



Blade (Rogue Angels MC, #2)

Author: *Lena Bourne*

Category: Romance

Description: BLADE is the second book in the Rogue Angels MC series by USA Today Bestselling Author Lena Bourne. HEA Guaranteed!

Blade

I've spent ten years trying to forget Bella. My high school sweetheart. My first love. The girl who stole my heart when she left. Now I'm the vice president of Rogue Angels MC, a man shaped by scars, battles, and the lessons of a hard life. But no matter how far I've come, Bella is the one thing I can't leave behind. I know that now. She's not my past—she's my always.

So I found her. And she's not the same girl I loved back then. She's harder, sharper, and carrying a darkness that cuts deep. But she's still Bella. Still the only woman I've ever loved. And I'll be damned if I let her slip away again. Not this time. No matter what ghosts are chasing her—or which enemies try to take her from me.

Bella

Blade was my everything—my first love, my first heartbreak, and the only man I ever trusted. But loving him came at a cost I couldn't bear. My family would've killed him for taking what wasn't his, for defying the life they'd planned for me. So I left him. I broke his heart to save his life.

I've spent the last decade running from that choice, trying to survive in a world that's as ruthless as it is unforgiving. But when Blade shows up out of nowhere everything I've buried comes rushing back. The friends I left behind, the pain I caused, the love I never let go of.

Blade is still my everything. Loving him might destroy us. But not loving him? That's not an option. If we're going to have a future, we'll have to face the wreckage of our past together—even if it means risking everything we have left.

Main Tropes: Second Chance Romance, Star-Crossed Lovers, Mafia Princess, Love Conquers All, Found Family, Protective Hero: Touch her and die.

Blade (Rogue Angels MC, Book 2) is a biker romance novel, which

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Bella

I'm in a dark room. My wrists and ankles are shackled to a rough, cold wall.

My arms and legs are numb because I haven't been able to move them for days, weeks maybe.

Nothing makes sense in this darkness. Nothing but the fact that I will die soon.

I used to think I wanted to die. And then I didn't.

And now I'm not sure. I just want this nightmare to end.

All my thoughts are focused on the metal door which might or might not open at any moment. He might or might not come in soon. And use the knife he's been threatening me with since he brought me here. Bottom line, I might be dead at any moment.

I've gone through heroin withdrawal chained to this wall.

I smell worse than the homeless under the bridge where I'd sometimes get high.

I will not survive this.

Through the cold wall I can hear screams.

The sick man's—Ghost's—other victims?

Or just the neighbors?

I never should've gotten in his car. I know that now.

But I needed to save Blade. He got beaten up because of me and I needed to get him help. I failed. And he might be dead now. That hurts more than all the other things combined.

Let me out! You sick asshole, let me out!

I screamed those words so many times that my voice is just a croak and my throat feels like it's bleeding.

No one hears.

He doesn't come to let me out. Or kill me. I don't even know which I'd prefer anymore. If Blade's gone, I want to be with him.

It's the other screams that always wake me up from this nightmare that is actually a true story. Angel's screams.

Because it didn't end with me dying.

It ended with the sick bastard who chained me to a wall fleeing, going into hiding.

But not before he killed Angel. My best friend since before I can remember.

She came looking for me.

She found him. Ghost. A serial killer preying on prostitutes and good Catholic girls. We were supposed to be the latter. She was. I wasn't.

But God wasn't with Angel when she tried to save me. I don't think he's ever been with me. Not before, not then, not since.

Maybe if I hadn't been dumb enough to get in his car, Angel would still be alive.

Maybe if my family weren't a bunch of mean men with medieval standards, we'd never have met him.

Maybe...

Maybes aren't going to change anything and they're not going to bring anyone back.

My family shipped me off to live on the East Coast after I was saved and I still wouldn't marry the guy they picked for me. They washed their hands of me and I let them.

I didn't make Angel's funeral. I didn't see any of my friends. Not even Blade, the love of my life, the only one I loved more than smack. Almost more.

But I saved him in the end.

By going far away from him and telling him not to follow. Demanding that he never speak to me again.

It was the only way I could save him from my family's retribution. They didn't kill him the first time, but they would the next. I'd dishonored them too much.

And I betrayed the love of my life and all my friends.

I don't deserve forgiveness. I don't deserve to live.

But here I am anyway.

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Blade

Angel is avenged. It's finished. Rogue Angels MC, of which I am the Vice President, came to exist from our feverish desire to find the psycho serial killer called Ghost who took her from us and kill him.

After ten years of trying, we have now done that.

It doesn't feel as good, as satisfying, as fulfilling as I had hoped it would.

Rogue Angels MC got its name from our quest to get justice for Angel, but in the years of trying to do that, we've become more than just a vengeance seeking MC.

Or not. Depending on how you look at it.

We're in the business of hunting down criminals that no one else is going after, be it due to lack of leads or the criminals' connections in high places.

Every member of the MC also has a backstory that involves a criminal that got away.

Sometimes we're lucky enough to hunt one of those down too.

Ghost is just one of many that we've hunted down.

He didn't die well. He died screaming just as Angel did.

I wanted that to feel good. Or better than it does.

And as much as I hate to admit it, I think I know why.

For me, avenging Angel has always been tied to getting Bella back. She is my the one . I'd gladly have laid down my life for her and almost did. Ghost had abducted her too, but we saved her. She left me anyway. And she's been gone for ten years.

Gone in the flesh but not gone from my thoughts. For years now, I've been telling myself I'm finally totally and completely over her. But she's been constantly on my mind ever since we watched the psycho's hut burn in the desert, with his screams echoing in the growing darkness and rising cold.

A vision of her visited me in the hospital after I took several bullets for my MC. She stood by my side as I floated in the air, watching as the emergency room doctors worked on my naked, bleeding body. She held my hand. As softly and warmly as only she can.

She didn't say anything. She never does when she comes to me like that. Just smiles, her presence filling the whole room.

The last thing she said to me was, "Don't come looking for me. It's over."

I didn't want to hear that and so I didn't want to hear anything else from her either. That's why she's always silent in my visions and dreams. And probably why she's always on my mind.

Even my favorite philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre went soft when speaking about love. "In love, one and one are one," he said.

As hard as I tried to fight it over the years, it's remained largely true for Bella and me. At least as far as I'm concerned. I have no idea how she feels. I've honored her wishes. I stayed away from her.

JP also said, “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance.”

And of course, “Hell is other people.”

I agree with all that too.

As I floated there in the emergency room, watching myself dying, I wondered if I was already in hell.

And if my version of it included Bella by my side, silent forever.

Touching me softly but never giving me more than that while I could feel her everywhere.

It would make sense as far as that being pure hell is concerned.

“What’s our budget like for traveling these days?” I ask loudly, my deep voice echoing in the nearly empty clubhouse bar.

Rogue, our MC president and my best friend, looks up from some file he’s been reading, the unfocused look in his eyes suggesting he didn’t even know I was here.

“Where you thinking of going?” Creed asks, glancing at me over the edge of his newspaper. His inherited millions are the main money source for the MC, and he holds the purse strings very tight.

“New York City,” I announce.

Now Creed looks confused, but Rogue knows exactly what I’m talking about. He’s clearly been keeping tabs on Bella’s whereabouts too.

“Bella needs to be told,” I say. “She deserves to know too.”

Rogue’s usually very bright green eyes turn black. Clearly, he’s still not forgiven her for bailing on Angel’s funeral and all the rest of us. For bringing Ghost to our doorstep. For abandoning us all.

“You sure you need to tell her in person?” he asks. “It’s something a simple email can take care of.”

Creed is pretending to read his newspaper, but there’s no rustling of paper coming from his direction and he hasn’t moved at all since I started talking.

“Three o’clock is always too late or too early for anything you want to do,” I say sagely, quoting JP again and making Rogue grimace. He hates it when I quote philosophers instead of giving straight answers. But I love doing that.

“Now what’s that supposed to mean?” he snaps. “I’m not in the mood for this philosophical bullshit right now.”

Creed folds up his newspaper, tosses it on the table and stands up. “I figure that quote just means it’s always a good time for a drink, since it’s three o’clock somewhere.”

He heads for the counter. I think he just doesn’t want to hear any more of this conversation than he absolutely needs to be a part of.

“Hey, don’t knock JP, he knew what he was talking about.”

“Do you?” Rogue asks.

“Everyone who latches onto that particular quote just ends up talking about the best time to start dinner if you wanna eat by 7PM, but I think it just means that there’s

never a perfect time to do anything. So why not just do it?”

I could’ve answered his question plainly, but where would be the fun in that? No, I don’t know if going to see Bella is a good idea. I don’t know if it’ll help heal me, or make me worse. I just know that I want to do it and now I can’t stop thinking about it.

Rogue silently looks at me for a few moments, probably trying to come up with a good and kind retort.

He’s been extra attentive to me lately. Mostly because I almost died.

But partly also because Zane’s been hanging around more and more, angling to become one of us, and possibly taking my place as the VP.

He and Rogue have always been the Ying to each other’s Yang, or however that saying goes.

Where Rogue is all about doing good, Zane—or Unholy as he goes by these days—is all about mayhem and blood.

They balance each other out perfectly, no one can deny that.

“She broke your heart once, her family almost killed you, she brought Ghost into our lives and then walked away when the going got rough,” Rogue finally says. “I just don’t want you?— “

“What? To get hurt again?” I ask, trying not to sound mocking. But failing. “I’m a big boy.”

In stature, sure. But anything to do with Bella, and I regress back to the teenager who’d chop off his own head if she asked for it.

“What brought this on anyway?” Rogue asks.

I could evade the question again, give him some mindless answer about needing closure, tying loose ends or some other such new-age bullshit. Or another quote from some long dead philosopher. But we’ve been friends a long time and he deserves a straight answer from me on this.

“Getting shot and almost dying brought a lot of things into clearer perspective for me,” I say.

“And the way I ended things with Bella never sat well with me. She got abducted while trying to save me and I never fought very hard to make her stay after that. Plus, you know, if Zane’s getting a second chance, she should get one too.”

He gasps and looks shocked for a moment. But I spoke truth and he knows that. It’s just harder for him to see it and accept it, because he loved Angel as much as I loved Bella. But he loves Melody now, and Zane saved her, so things are different.

“That could be debated, but we’re not gonna do that now,” Rogue says. “Do what you have to do. Take all the time you need. We’ll see what’s what after. She works at some place called?—”

“Sinful Creations, I know,” I interject.

“Sounds about right where she’s concerned,” Rogue mutters and I choose to pretend not to hear him.

“You might wanna pack your winter clothes,” Creed says from over by the bar. “New York can be chilly this time of year.”

I’m sure there’s a hidden meaning in there somewhere, but I choose not to hear that

either.

I've been thinking about visiting Bella for weeks. Years even, if I choose to be honest with myself. Lately I have been choosing straight-up honesty and truth more and more.

But now that the time to go is here, I'm no longer sure it's the best idea.

What if she turns out to be as silent in real life as she is in my visions? What if she's moved on completely? What if I am just setting myself up to hurt some more?

Good. I'm ready to feel something again. Even if it's pain. Anything to get over this numbness of wondering whether I survived that hail of bullets at all. And wondering if Bella still thinks we are one like I do.

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Bella

Just a few short months ago, I used to love coming to work.

Some days my boss Bear would have to kick me out after closing, because I could and did stay there after hours working on my designs.

Not so much now that his arthritis got so bad he can't tattoo a straight line anymore and he retired.

He gave the Sinful Creations parlor to his nephew Doug, or Doogie, as he wants to be called.

Doodie would suit him better as far as I'm concerned.

He's nothing like Bear and he won't take no for an answer.

No matter how many times I say it, he's always right there, breathing down my neck while I work, or draw, or stare off into space.

I almost messed up a tat the other day because he was standing too close and I kept fearing he was gonna grab me at any moment.

Yesterday was Sunday and he spends those at his Ma's house on Staten Island. Those visits are damn near sacred to him and he's always in a foul mood on Mondays. Most likely because he misses his mommy.

Today's a Monday and I came in mad early this morning, at four AM, partly to avoid him and partly because the scream dream—or recurring nightmare more like—got me good last night.

I don't know if it's the rainy, cold weather or the fact that the ten-year anniversary of Angel's death came and went, and I still haven't plucked up the courage to even visit her grave.

All my designs lately feature pretty girls, with crosses, and leafless trees standing over lonely graves. That's gotta mean something. And I don't want to even begin unpacking it.

The front door of the parlor slams open bringing in an entirely different kind of wind that blew on the day Angel was buried.

This is the cold and hopeless kind, that was a tingly hot, crazy-making kind.

I sat in the garden of my family's home, not at her grave and not attending her funeral is still one of the biggest regrets of my life.

"You're here early again," Doogie says. "We don't have anyone coming in until after noon. Or do we? Did you mess up another design?"

I slam my sketchbook closed without thinking. Now the ink of my drawing will be all smudged up on top of everything else that's going wrong lately.

"One time that happened, Doogie," I snap. "One time. And the customer ended up being more satisfied with the correction than he was with the original design."

And it happened because Doodie can't keep his hands to himself. He'd run them down my hair, groaning loudly.

He takes off his trendy trucker hat and jacket and tosses them on one of the plush purple and gold armchairs by the door where customers can sit while waiting to get their ink done in the back.

“I suppose you’re gonna tell me it was all my fault next,” he says, grinning leeringly.

“If the shoe fits...” I come from around the counter to get my jacket and purse, but he stops me by standing between me and the coat rack.

I sidestep him, trying very hard not to let the laser-hot surge of fear show anywhere on my face or my body. I don’t do well with overly alpha men. Too much psychological baggage, not enough love. I don’t go there either.

“I’m getting some coffee and breakfast,” I say. “Want me to bring you something?”

He finally steps aside so I can pass him, but he’s still all up in my personal space as I put on my leather jacket and zip it up tight.

“Or I could just come with you,” he says, looking me up and down, the leering not just in his voice but in his eyes now too.

“Someone has to mind the shop,” I say. “And I have a design to finish.”

I move towards the door, but don’t get far. He grabs my arm, the space between us suddenly non-existent. And there’s no hiding the fear gripping me now.

“Why you gotta always play hard to get like this?” he asks. “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“We’re co-workers,” I manage to say without my voice shaking to badly.

He uses his other hand to brush a strand of hair from my face. “I’d like to be so much more than that. Come on. Just one kiss. I promise I won’t bite.”

“Let me go!” I scream just as the door opens, bringing in more cold air. It’s the best thing I ever felt.

But Doogie is still holding me and leaning down like he expects that kiss he asked for.

“I think you need to do like she said,” the guy who walked in says in a voice I haven’t heard in over ten years. A voice that’s both as cold as the worst winter wind and as warm as the sweetest summer breeze.

Doogie turns to him without letting me go. “Yeah, what’s it to you?”

“Everything.” Blade could always be counted on to say exactly the right thing at exactly the right time.

Somehow even the memory of my nightmare isn’t as sharp anymore after hearing him say that, let alone Doogie’s crazy pass at me.

“Or do I have to make you?” Blade adds.

He was always a big guy, but he’s somehow gotten even bigger in the last decade. He dwarfs Doogie and me both. And makes the reception area of the parlor look tiny besides.

“Me and my girlfriend are just having a little chat,” Doogie says. “Why don’t you take a seat?”

“I’m not your girlfriend and I never will be,” I say and finally manage to rip my arm

from his grasp.

The words were more for Blade and he heard them loud and clear.

We haven't been able to take our eyes off each other since he walked in.

His are still the sweetest chocolate brown they always were.

Soft. Betraying the core of him which is loving, gentle and kind.

And nothing like the hardness he projects outward.

I didn't just break his heart. I smashed it. And told him it was for his own good.

But that doesn't stop me from going up to him and wrapping my arms around him in the tightest hug I've given anyone in a very long time.

"I missed you, Blade," I say.

"Yeah," he mutters back.

So maybe he doesn't have the right thing to say for every occasion anymore. Or maybe this is it.

"What's going on?" Doogie asks. "You know him or something? Or are you just a total slut?"

"Let's just go for a coffee," I tell Blade before he reacts.

"Yeah, I know him," I say to Doogie. "And you don't wanna mess with him."

I think even Doogie caught on to that by now. It's why he's only talking to me and why he doesn't say anything more, as I slide my arm under Blade's and lead him out into the biting cold. He doesn't resist.

"And don't bother coming back if you're gonna be such a bitch," Doogie yells after us.

Blade stops and turns, the air around him electric with pent up rage. I grip his arm tighter. "Leave it. He's an asshole and he's shit in a fight. You'd just kill him and where would that leave us?"

I smile at him, but his face remains completely still and unreadable. "Exactly where we've been for the last ten years?"

It's a valid point. We've had absolutely no contact.

But now that I have him back, I'm not letting him go again easily.

Because I meant what I said completely. I have missed him.

Every single day that we've been apart. The only reason I stayed away was to protect him.

But by the looks of things, he doesn't need anyone's protection anymore.

He also looks a little like maybe he missed me every day too.

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Blade

I'd be lying if I said I didn't imagine running into Bella over the years and how that would go. The way it actually went never occurred to me. Saving her from an overzealous boss in a small tattoo place in Brooklyn was never on the list.

She always liked drawing, ever since I first met her back in third grade. But she was never big on tattoos. I guess that's changed. Her hands are covered with them and I suppose the rest of her milky pale skin might be too. I'm not complaining.

She still looks amazing, her ass perfectly round in those tight skinny jeans she's wearing, and that leather jacket does nothing to hide the rest of her curves.

She's holding onto my arm like her life depends on it and we're walking in perfect sync down the crowded sidewalk, somehow managing not to jostle against anyone.

I think it's because she's leading me. I didn't do this well in the sidewalk crowd on my way to find her.

But I'm not ready to start thinking of all the ways we're perfect for each other yet.

New York's a strange city. It seems that no one sees anyone else, yet they flow seamlessly by each other on the sidewalks like rivers of varying currents, free and unbridled, un-concerned with anything but their own path. I could do without the cold though.

"Here," she says and leads us into a Starbucks that's somehow noisier than the street

outside. But at least it's warm.

She's winded from the pace she set to get us here, her cheeks slightly rosy. Her hazel eyes, big enough to suck you right in, are fixed on mine.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," she adds.

"I'm sorry you had to live it. You should've let me teach that guy a lesson."

She shakes her head. "He's pudgy and weak and I wasn't kidding, you probably would've killed him."

"I have more control than that," I say, eyeing the menu above the counter. "But maybe he'd deserve it. He came across as a sketchy rapist type to me."

"I wouldn't put it past him," she says then orders the largest latte they offer.

I've given up caffeine a while back, and I've grown partial to the green drinks they serve back home, but those don't seem to have made it all the way out east yet. So I opt for a green tea.

"This is nice," she says as we move to wait for the drinks. "Just like old times."

She's talking breezily enough but there's an edge to her tone. Finally. Because from the way she's been talking, smiling and touching me, I was beginning to think the last ten years never happened. Or that we'd been together this whole time. Like nothing had changed.

"We found Ghost," I tell her and watch her pretty face and eyes flip through a bunch of emotions. Most of them sad and ugly.

“And we killed him.”

More emotions follow, not all of them dark. There’s something very close to joy amid them.

“So it’s over?” she finally breathes. “Angel is finally avenged?”

The barista is calling our names, but she doesn’t seem to hear it. I collect our drinks and lead the way to a table for two in a window nook. Outside the currents of people are still flowing by relentlessly.

Her cheeks are even rosier and she’s still breathing hard, but it’s all just from hearing my news now. I’m gonna let her have a moment. Mostly because I don’t know what to follow up my news with.

“Who caught him?” she asks.

“We did.”

There’s an incredulous tone to my voice until I realize she probably has no idea what we have become in the years that I haven’t spoken to her.

Back when Angel died and Bella was still the love of my life we were just a bunch of kids riding motorcycles and occasionally scaring off a drug dealer or pedophile.

But mostly we rode motorcycles and partied.

“By we you mean Rogue and Zane and them?” There’s bitterness in her tone.

“Yeah, among others. We’ve established a real motorcycle club and our sole purpose is hunting down criminals,” I explain.

“And what’s it called, this motorcycle club of yours?”

She smiles, but it’s a sad, wispy little thing.

“Rogue Angels MC.”

She nods. “Nice. Figures Rogue would want to honor her. And get his name in there too.”

“Rogue likes the fame and attention, I’m not gonna lie,” I say. “But he’s still the most selfless man I know.”

She smiles again and touches my hand lightly. It feels like a butterfly landed on it. “You’re the most selfless man I know.”

“How do you figure that?” We knew each other well once upon a time. But that time is long gone.

“I mean, look at you, coming to tell me this news when everyone else has long since given up on me,” she says.

She’s not wrong. We have all written her off.

Myself included. And the longer I spend with her, that is fast starting to seem like the biggest mistake I ever made.

It always had seemed that way, but I could rationalize it before.

Those rationalizations have no power to stand up to her pretty face and the sweet sound of her voice, which I’ve missed even more than I realized.

Or her touch. Or her smile. Or the way her eyes glow like brushed gold, making everything right, and good, and nice.

“So, what have you been up to?” I ask, because I really want to know.

Her eyes widen again, but then she looks away at the currents of people outside the window and it’s like a part of her flows away with them. “You don’t want to know.”

Then she snaps her head back, fire in her eyes as she looks at me. “But I’m clean. I’ve been clean for five years, or will be next month. November 5th is my sober anniversary.”

It took her five years to get clean after we parted ways? Sounds like a nightmare. All alone, friendless, a whole continent removed from anyone she knew and loved.

“Your aunt and uncle didn’t straighten you out?” I ask.

The last time we spoke, she was being shipped off to live with them like some Italian, female version of the Fresh Prince of Bel Air.

She shakes her head. “Not even close. They gave up on me too, after I went down... everyone did, at that point.”

“Went down as in went to prison?” I ask and she nods, barely meeting my eyes.

Why didn’t I know this? Did Rogue?

“I got busted for possession,” she says.

“And I know it sounds twisted, but it was the best thing that could’ve happened to me.

Nothing like getting your freedom taken away, the last thing I still had at that point as it were, to straighten you out.

But it worked out. I got clean and I learned a trade.

They tell me I'm now the best tattoo artist in the tri-state area.

People come from all over to get inked by me. ”

She's smiling widely, but her eyes are sadder than ever.

“How long were you inside for?”

I don't even know why I'm asking this instead of something more uplifting about her tattooing career or something. But it's suddenly very important to me to know all the fucked-up things she lived through and I wasn't there for.

“Two years, but it was a minimum-security place, not so bad,” she says. “They had a great rehab program, and I met Bear's daughter in there. She taught me everything about tattooing.”

“Who's Bear?”

“He's... or was the owner of the place you found me in,” she says. “The dweeb's his nephew. He's running the place now.”

“You're so close to them, but they let that dweeb treat you like that?” I very nearly get up and go teach all of them a very belated lesson in decency. And start making up for the last decade in which I didn't take care of her like I should've.

“Bear had to retire, his daughter's still inside and Doogie's all he's got,” she says.

“But it’s fine. I’ve been thinking about going freelance anyway. I’m ready.”

She gives me a look I haven’t seen in over a decade.

Except in my dreams. I see it often in those even though she never speaks.

It’s a look of welcome, devotion and belonging all rolled into one.

Only she can give it. Only she can make me believe it.

Being an orphan, a black kid adopted by white parents, I never really felt I belonged.

Until she looked at me like this. It was a long time ago, but it still feels like yesterday.
How?

“Maybe I could do it in LA?” she asks quietly.

I almost yell, “Yes!” but end up just clearing my throat.

“I’m ready to go home,” she adds. “And now that Angel’s killer has been dealt with maybe I’ll be accepted again. And my family won’t be a threat to anyone anymore.”

“Yeah,” I say and leave it at that.

She’s always been impulsive. Always acted first and only thought about it after it was done. It’s gotten us in so much trouble over the years. But it’s also given me some of the best memories I’ll ever have.

“Unless you think me going back home isn’t a good idea,” she says. “I thought you coming here was a sign... “

“I think it’s a great idea,” I say and finally manage to smile at her. I’ve wanted to do that since I saw her. “You’ve been gone too long.”

She gives me one of her classic, beaming, light-up-the-whole-room Bella smiles. I missed those very much too. But her eyes are still sad.

Signs were always her thing too. She saw them everywhere. And she didn’t need much more to act on something that one of those “signs”. I’m glad none of that’s changed.

But can we really go back? Or more like, should we?

Then again, maybe this sign is telling her the truth.

I certainly wouldn’t mind seeing more of her. As in every day from now on...

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Bella

For the past five years, since I got out of prison, I've been keeping my head down, going to work and then home with no social life in between. The only excitement I felt was from a tattoo well done, a client who let me freestyle a design onto their skin and the occasional shopping spree.

Then here comes Blade, crashing back into my life straight out of my wildest dreams, and I'm ready to upend it completely, quit my job, and move across the country?

The scariest thing about that is I don't regret saying it.

In fact, I'm already planning the whole process in my head.

Doodie is not getting a two weeks' notice from me, but my clients might need it.

"Do you think I'm being too impulsive, saying I'll move back to LA just like that?" I ask.

We're just sitting in our booth at Starbucks, I hardly had a sip of my coffee and he hasn't touched his tea at all, but it feels like weeks have already passed. Years maybe.

He takes a while to answer, but his eyes are kind of saying, "Yes." I think. I no longer know him well enough to accurately read the expressions on his face the way I used to be able to do.

"You know your life here better than I do," he finally says. "So only you can answer

that question.”

Always the pragmatist. I smile and reach for his hand.

“But what do you want?”

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I want to take them back. I could be reading this situation completely wrong. So I pull my hands back into my lap before touching his.

He could be married by now, with kids. I’m too scared to ask.

Maybe he only came to see me as part of some other errand here in NYC.

Maybe he only came because he felt he had to.

Because Angel was my best friend since kindergarten and he thought I deserved closure too, because that’s the kind of guy he is.

The kind that always puts others first. Even if they smashed his heart.

He’s not answering, and I can’t read his face at all right now. Maybe I never could before either and it was just that we both wanted the same things back then.

So maybe it’s time to just come clean. Start saying exactly what I want him to know.

“I’ve thought about you every day since we’ve been apart,” I tell him. “I’m sorry I cut you off the way I did.”

“I could’ve fought harder for you,” he mutters and takes a sip of his tea.

We're surrounded by people and noise in here.

There's more of both outside the thick, green-tinted window.

And yet it's like we're the only two people in the world.

Alone in our bubble of silence filled with all the things we didn't get to say to each other in the last ten years. And all the things we missed.

"I thought about you a lot too," he says. "I guess I came here to see if there's still time to fix things."

Honesty. We always had that. I could say whatever I was thinking to him, and he always does that by default anyway.

"There is," I whisper and finally take hold of his hands. I don't remember the last time I felt joy as pure as when my skin touches his. He smiles and the surge of bliss from the touch makes me feel like a circle has finally been completed. Whatever that means.

It's broken again as the alarm on my phone starts beeping incessantly.

"That's a reminder," I say. "I have a client coming in half an hour."

His face darkens again. "I'd rather not leave you alone with that creep."

"Then come with me," I suggest as I shrug into my jacket. "You can watch me work."

He used to do a lot of that back when it was just drawings I did. I drew him at least a thousand times and left all those drawings behind when I left him. To make new ones

from memory was too painful so I never did.

“Just like old times,” he says, grinning.

“Even better. Because what I do now is make drawings come to life.”

The smile he gives me is one I do recognize. It tells me he thinks I’m quirky, but that he likes me exactly as I am. He’s the only person in the world who feels that way about me. Everyone else just wants me to change.

He follows me out into the street after holding the door open for me, then lays his arm around my shoulders. I wrap mine around his waist and actually get teary-eyed. I hadn’t had this kind of closeness in a very long time, and I didn’t know I missed it this badly.

And in this moment, my decision becomes final. I’m going back to LA. If any of my regulars want ink, they’ll just have to fly out there. No way can I be without Blade anymore. Not after today. Ten years was long enough.

And I do hear my old impulsivity behind all that.

The screaming that made me do all sorts of crazy and dangerous things in the past. Heroin used to be the only thing that could calm down my racing mind.

Heroin and Blade. And in the years that I’ve had neither I’ve just buried the screaming voice under work and nothing but.

Doogie is in the back when we reach the tattoo parlor, but he storms out, rage contorting his face.

“I didn’t think you’d dare come back,” he yells. “After the way I was treated...”

Of course he thinks he's the victim. Guys like him always do. Never mind that he tries to kiss me against my will.

"I have a client coming and then a couple of more in the next couple of days," I say calmly. "After that I'll be out of your hair for good."

Saying it feels good. And that's all I used to go by when making my decisions. How good they felt. It only worked out about half the time. But I have a feeling this time it will.

Blade isn't saying anything, he's just standing next to me, as calm and tall as a wall. One Doogie could break his teeth against if he wanted to. He doesn't seem to.

"Good, because you're fired," he says. "I already called some of your clients to let them know you won't be working here anymore. They were not pleased."

Rage is too soft a word for how I feel hearing that.

But the door opens and my 12.30 walks in... an exotic dancer named Holly whose back I am making into a beautiful and serene Japanese garden. All that's left to do is the coloring of the cherry blossoms and then she'll be done.

"Hey," she says, but the smile on her face falls as she seems to sense the tension in the room.

"Should I wait outside?" she adds, eyeing Doogie, then me.

I smile at her and hold the thick black velvet curtain that separates the front room from the back open for her. "Not at all. I'm ready for you."

"Do you mind if my boyfriend comes in with us?" I ask as she passes me.

Blade has a very shocked expression on his face and it takes me a few moments to realize why. I just called him my boyfriend. And it felt so good. So natural. I wish I could read his face well enough to know if it was the same for him.

Holly eyes him up and down, bites her lip and smiles at me. “Why not? The more the merrier.”

He’s not reacting to her obvious interest at all. In fact, he looks a little scared. Which is not something that’s easy to find in his eyes.

I continue holding the curtain open so he can follow Holly. She’s already stripped down to her waist, her back turned to us, the masterpiece I’ve been working on for the past three weeks in full view.

“Wow,” Blade says. “You did that?”

“Gorgeous, huh?” Holly says, looking at him over her shoulder and smiling. “Your girlfriend is the most talented artist in all of New York City.”

I see him get stuck on hearing the word girlfriend this time. But he nods bravely and barely misses a beat. “She’s got a lot of talent, no two ways about that. And gorgeous doesn’t even begin to describe it.”

He stands behind me as Holly lays down on her stomach on the chair. Good thing she’s not shy with her body, because I didn’t even remember that she’d have to be naked from the waist up for this before asking if Blade can sit in.

I prepare my tools and the colors, the familiar feeling of being watched—even admired—by him washing over me. I’m invincible under his gaze, safe and protected and wholly myself.

If anyone told me this is how the day would go when I woke up in the middle of the night, unable to fall back asleep, I'd call them insane. Yet here I am. Doing what I love best in the world, the man I love the most in the world beside me.

It feels like I never left him. And if that's not a good enough sign that I'm finally on the right path in my life, then I don't know what is.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Blade

I always knew Bella's talent for art could get her far.

She never believed me. Of course, I did have things like art shows and galleries in mind for her, but watching her needle the intricate, beautiful design into a person's skin is somehow better.

More intimate and visceral. She'll have no shortage of work back in LA.

Everyone and their grandma are getting inked out there lately.

Hell, I'll even let her paint something on me.

The thought gets stuck in my brain like an icepick and then I'm just sitting there, staring into the chasm that is the last ten years. It's gaping wide between us. But somehow, being in the same room with her, finally after all this time, it seems like something we can jump just fine. But is it?

"All done," Bella says, pulling me out of my dark thoughts like only her voice ever could.

"What do you think?" Holly asks, giving me a seductive smile over her shoulder.

I clear my throat. "Yes, very nice."

Bella laughs and it's a much harsher sound than I expected to come out of her mouth.

She used to have the prettiest laugh. Like birds singing.

“Very nice?” Holly turns to Bella. “He’s one-hundred-percent the strong and silent type, isn’t he? Where’d you find him?”

Bella smiles at me. “We met a long time ago, he keeps me grounded.”

I did used to do that for her. And I want to do it again. Even if this feeling she’s evoking in my chest is very old and might not even apply anymore.

She and Holly talk for another ten minutes before they finally hug goodbye.

“I’m all yours now,” she says after, beaming at me. “We can get some lunch, then I can show you around the city if you want, or just show you my apartment...”

She winks at me, the smile making her whole face sparkle.

I won’t deny it. I’ve spent a lot of the past decade thinking about touching and kissing and yes, fucking, Bella.

But this is moving at breakneck, rollercoaster speed and we’re not wearing any seatbelts.

I should slow it down. Then again, life with Bella always was a rollercoaster and just as impossible to stop once it gets going.

But she’s been so quiet for so long I forgot what a wild ride it could be.

Her smile falters and wanes while I sort all that out in my head.

“Let’s just go get lunch and catch up some more,” she adds, sounding quiet again.

Dejected.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” I say heartily, much too excitedly and loudly. But I just can’t stand her being quiet anymore. Her apartment sounds like a much better idea, but I said what I said and it’d be weird if I said so now.

She stuffs her large sketchbook into a tote bag, which is already jam-packed with all sorts of other things. And heavy, I realize as I take it from her hands so I can carry it.

“What do you do, live out of this thing?”

She smiles. “You know I can’t pack light.”

I do. Just the stuff she left behind when she left me was too much to carry. But I don’t need to slide into that kind of weird philosophical thinking now. All I need to do is let her take me for this ride. This walk. This whatever this is.

Doogie is nowhere to be seen or heard as we walk through the reception area. Bella doesn’t slow her stride until we exit the parlor and are once again greeted by the smells, and especially the sounds of the city.

She doesn’t take my arm this time as she leads the way down the sidewalk, setting a fast pace that soon wakes some residual pain from the gunshot wound in my stomach. It’s been three months, so I should be healed. This is probably just some weird sort of ghost pain.

“Are we moving too fast?” she asks as we stop at a traffic light, waiting to cross an avenue.

She could just be talking about the pace she’s setting, but she’s not. Or maybe I’m just hearing what I want to hear.

“I’m sorry, I’ve just been very alone for a very long time,” she adds and sounds it. “I don’t even have any real friends to talk to.”

The light turns to WALK, but we don’t.

“This conversation is like eating desert before the main course, Bella,” I say and start crossing the wide street. “How about we just start with the salad?”

“Gotcha,” she says and grins at me. “But this place I’m taking you to, I don’t think they do salads.”

I laugh at that. She always could make me laugh. Even when she was eyeballs deep in addiction, she was still the only person that could, without fail, bring me out of any kind of funk. Even the ones she caused.

“I’m sure it’ll be just fine.”

She gives me a weird over-the-shoulder look like maybe she doesn’t think I’m just talking about the salad. I might actually be.

Our destination is an Indian restaurant that’s on the first floor of an old brownstone, accessible via a narrow and very steep staircase.

We have to take off our shoes at the door, which tells me this is a very traditional place before she does.

I’m wearing my cut under a long black trench coat and I leave it on as we enter the restaurant proper and are shown to a table next to one of the tall windows.

“Vice president, huh?” she says. “Congrats.”

I nod and try not to groan as I lower myself onto one of the round, fake leather pillows they have in place of chairs. The doc who saved my life had to take out a part of my liver and despite all assurances that everything will heal just fine, it's just not happening fast.

"And I love the artwork," she adds as she looks at the back of my cut, our club colors. It's a hooded figure praying, with angel wings sprouting from its back.

"Who did it?" she asks as she sits down across from me.

"A very talented guy named Jack," I say. "He joined the MC right after we formed it, but we lost him to suicide soon after. He just couldn't get over the death of his fiancée."

"Oh, man, that's rough," she says.

"Yeah."

I'm spared having to say anything more because the waiter comes to take our order. I have no idea what anything is on the menu, so I just go with what Bella suggests. On top of everything else, my mind is now filled with memories of Jack. He was only twenty-five years old when he took his life.

Afterwards, the MC did find the man who took his fiancée's life, we made sure he went away for a very long time, and that's not something we can offer all our members, but the sting of Jack's senseless death never went away.

At least for me, the sting of all the injustices we can't put right never does.

"So, what is it that you guys do? Exactly?" she asks once the server leaves.

“We go after the criminals no one else is willing to hunt down for one reason or another.”

“And then you what, kill them?” She sounds shocked, but not as much as I would expect her to be.

I shake my head. “Not exactly. Usually, we hand them over to the police or the FBI after we gather enough evidence against them.”

“So basically, you’re like private investigators?” she asks. “And I assume Rogue’s family at LAPD feeds you the information you need.”

“Yes, you’re pretty much right. But we’re like very cool private investigators. And we decide which cases we take on.”

That’s all true... of how we’ve done things in the past. Before Devil’s Nightmare MC gave us the location of Ghost and we helped them go full ninja on their enemies.

I’d taken one life before we joined forces with them to take down a sex trafficking ring.

Now that it’s done, I might actually be closer to a mass murderer classification.

It doesn’t sit well with me. Nightmares are a daily occurrence these days.

And even though those assholes had it coming, a life is still a life.

She has a very knowing expressions in her eyes as she gazes at me.

“So what’s changed?” she asks.

“We’ve now become killers,” I say, since there’s no sugarcoating it. “I’ve become a killer. And it doesn’t feel good.”

But it feels good to tell someone about this darkness that’s been consuming me.

Someone who won’t judge me. Might even understand.

“No one at the MC talks about it. Everyone believes we did what we had to do. Did what was right and what needed doing. And mostly I agree. But I can’t pretend it hasn’t also ripped my soul the way a cat scratching a piece of silk rips it. ”

Her eyes are very soft and kind of wet as she looks at me.

I can’t look at her, can’t see all that pity.

She probably thinks I’m an idiot worrying about this.

Just like everyone else would if they’d hear me talk about it.

With the amount of violent deaths we’ve seen and experienced, who could blame them?

The whole reason for our MC’s existence is to punish those who have done wrong.

Punish them by any means . Bring them to justice by any means .

I had no trouble with that. In theory, it would seem now.

She takes my hand and squeezes, the touch electrifying and calming at the same time. The way I imagine getting struck by lightning would be—unbearable at first, then soft as the pain subsides. Her touch always was like lightning.

“You worry too much,” she says. “But that just shows the purity of your heart. You have it in you to forgive everyone. Even those who don’t deserve it.”

“Do I?” I ask skeptically, finally daring to look into her eyes.

“It’s why you’re here, offering me a second chance when no one else is willing to give me one.”

Her eyes are the color of soft grass in some sleepy meadow at sunset, when only golden light remains. It’s a place where I can rest and not worry about anything.

“Right?” she asks, sounding much less sure of her words than she did a moment ago.

I lay my hand over hers. “Right. Now let’s not talk about this anymore. I didn’t come here to bring you down.”

“We can talk about anything you want.”

But it’s not gonna be this. Not now. I also won’t ask her how she could leave me like she did, without a single glance back. I don’t want to spoil this moment. I waited ten years for it. I can enjoy the serene meadow in her eyes first, before I tear it all down. I’ve earned it.

It feels good touching her skin. Better than I could ever imagine it would.

Unfortunately, we have to let go of each other to make room for the meal arriving.

But it’s only a momentary respite. Because after this lunch, I mean to make up for all the touching we’ve missed in the last ten years. And more.

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Bella

He's keeping a lot locked away. Bad things that he's done since we saw each other last. Maybe even hurt over the way we ended things. I saw him lock it up even tighter during lunch, saw it in his eyes and on his face. Understood that he didn't want to talk about any of it anymore.

He unlocked something else though. Something sweeter.

His hand gently brushing a strand of hair off my face so it wouldn't get dunked in my food.

His arm resting lightly across my shoulders as I led us back to my apartment.

A genuine, booming laugh as I told him a few of the funnier stories of my last ten years.

Like the time I gave a British guy a tattoo of an ass when he actually wanted a donkey .

"Talk about a glitch in communication," he says, chuckling again. "What did you do?"

"The guy went berserk, so I spent the whole night fixing the tattoo and turning it into a donkey," I say. "It turned out to be one of my better tats, if I do say so myself."

"Well, you're the best person to know."

“The guy agreed, thankfully.”

I don't know if he's making fun of me or genuinely agreeing with me. But I was never sure with him. I doubt anyone is. He's got this quiet form of sarcasm, irony some would call it, and it goes straight over my head most of the time.

We're sitting on the lumpy, wine-red sofa in my living room, the sky outside a dusky purple laced with grey and dark blue.

I made us sweet mint tea and the room is filled with its aroma.

It reminds me of summer and long, lazy afternoons spent at his mom's house in Angelino Heights.

The house was old, and everything creaked if you so much as sneezed, but it was still the coziest and most peaceful place I've ever known.

His mom was nice to me too. Until the occasional line of heroin turned into something much worse for me. Then I had to come for visits via the overgrown shrubbery in the back and sneak in through the laundry room window.

“How's your mom?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Hanging in there.”

“And how does she view your crime fighting life?”

He grins. “You mean because she's always been so overprotective of me?”

I nod, biting my lip. His parents were a rich white couple who couldn't have children of their own.

They'd adopted him when they were already in their forties and proceeded to give him everything, wrapping him in cotton wool like nobody's business.

It didn't help that his dad had died when Blade was only fourteen.

"She's accepted that I'm a grown man now who makes his own choices."

"It went that well, huh?"

"It took awhile, but it's all good now. She worries, but I try to see her as much as I can."

"That's good of you," I say. "And good that she understands."

He leans forward and deposits his cup on the coffee table. "I'd ask about yours but I figure it's not good."

I shake my head. "Nope. Not good. My dad and my brother Ricardo are dead. And my other brother Matteo won't speak to me."

"I'm sorry they're dead."

"They disowned me long before that happened. And I've long since stopped considering them my family," I say, as always, wondering if that's entirely true.

They treated me very badly when I refused to marry the man they picked out for me.

But sometimes I still get lost in the memories of the good times we had as a family.

"And after they almost killed you... I didn't want to have anything to do with them either. I'm still so sorry about that..."

“It wasn’t your fault, Bella, like I’ve told you a hundred times already,” he says gently, probably assuming I once again won’t believe him.

“But it was... I knew how things were done in my family, I knew they’d react violently if I started dating you, but I did it anyway...” I say.

He grins. “Because you couldn’t help it. You loved me.”

I smile too. “That’s true.”

He always turns this conversation down this lane every time I bring it up, won’t let me take the blame. But everything I said is true.

He brushes a strand of hair off my forehead. The touch is gentle, but I feel the coiled tension emanating from his muscles. I feel it deep in my core like a magnetic force I can’t fight. I never could fight this pull he has on me, and I never felt the like of it with anyone else.

“All this reconnecting talk is nice and all, but there’s something else I’d rather be doing.”

And I know exactly what he means. I’d rather be doing that thing too, ever since the moment I saw him. And every day of the past ten years.

“So how about it?” he adds and I just nod. My voice would be just a croak if I tried to speak anyway.

He leans forward and touches his lips to mine. It’s a soft touch, but the force of two strong magnets connecting claps through me, making my head spin and taking my breath.

Not that I need to breathe as he deepens the kiss, his tongue invading my mouth with an urgency and a need only he's ever had for me.

Sparks of pleasure and bliss start coming to life deep inside me, slow to start because they've been dead for so long.

But soon, as his tongue plays with mine and the taste of him starts waking memories I've buried so deep I might as well call them forgotten, they explode into a raging fire that nothing can stop.

He pulls me into his lap and slides his hands up my back under my shirt, his lips still firmly planted on mine. The years we spent apart are flaking away to reveal the joy we used to feel for each other. The newness of being in love for the first time. The sheer bliss of kissing your soulmate.

But the ugly is coming up too.

I kiss him back. Fiercely, hungrily. Slide my hands over his cheeks and his strong arms and back. Fighting the ugly. Trying to get back to the light. The good. The joy.

He stops kissing me and grins. "How about we take this in the bedroom?"

I stand up and take his hand. "I thought you'd never ask."

I was almost there. Almost back in the bliss. Now the fire is burning bright, but his eyes are sad again and the fire is giving off no heat. He did ask. Hundreds of times. But I just said no and left. I shouldn't joke about this. Not yet. The last ten years hold too much pain for both of us.

But at least he's willing to put it behind us. At least his hand is warm, at least I get to clutch it tight as I drag him towards the bedroom.

I really should've tidied up. I haven't done that in a very long time because I never have visitors and I work all the time. But it doesn't really matter. His eyes are only seeing me as he lets go of my hand and slides my t-shirt up, the touch of his fingers on my stomach electrifying.

I'm about to feel very good. I know it. And that's enough. It's more than enough because I haven't felt good in so long I've forgotten what it was like.

He leans down and kisses my neck, his lips finding that spot no one else has ever found. The one that makes my knees weak as a soft river of pure pleasure traverses my entire body. I can't believe he remembers so well.

But why wouldn't he? We know all of each other's spots.

We found them all together, through hours and hours of experimentation.

At his house. In parks and on beaches. In the backs of buses.

On cliffs and in forests. And in the abandoned warehouse where Rogue, Blade and the rest of them created their first clubhouse. The place where I lost him.

I don't want to remember that place. Not now that I finally have him back and we can finally get on with our forever. But here it is, front and center in my brain, casting very dark shadows.

"Where did you go?" he asks, his eyes like melted chocolate as he gazes into mine.

I went to the night I lost him. The night my father and brothers beat him up and left him for dead as they dragged me away to force me to marry another guy.

The night I tried to save him, but ended up being abducted by Ghost instead.

The night everything I loved was taken away.

I never want to go there again.

I smile and hug him tight. “I’m right here.”

I run my hands down his clean shaven scalp and the way he moans—almost purrs—into my neck as he kisses me again makes me think I might’ve found yet another special spot. I’ll check again later. For now I need him out of those clothes.

I slide his jacket down. He helps by pulling off his t-shirt. Followed by my jeans. Then his. And finally my bra and panties and his boxers. We’re both in a hurry now. Chasing what we had. Needing it back after all these years.

His chest is wide, his abs are chiseled. He’s fully a man now. None of the boy I fell in love with and left. Not on his body, not on his face and not in his eyes as he watches me watching him.

“You like what you see?” he asks, grinning at me. Just not with his eyes.

“I don’t like the scar,” I answer truthfully, maybe letting too much reality into this moment that’s supposed to be all fantasy and all about hopes and dreams coming true.

The scar splits his stomach down the middle and looks recent and too much like the kind they make during autopsy for my liking.

He takes a step closer, sliding his hands down my sides and around the back, cupping my ass to pull me closer. His rock-hard cock is pressing into my belly and I’m getting a little light-headed with the anticipation of feeling it inside me.

“It’s healed, so it’s fine,” he says. “And I got it doing a good deed.”

He kisses me again before I can speak. Probably for the best. I could always talk too much and ruin things.

His kiss, his touch, his closeness after all these years of thinking I’d lost him forever fill me with pure joy, sweet like the freshest nectar, cool like the first drops of a summer storm, fresh like the breeze blowing in from the ocean, burning like touching flame.

He is the man I have always wanted, will always want.

But this is too much. Too good. It’s all my dreams coming true and it hurts.

I pull away from the kiss, step out of his arms, just need a second for the pain to subside, for the pleasure to win, take away all the bad and leave only the good. Leave only what should always have been.

He cocks his head, looks at me sideways, his dark eyes glowing like only they and gold can. The desire he still has for me is what’s causing that glow, the desire I was sure I’d never see again. And that hurts too. Everything still hurts.

It’s all I can do not to burst into tears before he even asks, “What’s wrong? Too fast?” speaking in that whisper that never failed and still doesn’t in waking a river of sparks just under my skin.

I shrug, not trusting my voice to speak. I haven’t cried in years, definitely not since I’ve been in prison, but right now, I just might.

He steps closer and brushes a lock of hair off my face, the touch familiar and welcome, but so damn painful. Am I going insane? I’ve dreamed of this moment, of

our reunion, for so long. And now that it's here, I'm in pain? What the hell is wrong with me?

He smiles faintly and wraps his arm around my shoulders.

"We can take it as slow as you want," he says. "Don't worry."

"OK," is all I manage to say before my voice breaks.

"It's for the best anyway," he says as he leads me towards my unmade bed. "You're not a fruit that should be eaten right off the tree. You're to be savored. Always were."

I don't know how I feel about being compared to a fruit, but anything from his lips always sounds like exactly what I need to hear and what I always wanted to hear.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," I finally manage to whisper once I'm lying in his arms, under the soft covers of my bed, imagining I can see stars in the dark depths of his eyes.

"There's nothing wrong with you," he says. "You're perfect."

"We both know that's a big lie," I whisper.

He turns so we're face to face and stares very deeply into my eyes, so deeply I feel like I'm falling through the vastness of his.

"It's the truth," he says. "At least for me. It always was. Getting shot and nearly dying put everything in a very different perspective for me. And even with all the shit we've been through, together and apart, that's still true. You're perfect for me."

"And you're perfect for me," I whisper, tears now rolling freely down my cheeks, but

my voice is clear. "I'm so glad you came back for me."

"I should've done it a long time ago," he says, then leans in and kisses me.

The pain is gone as his lips touch mine, replaced by the sweet, soft feeling of belonging only he could ever give me.

I will give him everything, all of me and more, just like I should've done ten years ago. But first, I will fall asleep in the safety of his arms like I've longed to do for so long I've forgotten how much I needed it.

And this time, I will not let him go again. I'll die before I do.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Blade

Amazing how days can pass in the blink of an eye. Even more amazing than how years can.

Bella and I have been inseparable for the last few days, while she got her affairs in order.

That included a couple of late-night inking sessions and a trip to Green Haven prison upstate where she wanted to say goodbye to a few friends before leaving the East Coast behind ...

as she keeps referring to coming back to LA with me.

And the more time we spent together the more the years we spent apart shrank in my mind...

along with the distance those years brought.

The lights of the blanket that is LA are just coming on as we disembark from the plane. There's still some of the sunset left in the sky, a dusky purple tinge that puts me in mind of velvet and all things nice.

Bella's hand in mine as we leave the plane puts me in mind of even nicer things. Like new beginnings. Like fresh starts. Like leaving the past right where it belongs. Forgotten.

Even the scar on my stomach no longer pulls as hard as it did when I boarded a plane much like the one we're leaving now to go find her.

Nothing hurts when I'm with her. Everything hurts when we're apart.

It's always been like that. No matter how much other people told me I was better off without her.

And they all told me that a lot. Starting with my mom.

It's just simply never been true. Heroin might've been her drug of choice, but she was always my drug.

And I can't wait to begin making it not true for the rest of our lives. I also can't wait to be out of this stuffy airport and in the warmth of our hometown... NYC cold is not for me. And the way Bella seems to glow brighter and brighter by the minute, it's not for her either.

She turns to me as we reach the baggage claim where the first bags are already starting to arrive. She has four. Two red, two green. The backpack with everything I brought on this trip is already strapped to my back.

"I hope we'll find a cab big enough to fit all my stuff," she says. The tightness around her eyes and the marble-like quality of her golden irises tells me that's not all she's worried about.

"Rogue's picking us up in one of the MC's vans," I tell her. He's doing it reluctantly. But I won't tell her that. I hope he won't either.

"Rogue?" she asks, her voice shaky and her eyes growing glassier still, even as she smiles wider. "You sure he's really coming? Seeing as he's not my biggest fan."

“You’re not wrong about that,” I say and the wash of watery sadness that floats across her eyes makes me wish I hadn’t. But I have a great follow up.

“But between him being my best friend and my MC President, and you being the only woman for me... well, it’s time you two made up.”

She smiles too, but says nothing, her eyes full of doubt as she moves to hoist the first of her bags off the carousel before I can do it.

I texted Rogue before we boarded, telling him we’ll need a ride and giving him our flight details.

Then I ignored all subsequent texts and voicemail from him, until he finally ran out of things to say and told me he’ll be there.

I thanked him once the plane touched down.

And I hope he’ll understand all that to mean I don’t want to have the conversation he’s been trying to have over text in person either.

Now, with all her bags loaded onto a trolley, we’re about to find out.

I half expected him to be standing by the Arrivals gate, possibly holding a large sign with my name on it, but that’s just what Hollywood movies conditioned me to think would happen.

Instead, we find him leaning against the side of the gleaming black van the club uses when we need to move in force.

It’s not the same vehicle I nearly bled out in not so long ago, we scrapped that one, but it sure vividly reminds me of that night for some reason.

Or maybe that's down to the unwavering way his eyes track us as we approach.

Like green flame. Like a river of glowing green flame.

The sky behind him seems so much darker than it is by comparison.

"Welcome home, Bella," he tells her once we're close enough to hear.

He embraces her tightly, which belies his toneless greeting and all the texts he's sent in the past couple of hours.

"You know, Rogue, I almost believe you," she says, hugging him back.

"I never wanted you hurt," he tells her. "You can believe that."

She nods and steps back, and I let them have a moment while I load the bags into the back of the van. They don't spend it talking about anything much.

He opens the back door for her and slams it shut once she gets in, turning to me, the green flames in his eyes rising.

"You can spend tonight at the clubhouse, but after that, I want her elsewhere," he says, probably quietly enough for her not to hear. "I don't need to open another front with the Moretti family. Or the Ravinas for that matter. We've got enough going on."

He's talking about the crime boss who she was supposed to marry and what's left of her own family and the little influence they still have.

"Why would any of them make a fuss?" I ask. "Moretti's moved on and the Ravinas... they're not what they used to be."

Apart from telling me that one of her brothers and her father were dead, and the other brother not wanting to know her, we didn't talk about any of them at all while we were in New York. But we'll probably have to now.

"They already know she's here," Rogue says and walks around the car, completely ignoring my whispered, "What?"

"We'll talk at the clubhouse," he says and gets behind the wheel.

I join him in the front, no matter how much I'd rather be sitting in the back next to Bella. That's all I really want to do. Sit by Bella. Lie next to her. Hold her hand. Watch her smile.

She's smiling now as she looks out the window, the glassiness and fear gone from her eyes. She's happy to be home. I'm gonna do whatever I must to make sure she stays that way. I smile back briefly before fixing my eyes on the road into darkness ahead of us.

Now I'm the one afraid... terrified, actually, that we made a horrible mistake coming back here. We should've just stayed in New York where we could be together and have everything we ever wanted. Because here in LA we never could. And maybe that hasn't changed like I was sure it had.

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Bella

Ghost succeeded in coming after me instead.

He killed Angel.

And destroyed all our lives before they even got started.

My mind's still awash with all those less than pleasant memories as Rogue parks the car in front of a four-story building with large dark windows and a parking lot full of Harleys, vans and pickups—none of which are beat-up.

The compound is enclosed by a tall wall that makes me feel safe and isolated at the same time.

The door of the clubhouse is open and soft rock music washes over me as I exit the van. Blade gives me a reassuring smile and squeezes my arm on his way to the back of the van to get my bags.

I just stand there, enjoying the warm, almost fresh air on my face, realizing I missed my hometown more than I thought I did.

Or more than I've thought about in years.

There's just something about the soft warmth here than makes people softer too.

Maybe it's the harsh winters and sweltering summer that make people in New York

so hard and mean.

“You can leave those in the van, Blade,” Rogue says. “She’s not staying here.”

So much for people here being soft and not mean.

“Ghost almost killed me too, you know,” I say, shuddering in the sudden cold that memory brings. I’ve packed it so far down into the bottom of my mind I hardly think of it anymore and got some therapy to deal with it in prison, but despite all that it’s front and center in my mind again.

The terrifying realization that I’d trusted the wrong person.

That he won’t be stopping the car to let me out.

The cold, dank basement of a theatre he kept me locked up in.

The theatre where Angel died trying to save me.

Where she screamed and I couldn’t do anything to help her.

The chains cutting into my wrists as I tried.

The shakes and the nausea and the hallucinations as my addiction to heroin finally loosed its hold on me.

Just in time so I could be wholly sober and present for the worst days of my life.

“Are you OK, Bella?” Blade asks quietly, standing between me and Rogue.

His warm brown eyes are so invitingly warm, so perfectly safe, so kind.

It was him I was trying to save when I got into Ghost's car.

And I failed at that too. That's what hurt the most in the beginning.

Before other things started hurting. But none of those hurt worse than the thought that I failed to save him.

"Come on, you need a drink," Blade says, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. "And Rogue needs to chill the fuck out."

Rogue seems shocked into silence as Blade starts leading me towards the pleasant rock music, dragging one of my suitcases behind him.

I hope it's the one with my clothes and not one of the ones with my art supplies.

It took me next to no time packing up all my possessions to come back here with him.

Just like it took me no time to pack when I was forced to leave ten years ago.

I hate that I still feel just as unwanted and unloved as I did back then.

But wrapping my arms around Blade's waist helps. Just like it always does.

The large room beyond the front door is filled with tables and sofas, a large bar counter dominating one end and a couple of gleaming black pool tables the other.

All the people inside turn to look at us as we enter, even the music fading to a dull hum as the tense silence grows.

I recognize three people in there-Creed, Bianca, and Trinity.

I've known them since I was a toddler. They're all somehow the same, yet completely different.

And I can't tell if they're happy to see me or not.

"Bella, welcome home!" a guy with a raspy voice and tattoos covering most of his neck exclaims, suddenly towering before me. I don't recognize his voice, hardly know his face, but I'd know those brilliant blue eyes anywhere.

"Zane," I say and let go of Blade so I can give him a hug. "I thought I'd never see you again."

Zane was the first crush of practically all the girls in our grade at school. I doubt many would feel the same way seeing him now. Or maybe they would. He's rocking the bad boy vibe hard.

"He goes by Unholy now," Blade says roughly and I hear that possessiveness in his voice that never fails to make me feel safe and wanted.

That and Zane's warm welcome are finally starting to make me feel like maybe I do belong here.

Because this is the only place I ever belonged, with these people, my oldest friends in the world, and if I don't belong here, where do I belong?

"Unholy?" I ask as I let Zane go. "Because of the priest thing?"

He grins and nods. "That and a whole lot more after that. Blade doesn't think I should be here."

"And Rogue doesn't think I should be. So we have that in common," I say and we

grin at each other.

I'm fairly certain Blade's arm around my shoulders is about more than just wanting my pleasant reunion with Zane to not get any pleasanter. He wants them all to accept me here, welcome me, let me stay.

"I didn't say I don't want you here," Rogue says as he appears at my side. "I'm just saying it could get dangerous for all of us if you stay."

He cringes like that's more than he wanted to say. Behind him, Bianca, Creed and Trinity have come over to say hello, but now they've all stopped dead in their tracks—probably reacting to the shock that must be on my face at hearing that.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, suddenly very breathless. "What danger?"

Blade holds me tighter, his eyes and whole face hard as he stares at Rogue. "This is not the time."

Rogue nods. "You're right."

The next thing I know, Bianca gives me a huge hug, followed by Trinity. Creed just nods at me in his stoic fashion.

"I am glad you're back," Bianca says. "And we're gonna celebrate. Everything else can wait until tomorrow."

Her voice carries the kind of command I'd never expect to hear come from her mouth.

And what's more, they all seem more than willing to obey it.

All that's left of the soft-spoken girl I went to school with is her gorgeous platinum blonde hair.

But even that is all braided up in the style of some female warrior.

Not to mention the leather pants and tank top and the tattoo covered arms. I don't know if I'd recognize her in the street.

Or Trinity for that matter, her jet-black hair shaved on the sides and arms just as covered by tats as Bianca's. They're sporting some very nice ink, but I could make it even nicer. I hope they'll let me.

I'm so engrossed by imagining all the beautiful things I could paint on their bodies that I hardly notice being sat down at one of the larger tables in the room and having a beer placed in front of me, the condensation forming tiny beads on the bottle.

"I think a Coke would be better," I say, my voice cracking and my heartbeat picking up as they all stare at me.

In their eyes I see the same identical look they used to give me back when I liked experimenting with heroin a little too much.

And later when I could no longer hide my addiction from anyone, no matter how much I denied it.

"Yeah, I'll get it," Creed says, recovering first.

I look around the room, smiling, trying to shake the memory of the darkest part of our past.

"So this is your new digs?" I say. "Very nice. Much nicer than that abandoned

warehouse your MC started out in.”

And there I go bringing all that past darkness right back into the room. Like an idiot. Now even Blade looks uncomfortable.

But my name is Isabella Rovina after all. Rovina means Ruin in Italian. I’ve proven just how well that name suits me many times over in my life. And gave a hint of it once again just now.

I grab the bottle of Coke that Creed hands me and drink almost all of it in one go, ignoring the scratching pain in my throat and the tears it brings to my eyes.

“Yeah, we’ve moved up some,” Bianca says. “In more ways than one.”

“Oh, yeah? Tell me all about it,” I say as eagerly as my closed-up throat allows.

“Well, we’re a proper MC now, for one thing,” she says. “And I’m the Sarge... I mean, the Sergeant at Arms.”

That must be where that command in her voice and demeanor comes from.

"I actually go by Alice now... that’s my road name,” she adds.

“Like that movie you used to like so much?” I ask. “What was it? Alice Isn’t Here Anymore, or something?”

She smiles. “It’s ‘Alice Does’t Live Here Anymore,’ but close enough.

And yeah, you’re right. I chose it because I left all of the old me behind when I joined the MC.

I never thought I'd slip into being a Sarge so easily, but here I am.

And I love how we've been able to help so many people. I've definitely found my calling"

And she really has. She comes from a very wealthy, non-mafia family and had it all. But she was always very quiet and shy in school, mostly staying in the background and keeping her head down. So I guess she had it all except the chance to be herself. I'm glad she found that here, in this MC.

"But I'm sure Blade's told you all about that," she adds, glancing at him and grinning.

He shakes his head, looking a little embarrassed. "We didn't talk about the club much, to be honest."

This time it's him grinning at me and me blushing.

What we did a lot was hold hands and kiss, cuddle and reconnect with everything that made us us , made us perfect together, back then and now.

And no, we didn't talk much about home, because we weren't sure how welcome I'd be here and by extension, whether it was still home at all. But I don't need to go there now.

"He did tell me you're still catching bad guys and making them pay," I say, looking around the table.

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They all look pleased with themselves, but a shadow hangs over all their faces regardless, even Blade's. Maybe it's the memory of their beginnings and Ghost that I brought up. On Rogue's face, that shadow is darkest.

He and Angel were as in love as Blade and I were back then.

He might have avenged her now by finally killing Ghost, but did he ever find love again?

For all his hard words to me today and back then, and even despite his less than joyful welcoming me back today, I still want him to find love and be happy again.

"So how many members do you have now?" I ask looking around the room.

More of the tables have filled up, there's dancing and pool playing now and I count at least fifty people in the room.

Men and women both. Most of them dressed like bikers.

Except the brunette beauty over by the counter who looks like she could be a club girl, but is wearing what looks like surgeon's scrubs.

"We're up to thirty," Rogue says. "Our numbers swelled up after we brought down a trafficking ring about a year ago and we became sort of famous."

"Famous as a crime fighting biker club?" I ask. "I guess your dreams came true then."

Rogue looks at me, the sharpness in his bright green eyes clearly telling me he thinks I'm making fun of him.

And back in the day, before anything bad happened, I did have a habit of doing that.

Just for kicks. Because that's how I was raised in my dysfunctional mafia family, with just a dad and two older brothers. I've grown out of that since.

"Yeah, a lot of them did," Rogue says, clearly seeing that too. He was always good at reading people. And being a leader others loved to follow. I'm sensing he's grown into that nicely.

"So you've found the bastards who killed your parents, Creed?" I ask.

He gulps at suddenly being the center of attention. Or maybe at my blunt question. Then he shakes his head and a sadness so deep washes over his eyes they turn from the usually dark blue to black.

"Haven't been able to do that yet," he says. "But at least I've been able to put all the money they left me to good use. It's going towards funding the MC."

"Every member of this MC is looking for justice in one way or another," Blade says, squeezing my hand. "And I'm sure we'll all find it."

He means me, that I'll find it. But I've stopped looking a long time ago. Just having him back in my life is so beyond my wildest dreams I don't need anything more.

"And you? What have you been up to these past ten years?" Trinity asks, breaking the silence that followed Blade's words.

I shrug, no idea how much they need to know right now. "I never really found my

feet out East. But I did find my calling. I'm a tattoo artist now."

"Oh..." Comes from all around the table.

"And she's damn good," Blade adds.

"Well, you'll have no shortage of work here," Rogue says and smacks Zane on the back. "This one alone needs a lot of tats fixed."

Zane grins at him sourly then looks at me. "He's not wrong though."

"And I'll be more than happy to fix them for you," I say, then smile at the rest of them too. "And anyone else's for that matter."

The conversation takes off after that, the years we spent apart and the things holding us apart melting away the way they only can between people who have known each other for their whole lives. And I have known them all for that long, since before I can really remember.

We all attended the Sacred Heart Academy, some of us from the time we were babies. Raised by nuns, they were always more my family than any of my blood relatives. Maybe I didn't have to stay away. Maybe I should've come home sooner.

Rogue suddenly claps his hands and stands up. "Well, this little reunion was nice. We'll have to do it again some time. But I have places to be now."

The beauty in the surgeon's outfit is smiling at him, and he's smiling right back, walking to her as though attached to an invisible rope she's holding the ends of and using to reel him in.

"Rogue is in love again," I whisper and wouldn't even know I spoke aloud if

everyone else at the table hadn't laughed.

"I was beginning to think it would never happen," Bianca says. "But it seems he finally managed to lay Angel to rest."

"I'm so glad," I say and look at Blade.

He reads my mind correctly, as he gives me a quick hug then announces we've had a long day and need some much-deserved rest now.

We still haven't had sex, waiting for the perfect moment perhaps, or simply needing to go through all the motions of falling in love all over again before, but I think tonight might be the night.

Seeing everyone—even Rogue—get their happily ever after makes me think that maybe I can finally reach for my own too.

Blade takes my hand and starts leading towards the back of the room, but I don't follow, pulling him back until his lips are so close to mine it seems impossible not to kiss him.

"Take me for a ride," I ask in a whisper. "I want to see the stars."

There are very few places in LA where you can see stars, but we found all of them. And going by the smile he gives me, he remembers that as well as I do.

"Let's go," he says and pulls me in the other direction, back to the door and into the night.

The night that will be ours in all the ways all the nights of the last ten years weren't. And maybe afterwards, I'll ask him if we can just keep riding.

Because I've seen so much contentment here tonight, so many things having fallen into their proper place, that I'm afraid to stay.

Afraid I'll find a way to destroy it all like I always seem to.

But that's a conversation for later. A pain to deal with later.

A truth to face later. After I get just a little taste of what could've been for all these years. To wash away what was.

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Blade

I've had endless dreams about this very moment, so many I've long since lost count of them.

Dreams of Bella and me just riding through the night, the darkness like a velvet cloak around us, the stars our only guide.

Her arms around my waist, holding me tight, her scent woken by the night air and the wind of our passage.

All those dreams came back to me when she mentioned wanting to see the stars. Just the fact that she remembered that was priceless. And this ride as we search for them is already all those dreams coming true.

We finally find them atop one of the hills overlooking the vast, dark Pacific Ocean. Not in the best part of town—an openly Aryan MC has set up shop not far from here—but with her I am invincible. For her, I am invincible. That's proven to be the truth many times.

And as I lay her down on the blanket that I'm now sure I kept in my saddle bags for exactly this night, I know that truth in every cell and fiber of my being.

"You're so beautiful in starlight," she says as she brushes her soft, warm fingers across my cheek.

"Nowhere near as beautiful as you," I counter, wishing I could find something

profound to say to her. But those words will come too. When they are needed. Because words are not needed now.

What I need now is to feel her, to touch and kiss her, to make her mine the way she's always already been mine. In all ways, shapes, forms, in a way that knows no such limitations of time and space. In a way that is as right and perfect as drawing breath.

As our lips meet for the first kiss I feel like I've been holding my breath that I can finally release now. Finally let go of. Finally draw a fresh one.

But it's not air I need. I need her and only her.

She kisses me back with a fire she's been denying us until now. That fire that lives deep inside her and is bright enough to keep us both warm, hot, moving forward.

She's tugging at my jacket, pulling up my shirt, silently urging me to take them both off.

I oblige willingly. Continue by removing her jacket and shirt.

Then her pants and mine. Then her bra and my boxers and finally her panties.

It's too dark here to see very clearly, but I see her perfectly anyway, in my mind.

Under my touch and my kisses, she is perfectly formed, aglow in a light all her own, more beautiful than anything I've ever seen. Or will ever see. Or taste. Or touch.

I want all of her, taste all of her, touch all of her. The need rises in me like lava needing to break the surface and engulf the earth. I've denied, deflected and tried to destroy this need for the past ten years. And it's that much stronger for that.

But then she slides her hand down my chest and caresses my rock-hard cock as she somehow deepens the kiss we've been sharing. And I finally snap out of my lofty thoughts and into the here and now. Stop thinking and start doing.

Kiss her lips and her cheeks, her neck and her breasts, bury her under me so there's practically no space between us, every beat of her racing heart pulsing and tingling across my skin.

"I need you inside me so bad," she whispers, her voice cracking, proving the truth of her words, the depth of her yearning. Which is also my own.

I don't think about anything but how I'm the luckiest guy in the world as I slide my cock into her willing pussy, her body opening for me—accepting me—the way only she can.

I was sure I'd only be good for a few thrusts. Sure, the need I've kept buried for so long would show no patience.

But this isn't just about me. It's about the both of us. It's about her too. And my body knows this very well, remembers very well.

Each thrust, each pull back brings such pure pleasure it's almost painful. Her nails are digging into my back, scratching as she urges me on, between moans, whimpers, and sweet little shrieks as I pick up the pace.

I feel all of her all around me, inside and out. And yet I need more, even as I know this pleasure is already more than I've ever experienced.

There's no explaining how she makes me feel. So I'll just stop trying. I'll just live it, just experience it. She's the one who taught me how to do that. It's time to show her how well I remember.

Her moans are vibrating like the sweetest, greatest music, booming near my heart as I pick up the pace. I feel her release, the explosion of her orgasm, like a wave that starts in my cock but travels all through me more destructive than a tsunami.

There's no holding back my own orgasm after that.

And destruction is not the right word for it.

But I won't ruin this perfect moment trying to think of a better word.

I'll just feel it.

We'll just feel it.

And I'm sure she'd tell me the same thing if she could hear my thoughts.

I wrap my arms around her and she does the same. Stars are shining bright above us, reflected in her eyes as she gazes at them.

"Thank you," she whispers and I'm pretty sure she's not aware of having spoken that aloud.

"For what?" I ask.

"For taking me back," she says. "For not forgetting me."

"You've never left my heart," I say. "And there never was any forgetting you."

Her eyes look like the ocean reflecting the stars now, choppy, wavy, eternal.

But her kiss is as firm and sweet as anything I've ever tasted.

“I’ll never hurt you again,” she says. “I’ll die first.”

“That would hurt me the most.”

“I know,” she says then kisses me again. So deeply and completely I forget even the need to breathe. And it almost wipes away the crushing fear the thought of her dying brought.

I still don’t understand why she thought she needed to stay away from me for the past ten years. But I’m starting to believe I don’t need the answer to that question at all. I just need her in my arms and in my life. Everything else is just noise.

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Bella

Love. I had it and I lost it. And then, for so long, I didn't even think about it because it was too painful that I forgot what it felt like.

But now it's back. Exploding in every, last cell of my body, crackling and sparkling and making me forget all those things that should be forgotten.

Not love. I will never forget love again.

His body as he holds me close is so wonderfully warm that even this deep, ocean side night chill can't touch it. An ice age couldn't touch it.

"We waited too long to do this," I whisper and feel more than see him smile.

"I have no idea why we waited," he says.

"You know what? Me either."

But as soon as I say it and despite how very good I feel in this moment, in his arms, in the light of a billion stars, all the whys start flooding my brain.

My family would've killed him if I stayed with him.

For the honor, if nothing else. Especially as they started losing it.

But I don't want to bring any of that into this perfect place.

He holds me tighter, kissing the top of my head as I burrow closer to him and try to forget it all again. All but how good making love to him feels. He smells like the sea, and the nighttime ride, and so many other good things I don't even know how to name them all.

"I was gonna suggest we go again," he says. "But you're right... it's cold. Let's continue this somewhere a little more comfortable."

"Not your clubhouse," I say.

He leans back so he can look me in the eyes, and the moment his warmth recedes, icy cold floods me. I'm so sure I'll never be warm again that no amount of knowing it's all just in my head will make me not believe it.

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to put anyone else in danger," I say. "Let's just go to a hotel or something."

I punctuate it with a laugh that sounds so forced I almost cringe.

He sits up and pulls me along too. "Don't mind Rogue and his warnings. You're one of us. You're family. If you're in danger we all are."

Some of the warmth returns to my chest at hearing him call me family.

"That's all I ever wanted to be," I say. "Your family."

The silence that stretches between us is soft like the ocean waves, beautiful like moonlight sparkling on them. But also sharp and cold the way only starlight can be.

I have no idea what's rushing through his mind because I can't see his eyes to read them. But I'm sure it's not much different than the stuff in my mind... it's my doing we're not a family. But this is our second chance, and I'm gonna do it right this time.

"We should at least find out why Rogue is so concerned over me being here," I say. "Besides, we'll be so much more comfortable in a nice hotel downtown."

This time my laugh isn't quite so forced. Mainly because I'm already seeing the two of us tangled in the soft white sheets, laying on an even softer mattress, his body at once heavy and light on top of me, his lips?—

"Yeah, let's go," he says and gets to his feet, offering me his hand to help me stand.

By some miracle we locate all our clothes without needing to turn on the flashlight on my phone.

"Are you already seeing the comfy hotel bed in your mind too?" I ask as I'm buttoning up my jean jacket. I'll need to get a leather one soon, if we're going on any more of these nighttime rides. Which we are, if I have anything to say about it.

"What I'm already seeing is you naked again," he says and pulls me into his arms, kissing me so deeply and wildly, the ground beneath my feet transforms to water, soft waves supporting me, carrying me to the life I always wanted.

"That was intense," I say, my head spinning as we break apart. "What did I do to deserve it?"

He takes my hand and leads me to his bike. "It's just because you're you. And you're finally mine again."

I don't know if either of those things are good for him. But I push that thought down.

Focus on nothing but the hard seat beneath me and his hard abs enveloped in my arms. Nothing but the sweet, sea-scented air all around us as we're riding again.

And for the first time in maybe my entire life, I start to feel like things will work out the way they should. The way that is good and pleasant and involves no pain. No regret. No shame and no guilt.

This is my second chance. And even though I don't deserve it, I will take it. And build the life we both need and deserve with it. I swear that silently to the night wind. To all the angels listening. To God. And I will swear it to Blade too, just as soon as we stop and I can kiss him again.

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Blade

I would've liked nothing better than to spend the rest of the week—hell, the rest of my life—in the hotel room with Bella.

But even her fire and my wild love for her isn't enough to turn off my ultra-pragmatic mind for long.

So I left her sleeping, wrote a note that I'd be back very soon, hopefully before she wakes up, and rode back to the clubhouse.

The bar was empty when I arrived, but just as sparkling clean as it always is every morning.

Lotus, our club girl, but actually more of a house manager, likes to keep everything spic and span and smelling like lavender.

I'm not complaining. I've been to some clubhouses that had probably never been cleaned since being built and that's not a part of biker culture I want to embrace.

I find Rogue alone in the kitchen, finishing off a cup of coffee while staring out the window at nothing in particular since there's nothing but a tall wall and a bit of the sky to see there.

"You guys just getting back?" he asks as he notices me, his eyes unfocused like he's still staring off into space.

“I’m on my own.” I take a seat across the long table from him, blocking the window. The look in his eye switches to something that looks a lot like an I told you so and I resent that. “We need to talk.”

He nods and sips more of his coffee.

“I love Bella and I would like her to feel welcome in my home.”

I practiced these words some on my way over here. Maybe that’s why they sound so stilted.

“I didn’t say she wasn’t welcome,” Rogue says. “I said she could be a danger to us.”

“And that’s what I want to talk about,” I say and lock eyes with him. “What makes you say that? ‘Cause if it’s just to scare me away from her, to keep us apart—”

I realize I sound pretty pathetic, so I stop talking. But I wholly deserve that pitying look in his eyes. I get up to pour myself a mug of coffee to get away from it.

“That Dante Moretti guy she was supposed to marry... he’s never gotten over being jilted,” Rogue says. “He’s pretty much destroyed her whole family in revenge. I’m thinking he’ll come after her as soon as he learns she’s here.”

I turn to face him so fast about half my coffee lands on the sparkling clean white tile floor. I make no move to clean it up.

“All the more reason to protect her!”

Her family being in trouble isn’t exactly news to me. Even before she told me, I did hear about her dad and one of her brothers—the bastard who broke my jaw—being killed, but this was about five years ago, it’s old stuff.

“And we will protect her,” Rogue says, fire in his voice and eyes. “She’s one of us. But we won’t be putting the entire MC in danger doing it. Especially since we could be needed up north by the Devils soon.”

This is way too much new information for me to process right now. Probably because a large chunk of my mind is still with Bella under the stars last night and in the warm bed this morning. I sit back down to face him.

“What’s going on? What did I miss?”

He sighs, goes to drink some more of his coffee, but realizes his mug is empty and sets it back down. “Nothing much. Not yet. But the war Devil’s Nightmare MC is fighting is still going strong and Cross let it be known he might need us soon.”

It was the Devils who told us where we can find Ghost after no one could find him for a decade. So the debt we owe their president Cross is vast. There’s no way we’re not paying it.

“What else?” I ask.

I’ve known Rogue my whole life, so I can accurately read every one of his facial expressions. He’s holding something back.

He sighs and runs his hand through his messy dark hair, looking kind of lost as he grins at me.

“We veered so far off the course we’ve been smoothly sailing for the last couple of years I have no idea how to get us back on it,” he says.

“Zane coming back and our fights with the traffickers have put us in the doghouse with the cops. The Devils have sucked us into their war. The Hydras will probably be

back any moment now to get their revenge on us for messing with their trafficking operation. And now the Morettis will also come knocking. I just can't shake the feeling that we're in the opening stages of a storm that could prove more deadly than anything we can anticipate. Or that we've ever faced."

It's never good when he starts talking in metaphors. Although those things he's worried about are very much rooted in reality.

"We'll fight them all off," I say. "And we'll swim back to the top. We always do."

"And also, the sun will come out tomorrow, right?" he says, grinning crookedly.

I totally deserve that for listing all those empty platitudes.

"Fine, I'll set up Bella at my mom's house for now," I say. "She'll be safe enough there."

We all keep our families under protection that they know nothing about. It's just good practice given the work we do, the enemies we accumulate and, as Rogue put it, the storms we stir up.

"Do that," he says and stands up.

A moment later, his ol' lady Melody comes in and I'm amazed, but not surprised that he sensed her coming. I get the same thing with Bella. It's like life gets a little more alive when she's near. Like right now, I'm pretty sure she's already awake. I should get back to her.

So I just say a quick good morning to Melody, tell Rogue he can reach me any time then leave them to their own good mornings.

My mom might take a bit of convincing to let Bella stay in the apartment over the garage that was meant for me. Come to think of it, Bella will probably need some convincing to stay there too. But I'm not taking no for an answer from either of them. Ever again.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Bella

I woke up with the sun in my eyes and a note where Blade should be lying.

Not the best start to the day. Especially since the note said he'd be back soon and then he wasn't.

I spent nearly two hours trying to enjoy the comfy hotel bedroom, but my mind kept getting stuck on how alone I was.

Once again. I've spent the last decade far away from my hometown, my family—biological and found—but I never felt as alone as I do in this town when I'm by myself. Go figure.

It doesn't help that two-thirds of my biological family is gone too.

My dad and my brother Ricardo were killed while I was in prison.

I could've gotten permission to go to their funerals, good behavior and all that, but my only surviving brother Matteo told me not to even think about it and to forget them all, like they'd forgotten me. And he was the nice one.

I haven't heard from him since.

And between Rogue's warnings last night and my need to see if I really, truly have no biological family left, I almost called Matteo while I waited for Blade to come back.

I'd already dialed the number, all I needed was to press call.

But that small action was more than my shaking hands and quivering soul could take.

Just like each and every time I'd tried to call Blade in the last decade.

Everyone is better off without me. Everyone. I am ruin. I am the curse that destroys everything.

And right on cue, just as I think that, Blade walks in. Sending my mind into an even darker spiral, because it's him I most want to protect from my curse.

"Where did you go?" I ask, my voice shaking so hard I'm sure I'm blushing in shame. I'm so much stronger than all this. So much fiercer. So why do I just fall apart whenever I'm faced with my past?

Good thing Ghost never got around to torturing me, or raping me, or all the other terrible things he did to his victims. He just kept me locked up in that dank basement with no food and no water until I'd hallucinated enough for several lifetimes.

None of it good. It's why I don't like to sleep.

Dreaming is too much like those hallucinations.

Sometimes they come when I'm wide awake too.

"I'm sorry," he says and walks to me, reaching out to like he means to caress my face or something. I stand up before he can reach me, hating the pity in his eyes. I am not a fragile thing. Never was.

"No, I'm sorry," I say. "How about we get some coffee and breakfast? I'm starving."

I start looking for my clothes which somehow managed to get tossed all over the room.

No, not somehow... it happened in that whirlwind of passion that overtook us as soon as we were alone and safe in here.

I was reacquainted with so many things I'd forgotten about his body, his touch, his very soul, last night.

So many things I'd missed to the point of madness...

a point I might have crossed a bit in the last ten years.

As this morning's freak out proves. But just thinking about last night, remembering all the pleasure and bliss is making the darkness of my thoughts fade.

"Sure, yeah," he says. "But pack up your stuff. We're not coming back here."

I freeze in the middle of pulling on my shirt, wondering where the hardness in his voice is coming from. It's there on his face too.

"OK," I say and continue getting dressed. Maybe if I pretend everything is fine, it will be. "Where are we going? The clubhouse?"

He shakes his head. "My mom's."

"Your mom's?" I ask, a laugh bursting out of my chest. A relieved sort of laugh, but also everything but. "Your mom hates me worse than anyone."

He shakes his head. "She doesn't hate you."

She was just mad at you, but she's gotten over it.

Besides, you won't be staying in the house with her.

You'll be staying in the small apartment over the garage.

The one she had made for me when she thought I'd be staying at home while going to college.

You can even set up a tattoo studio up there.

It's big enough. I mean, for the time being, until you get settled in and find a better place. ”

I walk over to him and lay three fingers over his mouth to silence him. Otherwise, I don't think he'd ever stop talking. And it's not like him to talk this much. Ever. He must've given this a lot of thought. Probably while he was convincing his mom to go along with it.

“I really hate this idea, but thank you for coming up with it,” I say. “And if you're there, it won't suck so bad. I guess.”

He cringes. “I'll be there as much as I can. I promise.”

“You won't live there with me?”

“Not all the time... the club...” He's mumbling because my fingers are pressing down on his lips now. I don't want to hear this. But there's no running from it.

So I release him and start looking for my jacket. I'm suddenly very cold.

“Won’t your mom be in danger if I’m living with her?” I ask. “I mean, won’t she be in even bigger danger than everyone at the clubhouse? Maybe I should just go hide in the desert or something, or some dark basement alone so I don’t put anyone else in danger.”

He doesn’t say anything, is just standing there like a wonderful wall of stone, letting me rant, the way he usually would. He knows I need to get it all out and then I’ll snap out of it. I know I will too, because he’s here.

“Everything’s gonna work out, Bella,” he says, which just sends my mind spinning even harder with all the things I could, should, need to say to contradict him.

But then I look into his eyes and take a deep breath. And there it is again. That feeling of dreams coming true.

So instead of ranting I walk to him, caress his cheeks and cup them, then stand on my toes and give him one of those sweet kisses that are straight from those dreams too.

And before I know it, we’re lying in bed, clothes flying all over the place again, because fuck it, we have all the time in the world again. All the time I thought was lost forever.

He enters me with the same care he’s always shown me.

But also with an urgency that lets me know he’s chasing those lost dreams as hard as I am.

Chasing them with his kisses, his caresses, but mostly his thrusts, which never fail to hit the spot, the one where nothing but pleasure and goodness can live.

Pretty soon, I’m moaning into his wild kisses, meeting his thrusts, trying to fight the

orgasm knocking at me with all the force of an approaching wildfire... just so I can hold this dream a little longer, just so I can pretend it will never end again.

But there's no holding back those fires. Never was.

I welcome their all-erasing power, welcome the pure pleasure they wash me in, inside and out. Welcome the good. Because if bad must come, at least we'll have this wild abandon, this pure bliss to remember.

Bad will come. It always has and always does when I'm around. It's pretty much the only certainty in my life. As is the fact that I'll fight it with everything I've got.

Just so I can get back to this. To his arms. To this wildfire love we do so well.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Blade

The sky outside is the soft dusky pink of twilight as we ride to my mom's house in Angelino Heights.

I took the van when I went to pick her up at the hotel, since it has all her bags in it, so no sunset ride for us today.

And not much actual driving either, since the highway is as congested as always at this time in the evenings.

"If you brought your bike, we could be whizzing right past all these standing cars," Bella muses, looking out her window.

Her skin is aglow with the purplish, dying sunlight, even her eyes a deep violet. It's my favorite light to look at her by... well, it's definitely in the top five.

"And next time we will," I tell her.

She looks at me and grins. "So you will come visit me often. And take me out."

"I'll take you out all the time," I promise her and grin suggestively. "Unless we'd rather stay in."

"Ugh, doing it at your mom's house? That's so cringe," she says, giggling.

I laugh too. "Hey, anywhere I can get it is just fine."

She scoots closer and rests her head on my shoulder. “Yeah, anywhere sounds just perfect.”

“Plus, you won’t technically be in the house.”

“I know, I know, the garage,” she says. “Still not sure if that’s the best plan though.”

“It’s the safest place for you.”

She sighs and raises her head, gazing into my eyes. “Do you really think anyone from my old life gives a shit that I’m back? Because I don’t. I think Rogue is just being overly paranoid. Or he’s just trying to chase me away.”

One of these days, we’re all gonna have to have a heart-to-heart about the past and Bella’s role in it.

Rogue especially. If he took back Zane, there’s no reason he should continue holding his grudge against Bella.

She made mistakes. But she was an addict.

And she didn’t mean to hurt anyone, least of all Angel.

Or me. She was trying to save me when she was taken by Ghost... but I can’t think about that.

If I hadn’t let myself get beaten up by her family... if I hadn’t been the pussy that let them take her that night, everything would be different. Everything. I try not to think too much about that either. Staring into her big, sad, vulnerable violet eyes right now, that’s very hard to do.

“The traffic’s starting to move,” she says, averting her eyes and breaking the paralyzing spell of all the things that went wrong and can never be put right.

I drive on, only to come to a standstill a few yards further down the road. That’s how dealing with the past has been... I’ve tried everything, from reading too many books, to meditation, to drink and medication... none of it helped. Hopefully having her back will. I think it’s already starting to.

“I’m sure Rogue’s intel is solid,” I tell her. “It usually is.”

I hope it’s not though. I hope she is in absolutely no danger and that we can finally have the life we always wanted. Together.

“I’ll just call my brother,” she says. “See what’s what.”

“You can’t do that,” I say, but then have no idea how to back it up. Especially after she fixes me with the fiercest look I’ve ever seen in her eyes. And I’ve seen plenty of them.

“He’s my family,” she says. “Don’t tell me I can’t speak to my family. And I want to visit my father’s and Ricardo’s graves. They might not have been the greatest, but they were my family. My blood.”

The traffic finally starts moving for real and I don’t remember the last time I was so relieved about anything. Other than after finding out she still loved me, that is.

“I meant don’t call him yet,” I tell her. “Let’s find out if Dante Moretti really is still looking for you first.”

She scoffs. “He could’ve found me anytime in New York. Thinking he’s still after me is just a fairytale. I’m dead to everyone here. And totally spoiled as a bride.”

“Not to me,” I say quietly, even though I know it’s not nearly enough to make her feel better.

She leans her head on my shoulder again though. “I know. I’m sorry I got worked up. Talking about my family always does that. You were always more than enough for me.”

We don’t speak, just share a silence that’s pleasant and homey despite being filled with so many things that can never be put right. But maybe they can be survived.

My mom’s fancy neighborhood sparkles with all the lit-up mansions lining it.

The cops picked me up no less than four times on my way home here, thinking I’d come to steal or worse.

Being a dark-skinned black kid in a rich neighborhood and all.

My rich and famous white mom took the complaint all the way to the Chief of Police, the second time it happened.

The guy ended up apologizing to me personally.

But it was too late. I’d already learned that this would never be my real home by then.

I park the van by the garage, looking up at the stained-glass windows of the apartment above it.

My mom had them put in to match the main house, had the same guy hand paint them as the originals, but it was all for nothing...

I never spent more than a night or two in that apartment, always preferred to stay at

whatever place we were calling our clubhouse at the time.

Mom's standing at the top of the stairs that lead up to the apartment, holding a spray bottle in one hand, a cloth in the other, her eyes fixed on mine.

Bella sees her too, gives me a look that plainly says, you could've told me we'd be meeting your mom tonight , then opens her door and steps out.

"Good evening, Mrs. Steele," she says, looking up at Mom. "It's very gracious of you to let me stay here."

Whatever else Bella might be, she's also someone who knows exactly what to say and when. Probably her upbringing as a Mafia princess. Or just the fact that she's always been meant to be a queen.

"You're always welcome here, Isabella," Mom says as she descends the stairs. "As long as your intentions are good. And I am always willing to help."

There's no animosity in their words, my mom is smiling widely as she pulls Bella into a hug that is returned.

It's just two queens sizing each other up.

Between them I always wondered how I managed to get a word, or a thought, in edgewise.

I'm probably not going to now, so I leave them to it and start lugging Bella's suitcases up the stairs.

"I thought we could have supper together, get reacquainted and so on," Mom says when I come back down for the last time. "Nothing fancy. I just made some

sandwiches.”

“Sure,” Bella says. “I’m starving and you always made the best sandwiches.

They spoke while I was toiling with the suitcases, but I only heard their voices not their words. I didn’t want to hear what they were talking about. I already got an earful of Mom’s warnings this morning when I asked her if Bella could stay here for a while.

“Great. I don’t get the chance to make them as often as I used to,” Mom says. “Come.”

We follow her to the main house, past the flower garden that she spends a lot of her time in now, and up the stone steps to the wrap around dark wood porch.

“Should you be leaving your door unlocked if you’re in the garden, Mom?” I ask when it turns out that’s what she did.

She looks at me over her shoulder. “You’re always telling me I’m well protected here and I believe you.”

Mom had been a world-renowned psychologist in her time... she still gets consulted from time to time, and I never could read exactly what she was thinking. It’s never anything bad, I don’t think.

She’s always given me all the love a mother should, ever since she and dad adopted me.

And more. But I’m now also sure she didn’t like me telling her this morning that she’s under surveillance 24/7 because of the work I do.

She also didn't like being kept in the dark about it all these years.

I'm sure more words are coming my way about that, just hopefully not tonight over sandwiches.

And going by the look Bella is giving me as we follow my mom down the dark foyer to the kitchen, I'm sure I'm getting words from her too once we're alone.

I shrug, meaning this dinner invitation is a surprise to me too, but I doubt that's gonna be enough to placate her. Not that I mind. I'm just happy that these two are starting to get along again. Or are at least willing to try.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Bella

I wasn't just being nice when I complimented Sophia, as she's once again insisting I call her instead of Mrs. Steele.

She makes sandwiches that she could sell for lots of money if she were so inclined.

And the bread she uses is to die for... it's a sort of crustless panini bread and so soft it literally melts in my mouth.

I wolfed down two tuna and avocado ones, and started on an eye-wateringly good cheese and walnut next, before I had to concede I'll need a little break first.

The sparkling water she laid out for us scratches my throat as I wash the sandwiches down, but in a good way.

"Got any beer?" Blade asks on his way to the fridge.

"I don't think so," his mom says, casting me a glance that plainly says she doesn't want any alcohol around me.

The look makes me instantly remember late nights in this kitchen, alone with Blade, looking for liquor we could drink to make our night even funner. This was before I developed a taste for heroin, but not by much. She's right not to trust me. But I mean to earn her trust again. And everyone else's.

"So, how did you like living on the east coast, Isabella?" she asks, while Blade is

rummaging through the fridge.

I take another sip of my water before answering. Trying to get my mind straight and decide how much she needs to know. But that's useless. She will need to know everything eventually. And with her nation-wide connections, maybe she already does. Or Blade told her.

"I got off to a rough start and the first few years weren't that great," I tell her. "But then I found my feet."

"Henry tells me you're a very accomplished tattoo artist now," she says.

It's always such a surprise hearing someone call Blade by his given name, but at the same time, Henry suits him very well. So polished and serious. Just like him. Maybe I should start using it more.

"I do OK. Hopefully that will continue here too."

"You can have clients at the apartment, I don't mind," Sophia says. "And maybe you can give me a tattoo too."

I was taking another sip of water and swallowed the scratchy liquid way too fast. It takes me a few seconds to be able to breathe again.

"Just a small one," Sophia says and laughs. "I've always wondered what all the fuss was about."

"Umm, sure, I'd love to."

She continues smiling. But I can tell she has things to say to me, questions to ask. She's wondering if I will break her son's heart again and I don't blame her for it. The

answer is no. A loud, screaming no. I hope she does ask so I can tell her.

Blade is still busy in the kitchen proper, leaving us alone in the dining nook, probably waiting for his mom to ask the questions too.

“How is your family?” she asks instead. “I heard your father passed. I’m sorry about that.”

I shrug. “Me too. But he was more or less done with me long before that.”

“You haven’t had it easy, that’s for sure.” Her eyes show genuine concern. I have a feeling like maybe she wants to hug me. But she doesn’t and then Blade comes back and the spell is broken.

“You can talk to me any time you want to,” Sophia says. “About anything. I’m here.”

“You mean the... the Ghost stuff?” I ask, my voice cracking.

Blade looks up from his phone, noticing it too.

Sophia nods. “Or about your family.”

My thoughts are screaming at each other in my head. I’ve done therapy, but all of it was very patchy and I don’t think I ever really talked anything through with anyone. I don’t need to. I have my art. And I have Blade now. And I’m back home. I don’t need anything more than that.

“Sure,” I say instead of any of that.

Blade comes over and lays his arm around my shoulders. “Thanks for dinner, Mom, but I think Bella wants to get settled in now.”

His mom stands up, nodding. “Yes, of course. I’ve laid out some clean towels and made the bed. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Thank you, Sophia, for opening your home to me,” I say as I stand up too, glad for Blade’s arm around my shoulders. “You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to,” she says. “For a long time. So I’m glad you asked, Henry.”

He nods, not seeming to grasp the full depth of her words. Not sure I do either. But she’s definitely saying more than she’s actually saying. I think she really wants to help me. And I don’t know if I’m happy about that or just scared.

Because I’m not sure I’m strong enough to face my ghosts.

Any of them. I’m afraid if I try, I’ll just disintegrate again.

And that would ruin everything all over again.

So, no I don’t think I’ll be talking to her about any of that.

Why risk it? Best to just focus on what I can fix.

My past not being one of those things. My future, maybe.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Blade

Surprisingly enough, Bella didn't give me any shit about my mom making us dinner and wanting to talk to her.

And that's not all. We made love like we haven't yet.

With gentle kisses and tender caresses, taking our time in everything.

She fell asleep in my arms, spent and sated.

I followed and slept better than I had since I was a child, felt even safer than I had then.

But there's no pushing the world away anymore.

Rogue wanted me at the clubhouse last night.

I convinced him this morning was fine. And as much as I want to make that stretch into another week of making up for lost time with Bella, I can't.

Besides, the sooner everything the club's facing is dealt with, the sooner we'll be together all the time.

I took my time leaving her though, careful not to wake her, but mostly just wanting to watch her sleep.

I took my time with the note too, came up with a great quote about love, one I'd completely forgotten until this morning as she lay sleeping and I was getting dressed in the early rays of the sun.

One word frees us of all the weight and pain in life. That word is Love.

Socrates said that. And I've known the reverse of that...

absence of love brings all the weight and pain in life.

But what he said is more true. I added all that to the note, then felt a little like a fool as I jogged down the stairs to the driveway, but there's nothing I don't want to share with Bella.

And that includes sounding like an idiot when I try to be philosophical.

My mind was still full of Bella as I entered the room where the rest of the execs—and Zane for some reason—were already getting started on Council.

“Good of you to join us, Blade,” Rogue says edgily. He wasn't happy that I refused to come in last night, but I regret nothing.

“So what's on the agenda today?” I ask, taking my usual seat at the table with my back to the window.

“The better question would be, what isn't?” Rogue says. “Or at least, the answer would be shorter in that case.”

“Let's get started with the most pressing shit then,” I say. “Don't wanna be here all day.”

Zane grins at me. “That’s right. You got better things to do now.”

I just grunt and nod in response. I don’t know if the guy is trying to be friendly or wanting to mess with me.

Neither will end well. It’s no secret that I don’t want him here.

He’s the real danger to this MC. In more ways than one.

I wish Rogue could see that as clearly as he seems to see Bella as a danger.

But there’s no logic in any of that. It’s just emotion.

He loves Zane like a brother, and he believes Bella is partly responsible for Angel dying.

I’d hope he’d mellowed out now that he’s finally in love again, but so far, no such luck.

“All right, let’s start with the most pressing shit,” Rogue says.

“And shit it is. The Hydra assholes that we put in their place seems to think we’re in an all-out war with them now.

Never mind the fact that the feds busted a bunch of them and the state police even more.

Just last night, Minx and Rock were attacked to send another message. ”

I sit up straighter, glaring at him. “You didn’t tell me that. Are they all right? Where are they?”

“Would you have come in if I had told you?” Rogue asks.

I wish the answer was a clear yes. But I pause, and he grins darkly, thinking his thoughts. They’re probably the same as mine. Two weeks ago, I would’ve been the first one in after a thing like that. Now I’m the last. Bella’s fault. I hate him thinking that.

“They’re fine, just scrapes and bruises. Rock has a mild concussion,” Rogue says. “At least those cowards didn’t go after the club girls this time.”

“And what was the message?” I ask.

“They want us to pay for what we stole, else they’ll start leaving bodies next,” Rogue says.

The quiet that settles over the room is as cold as snow.

“Pay for the sex slaves we freed, they mean?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

“Well, we’re not doing that,” I say, as if it needed saying.

“Obviously not,” Creed says. He’s our money guy so he always speaks where money’s concerned, but what he said didn’t need saying either.

“I say we hit them again,” I say. “Finish what we started last time.”

Rogue shakes his head. “We need a more permanent solution. We almost lost you the last time and I’m not ready to take another risk like that. I’ve got Skye finding out everything about them and then we’re handing it all over to the cops, let them take

care of it.”

I lean back, resting my head on interlaced fingers. “You mean we’re going back to the way we used to do things?”

“And it’s about fucking time,” Alice says. “I’m not OK with almost losing anyone.”

She’s the sarge, so it’s her job to say things like that.

But the way her eyes are so sharp yet so soft at the edges tells me she’s speaking from the heart.

Before we made our pact with the Devils, we’d rarely get into all out fights with the people we were hunting down. Since, it’s all we seem to be doing.

“I would love nothing more than to keep everyone safe,” I say and lean forward again. “But is there still a way back for us. After Ghost and the Devils? After taking him in?”

I point to Zane, but don’t look at him. I can feel his eyes boring into me though, none too friendlily, I’m sure.

“We’ll give the cops all we have and hope they take it,” Rogue says.

“But an operation like Hydra... there’s bound to be higher ups involved who’ll just crush any sort of investigation... “

“And we’ll worry about that when we get to it,” Rogue says with finality.

I nod and lean back again. “OK, so what else?”

“There’s trouble brewing up North with the Devils, like I already told you. Cross wants us to be ready to ride if he needs us.”

More silence falls like freezing snow.

“Will we ever be free of our debt to them?” Creed asks. This isn’t a debt counted in money, strictly speaking, but he is the guy who handles our debts so it’s fitting.

“After this, we’ll be square,” Rogue says. “Cross gave me his word.”

Except the this he’s talking about is an all-out war. And people get killed in wars. No one says anything this time. I’m sure we’re all thinking that same thing though. There’s enough cold silence in this room now to give me chills. And not the good kind.

“All right, so we get to work on Hydra,” I say and brace against the chair arms. “I want to see Minx and Rock now.”

“There’s one more thing,” Rogue says and it’s his tone alone that makes me sit back down without hesitation.

“We gotta find out if Moretti is still after Bella like I think he is,” Rogue says. “Can I give you that job?”

He’s looking at me, his fiery green eyes boring holes straight through mine.

“Yeah,” I say and hate how weak it sounds.

“You and Zane,” he says. “It’ll be good for you two to work together. You need to find common ground and I trust you to get it done in a way that won’t add more shit to the pile we’re already facing.”

I want to complain. I want to tell him no way, give me someone else to work with , but he's trusting me with a thing a lesser man wouldn't have. And he's trusting me to do it well.

I hope I don't let him down. Because I have hated Dante Moretti since the day I found out Bella was promised to him and that hatred has not died down since.

"Just watch him, see what you see," Rogue says. "No grand gestures for now."

I have no idea what he means by that, but I nod anyway, signaling I get it.

"So what else?" I ask.

"I think that's enough for one day," Rogue says. "Like you, I also don't want to spend the whole day in here."

I get the distinct feeling that he's holding something back, that he knows something that I should know too. But I don't call him out on it and the moment passes.

They all file out, leaving just me and Zane in the room.

"So how you wanna handle it?" he asks.

"Meet me out front in fifteen," I say and get up. "We'll figure it out then."

Then I leave without waiting for a reply. He's gonna hate me giving him orders, I already sense that. But there's a lot more where that came from. I gotta know if there's still any of that good Irish boy that we used to know left in him. And above all, I gotta know if we can depend on him.

But first, I have to see Minx and Rock, find out what went wrong with the security

measures we implemented to keep all the members safe.

Because that's always been my priority, keeping every one of my brothers and sisters safe.

Right down to taking the bullets that would've killed Rock and very nearly killed me.

But I want to be done taking bullets now that I have a chance of the future of my dreams back.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Bella

Since there's no time like the present and we should make the most of what we have while we have it—something I learned very well while I was locked up in prison—I dragged Blade to come tattoo chair shopping with me.

I don't even, strictly speaking, need it.

I can ink anywhere and anytime, and I did some of my best work with a makeshift tattooing needle in prison.

But I want this to be the start of the next chapter in my life in all ways.

And if I'm gonna make it be the best chapter of my life, I need to do it right from the start.

So now I'm the proud owner of a state-of-the-art chair that just about fits in the small living room of the garage apartment at his mom's.

Zane helped Blade carry it up the narrow stairs and we're all sitting on the sofa, which is now pushed to the side of the room and making everything seem a lot more cramped than it already was.

But as long as there's enough space around the tattooing chair, I'm happy.

I just hope the stained-glass windows will let enough natural light through for me to do my work.

“So, got any clients lined up?” Zane asks, eying the chair like it’s made of gold.

“I’ve had some calls from people back East who are thinking of coming out just to get tats,” I say. “But nothing concrete yet. You want to be the first? If there’s any space on you left, that is.”

I laugh at my joke, but I’m sure I’m not very far off the mark. What I can see of his skin is already pretty well covered in ink. Minus his face, although he’s got some ink there too.

He grins and winks at me. “I think there’s a couple of spots left.”

My face heats up, because for some reason the thought that he’s talking about his dick flashes through my mind. Nothing he said. Just the way he’s looking at me.

“We should get on with things, Zane,” Blade says, slamming his mostly full bottle of beer on the coffee table, making foam rise.

I’m pretty sure he heard the same thing in Zane’s voice I did. And is jealous? I have never given him cause to be jealous, and that’s not what happened now, so I don’t think that’s the whole reason for his reaction. I’ve sensed a tension between him and Zane all day.

“We can finish this beer, I think,” Zane says, grinning at me again. “Talk some more about being the inaugural client... I’ve been thinking... I have an old tat that I wish I didn’t have anymore?—”

“Sure, I’ll take a look,” I say, because Blade’s been showing signs of blowing up. It doesn’t happen often, he’s usually the calmest person I’ve ever met, so when it’s spectacular when he goes off. “But I think Blade’s mom will be my first client.”

I walk over to Blade and sit on the arm rest next to him. “If she was serious about getting a tattoo, I mean.”

Blade rests his hand on my thigh and looks up at me. “I doubt she was. But maybe.”

He gives my leg a squeeze and stands up. “Let’s go, Zane.”

It sounds like a command, like he’s speaking as the Vice President of his MC, and Zane takes it as such, getting up and finishing his beer standing up.

“Yes, boss.” He winks at me again and I don’t react.

Never in a million years would I expect Zane to flirt with me.

But is that really what he’s doing? Or is he just trying to get Blade riled up for some other reason?

Blade looks at the door, then watches Zane exit through it before turning to me.

“I’ll probably be late again,” he says. “Will you be OK here?”

I nod and wrap my arms around his neck, kissing him softly. “Don’t worry about me. I think I’ll go ask Sophia if she wants to put her money where her mouth is.”

Blade cringes. “My mom with a tattoo. I’m not sure I’m ready to see that.”

“Why not?” I ask in a very innocent voice. “Maybe a nice phoenix rising from the flames on her back. Or maybe a flower garden complete with birds. Something like these stained-glass windows she’s installed everywhere.”

He actually shakes as he cringes this time. “Please, God, no. Start her off with

something small. Please.”

I laugh and kiss him again. “I’m making no promises.”

He squeezes me tight then lets go.

“And don’t worry about Zane and whatever his play is,” I say. “I’ve dealt with a lot of guys like him and I’m still here.”

I realize I’ve made a mistake as his face grows as hard as steel and his whole body tenses.

“I just mean... I don’t even know what I meant... you have nothing to worry about is what I’m saying.” I try to backtrack, but I’m sensing that I’m failing miserably. “Don’t be mad.”

He brushes a strand of my hair off my face. “I’m not mad.”

But he sure looks it. I don’t say it though, because I’ve messed up enough for one afternoon already.

“I’m just upset that you had to deal with guys like that and I wasn’t there to keep you safe.”

Something I didn’t even know was solid melts in my chest and I lean against him, resting my forehead against his chest. “My fault. Totally.”

“Didn’t you say we were in a hurry?” Zane’s voice interrupts whatever Blade was gonna say next. Probably for the best because I’d rather not start crying again.

“Not only your fault, mine too,” he says and kisses the top of my head. “We’ll talk

later. But now I really should go.”

I let him go then watch him leave. The little colorful birds drawn on the stained-glass windows seem to flutter in the afternoon light, the trees and the flowers sway in an invisible wind and I’m sure I’ve finally made it back full circle.

Back to the love I had, the love we shared, before it all fell apart.

And I don’t know if I’ve ever been happier.

I don’t think so. Even if tears are pressing against the back of my eyes.

They’re tears of joy. Another thing I’d forgotten how to feel until just now.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Blade

We helped Bella with her chair while Moretti was taking a long lunch at one his restaurants, Divina Cucina. I bet the food is actually better than that presumptuous name else all those made men wouldn't be eating there. But the Divine Kitchen? Come on. How pedestrian.

The place was filled with a bunch of guys in suits, including Bella's brother, Matteo. But he wasn't sitting at the big table with Dante, the boss. I suppose that could be a telling bit of intel. But nothing we're gonna find out by sitting in a van curbside and watching them eat.

I was gonna leave Zane here while I went to help Bella alone, and I wish I had. But he insisted on coming along, saying the men inside are just gonna stuff their faces for hours and he was right. They're still doing that.

It never ceases to amaze me how all these Italian restaurants always manage to look the part of an authentic out-of-the-way place in Italy.

Must be the dainty tables, pristine white tablecloths, the striped awnings and the waiters in perfectly tailored dress pants, white shirts and black aprons.

They all look as ready to serve you the best meal you've ever eaten as they put a couple of bullets in you. Whatever the boss asks for.

I lost my taste for anything to do with the Mob when I lost Bella. Or even before then, when I found out she was to be given away in marriage to secure some deal or

other. Like a piece of property.

“I don’t know what Rogue thinks we’re gonna get from sitting out here watching these guys eat?” Zane says.

“Just take the pictures and try not to think so much,” I snap.

We’ve now spent days taking pictures of everyone Dante meets with and sending them back to Skye, our intel officer, to put names to. So far, a good third have come back Hydra. And that’s worrying. But as I told Rogue last night, it doesn’t seem to have anything to do with us.

“Once we’re done here, I wouldn’t mind going back over to yours to get that tat from Bella,” Zane says amid pressing the shutter of the camera.

“You’re not getting a tattoo from her,” I say, thinking that’ll be the end of that.

“Sure I am,” Zane says and snaps a few more photos. “Why wouldn’t I?”

The stuffy interior of the car grows even hotter and it has little to do with the fact that there was no shade to be had on this damn, dusty road.

As the VP of the club, I’ve gotten very used to people doing what I tell them to do the first time I say it, even with all the new recruits.

But Zane isn’t just a new recruit... he’s something a lot worse than that. He’s an old friend.

“I don’t appreciate you flirting with my woman,” I say.

He lowers the camera and looks at me, his blue eyes the only clear and light thing

about him. “I wasn’t flirting with her. We were just talking.”

I’m sure he’s fucking with me. His eyes are too innocent as he says it.

They don’t belong in the head of the kind of man he is.

A ruthless, psycho killer. And an old friend.

I’m not sure how the latter can possibly still hold true, seeing everything he’s done.

If I had to guess, I’d say Zane is no one’s friend, not even his own.

“She’s mine and that’s the last warning you’re gonna get.”

Zane sighs loudly and lifts the camera back to his face. “Man, when did you get so hard?”

“When did you?” I ask. “But no, don’t tell me, must’ve been when you butchered that young priest.”

He hits the side of the door with the lens as he lowers the camera to glare at me. “What do you know about that, huh? What do you think you know? I did what needed doing.”

That’s not how the story went. The guy he killed, Father Vincent, was a nice guy, worked with street kids, devoted his short life to bringing light to the downtrodden.

And what did Zane do? He’s been bringing nothing but darkness practically his whole life.

Yeah, I know some things about all that.

And I'm not about to listen to any of his bullshit.

"Just stay away from Bella," I say.

He's still glaring at me, his previously so innocent eyes full of the darkness that's more his speed. He wants to say more, wants to argue, maybe wants to plunge that huge knife he carries on his belt into my guts. I'd like to see him try. I let my eyes do the talking on that one.

He looks away first, sighing as he gazes back at the restaurant.

"I don't think that brother of hers is having the best time with Dante.

He's been standing in the back all through this lunch.

They haven't given him anything to eat, they haven't even let him sit down.

And he looks like maybe he's been beaten up recently. "

I look over at the restaurant and raise the binoculars to my face. Matteo is indeed standing with his back to the wall, a scowl on his face. But all the guys in there seem to be scowling. He's also sporting what could be the beginning of a black eye, but we're too far away to be sure.

"How'd you get all that just by looking at the guy?" I ask. "As far as I can tell, he hasn't even moved."

"Trust me," Zane says, picking perhaps the least likely thing I'll ever do. "I've been where he is. I know the look."

"Been where?"

“Hated, despised, friendless... and beat on because of all that.”

I sneak a glance at him out the sides of my eyes, feeling something for the guy despite how much I despise him.

It’s the sincerity in his voice and something raw that can’t be faked.

I could tell him he brought it on himself.

But what good’s that gonna do more than a decade after everything went to shit for him.

“You’re gonna have to earn my friendship back,” I say.

He grins and it’s not an altogether cold thing. Just mostly. “I guess that’s a start.”

The men in the restaurant have finally finished their lunch and are starting to get up and head out.

No one speaks to Matteo, and he’s one of the last to leave.

Maybe Zane is onto something as regards his low standing with the Moretti family.

But I’m not about to tell Bella about it.

She’ll go straight to him and I don’t think that’s gonna do either of them any good.

“So what now? We follow them some more?” Zane asks. “But who?”

The men are getting into their various rides—all of which are shiny black cars of various makes and models but all with tinted windows. Moretti got into a Rolls

Royce.

“We’re going back to the clubhouse,” I say, making an executive decision. “We need to figure out who’s who in all those photos we’ve been taking, then make a game plan. They don’t seem to be an immediate threat to the MC.”

And I’ll have Skye look into Matteo and what he’s doing with Dante Moretti. Then, and only once I’m armed with some concrete facts, will I decide how much to tell Bella. It’s for the best that way. They’d written her off, after all. It’s best she does the same.

Bella

I didn't expect Blade's mom to agree when I walked up to the house to ask if she wanted that first tattoo now. But here she is, half-lying in my new chair in just a tank top, her white-grey hair pulled back from her face.

"How much is this going to hurt?" she asks, but I hear no trepidation in her voice, no backing out.

"It's going to hurt, I'm not gonna lie," I tell her and grin. "So if you want to change your mind..."

She shakes her head resolutely. Good. Because I already have my latex gloves on and my needle and colors ready. I also already have a firm mental image of what I will draw on her skin.

"So, a butterfly?" I ask.

"Yes, because they represent rebirth and transformation," she says. "But also because I just really love them. I planted a few special bushes in the garden that I read would draw them in to my garden, but so far, no luck. Maybe it's all the smog in this city. I really should move to the country."

Most of my customers get chatty, especially first timers. It's the nerves and anticipation of pain, so I just smile along and listen.

"I'll give you the most beautiful butterfly to have with you all the time," I say. "We

could even make it a little family of butterflies? What do you say?"

The shock on her face says all I need to hear. A big no.

"Maybe just one to start," she says. "Then you can add more if..."

"If it's not too painful? Gotcha."

I turn on the needle and the buzzing sound makes her tremble. Another reaction I've seen a bunch of times before.

"Don't worry, you're a tough lady," I say. "It won't be more pain than you can handle."

I regret the words as soon as they're out of my mouth. I caused a bunch of that pain for her, including putting her only son in a coma for three days. My father and brothers did that, but I might as well have done it, since it happened because of me.

"We'll see if I can handle it," she says and laughs. "Else I'll just have a little dot or something... if I change my mind."

If she'd been thinking the same thing I was, it's not evident from her voice. And I better get started before those terrible memories swallow my whole mind and leave me useless.

As soon as I draw the first line, the now disappears and I'm all-in on the art I'm creating. It happens when I draw on paper and even more so when I draw on skin. I love it.

"You don't think my saggy, old lady skin will make it look odd?" she asks, eying what I'm doing.

“Your skin is great,” I tell her and it’s not even a lie. “I think it will look gorgeous.”

The butterfly would look perfect on her hand, as though just resting there for the moment. But she’d never go for a tattoo that’s visible all the time. So I’m putting it along her collarbone, where it’s easily covered, or uncovered whenever she wants to look at it.

I was right about her high tolerance for pain. She barely flinched when the needle pierced her skin and is handling it fine as I go on.

“So what color are you making it?” she asks.

“I was thinking sapphire, yellow and black,” I say.

“Perfect,” she says. “It’ll be like a piece of jewelry. I do love sapphires.”

“I know you do,” I say. “That’s why I chose those colors.”

She gives me a sidelong look that pulls me right back into the whirlwind of memories I’m trying really hard to ignore. I don’t return her look, just focus even harder on the drawing and it helps. Somewhat.

I’ll need one of those stronger reflector lights in here.

I thought I could get away with it without getting one, but the light is fading fast and not even turning all the lamps and ceiling lights is helping.

Not that I need much light to work with.

I see the design in my head clearly, and my hand translates it onto skin exactly.

That's always been a gift I had. Probably my only gift.

My vision of a butterfly that had just landed on her collarbone is coming together perfectly. I can't wait to add the colors. That's when the vision will truly come to life. But for now I'm just tracing the outline, just making the shape to fill, just giving it the first inklings of life...

"You really love this work, don't you?" Sophia asks.

Her eyes are clear and pain free as I gaze at her, get sucked into them, because I'm still so lost in the work.

"And I really love your son too," I say.

No idea what made me say it. I was so consumed by the art I was making I'd lost touch with the real world. It happens all the time. That's why I prefer to not engage in small talk when I work. Because I never know what stupid thing is gonna come out of my mouth.

There's pain in her eyes now. And my needle isn't even touching her skin.

I remedy that by getting back to work, praying to get back the focus I had. But it's melting away even as the colors I'm applying melt together into perfectness.

"I was trying to get help for him that night," I say. "I was trying so hard. I don't know if anyone ever told you..."

"He told me," she says. "It was the night you were abducted."

"And I never imagined my family would beat him up so badly," I say, choosing to ignore the last bit of what she said.

That night is just darkness in my mind, the next two weeks even more so. The only light is the love exploding in my chest, love for Blade, that led me forward, let me fight, kept me sane in that dark basement. “I never imagined a lot of things... things I should’ve known.”

The silence that follows is full of the buzzing of my needle that sounds like water flowing fast somewhere. Like maybe under the bridge. If only I were so lucky. Of course no one trusts me, of course she doesn’t trust me. I’ve done nothing to deserve anyone’s trust.

“You’ve made some mistakes, there’s no two ways about that,” Sophia finally says. “But what happened that night isn’t your fault. None of that was your fault.”

The butterfly is done. It’s just as pretty and perfect as I wanted it to be.

Maybe even slightly better. But I can’t see that perfectness anymore.

It doesn’t make me happy. I’m still just lost. Like I was that night.

Like I’ve been since that night. Right up until Blade showed up at my studio almost two weeks ago now.

But everything is still all messed up. Nothing is perfect.

“Go look,” I tell her, having trouble stringing more than that together. “In the bathroom mirror. Before I bandage it up.”

She gives me another loaded look, a searching look, like she’s checking for my reaction to what she said. All she’ll see is regret. And that hasn’t solved anything yet.

I say nothing and thankfully neither does she. Instead, she gets up and walks to the

bathroom like I asked her too. A gasp is followed by another loaded look in my direction.

“This is beautiful, Bella,” she says. “Better than anything I could’ve hoped for. And my sagging skin isn’t getting in the way at all.”

She’s grinning wide as she checks it out some more, moving her arm this way and that.

“It’s like it’s alive,” she says. “And the colors. They’re amazing too. So real. So shimmery.”

“Glad you like,” I say as I join her in the bathroom, holding the bandage to put over it. “I wanted you to love it.”

“And I do.”

She’s gazing at me but I’m avoiding her eyes. I’ve seen quite enough of the fuck up that is my past in them tonight. And heard it in her voice too.

“You have to keep it dry for a few days. And apply this ointment.” I hand her a small vial of it.

“I didn’t want to push you,” she says once we’re just standing there under the glaring fluorescent light in the bathroom.

This room also has a stained-glass window. It’s a colorful picture of a meadow full of flowering trees. And I’m pretty sure those dots I can’t quite make out are butterflies.

“You can talk to me anytime.”

“What’s the point?” I ask. “The past will still be the past. Why bring it forward to

mess everything up now?”

“There’s something to be said for releasing the past,” she says.

“I don’t think I’m one of those people that can be saved,” I say. “I can only be forgiven. Maybe.”

She doesn’t speak, just wraps her arms around me and it’s very hard to keep the tears in.

But I manage it. Because crying about it never solved anything.

Back when I still lived at home with my family, I’d do a lot of yelling and screaming and arguing.

But that didn’t solve anything either. None of this can be solved.

It just has to be endured. I’ve learned and relearned that so many times in the last ten years.

“If you’re looking for my forgiveness, you have it,” she whispers.

And I didn’t know how much I needed to hear that until a tiny tear escaped despite its pointlessness.

“And I’m sure others will forgive you too.

In time. Because none of it is really your fault.

You were too young to be blamed for your addiction, for giving your heart away, for making the wrong choices for the right reasons. ”

What she's saying makes perfect sense. But it's just words. And words, like crying, don't make anything better. I'm not sure anything ever truly gets better.

"You have to forgive yourself first, Bella," she says and lets me go to gaze into my eyes again.

This time I do return the look. And get lost in her eyes again. But also found, in some bizarre way.

"I'll work on it," I say and extricate myself from her arms.

But I think both of us know I wouldn't know where to begin.

In Blade's arms is a good start, a little voice in my head is telling me.

But another one is screaming at me that I'll just fuck it all up again.

Maybe worse than the first time. That I should leave.

That being alone is better. At least there's no one around to be hurt then. But there's no one to love either.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Blade

I've been away from Bella most days and much of the night each night, busy with club business, for over a week now.

She's been patient, not asking many questions, focusing on her art and getting clients.

My mom has a whole family of butterflies adorning her collarbone now and I don't know how I feel about that.

Not bad. But definitely weird. Must be some kind of late midlife crisis or something, seeing as she pushing seventy.

She's talking about having one on her hand and I'm thinking that's entirely too many butterflies for one person, but she seems to enjoy them.

And they are very pretty. Bella's finest work, I'm sure.

But I won't ruin this calm, perfect evening with thoughts of that.

The sun is setting over the city in the distance, the sky above us already turning grey.

The air is still warm, and not so smoggy for a change, enveloping me in its velvety smoothness.

The only way this would be even more perfect would be if Bella were here too.

Preferably in my lap. But she's out getting supplies, and I've found she likes to do that on her own.

"You should make more time for Bella," Mom says suddenly. "She's struggling."

I was about to take another sip of my iced tea and end up spilling some all over my shirt as I change my mind in the last second.

"Did she tell you that?"

I have a lot of fears surrounding Bella, chief among them that she'll suddenly just be gone from my life again. It's irrational and whatever happens I'll survive it, I know that. But I don't want to have to.

Mom shakes her head. "No, she won't talk to me at all. And I've been trying to get her to open up."

"Why?" I ask, making a face and hiding it by using tissues to try and blot out the worst of the spill on my chest. I tend to turn into a big clumsy baby when I'm around my mom. And at my age, that's just shameful.

"Because she needs to talk. I don't think she's ever faced and resolved everything that happened to her."

"That's just the psychiatrist in you talking," I say. "I think she's doing great. And she told me she had therapy in... a couple of years ago."

I was going to say in prison, but my mom doesn't know about that and I don't think tonight's the night to tell her. In fact, I think Bella should do that herself, when she's ready. Might be not wanting to is the reason she's not opening up to my mom.

“She seems very sad, troubled even, unsure of herself and her place here,” Mom says.
“And yes, that is the psychiatrist in me talking.”

It was shaping up to be a cozy, calm night, but now, not so much.

“Maybe the two of you should go away somewhere. My brother’s house in Sunset Beach is free. You could take the bike, make a ride of it.”

My mom always sounds so weird when talking about anything to do with the MC. Usually I find it funny. Now everything just lays heavy.

Until I spot Bella coming towards us along the garden path. There’s no sun to speak of left in the sky, but her face glows despite it. She truly is the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen. I’ve never yet written a book, but I’m sure I could write a whole series of books just about her beauty.

“There you are,” she says. “The front door was locked, and I’ve been knocking?—”

I scoop her into my arms before she can finish her sentence and love how the initial shock on her face melts away to pure joy as she hugs me back.

“Sorry about that,” I say. “I’m a little paranoid about leaving the doors unlocked.”

“Yeah, you do worry a lot,” she says jokingly.

“Let’s go away, just the two of us and the road,” I say. “Destination Sunset Beach.”

I can just tell my mom is smiling behind my back even though I can’t see her face. Bella smiles too, and it makes her face glow even more.

“When?”

“Right now?” I say and release her. “A starry ride and a long night listening to the waves hitting the shore. You in?”

Once again, surprise melts away to joy in her face. “I definitely am.”

“Let’s go then.”

Why not? A couple of days of bliss, joy and love by the sea.

Before I go off to a war that’s not even my war.

And before I tell her that brother of hers, the last of her family, is not having the time of his life and might not have much of a life left.

But only the war is an actual threat, the rest just rumors Skye’s been able to uncover.

I’ve been trying to find the right time to tell Bella about it. But the right time will be after we get back from the beach. Or better yet, never.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Bella

We rode into the night, the starry sky greeting us as we left the city, opening in all it's sparkling majesty before us.

We stuck to the back roads, away from any light that was not starlight.

I wish I could recreate the beauty that is the starry night sky on paper and on skin.

I've tried many times, but it never captures the real beauty of it.

But I'll keep on trying. Until I get it right.

It took us four hours to get to the house on Sunset Beach and yet it felt like a short ride. Too short. We're sitting on the wooden porch, watching the glistening black ocean move like a lazy snake, holding each other, needing to be close.

"This place is some kind of perfect," I say, gazing into the stars reflected in his eyes. "Why haven't you ever brought me here before?"

He grins. "I didn't have a good enough ride, and my uncle was always here."

I almost ask where his uncle is now, but I don't want to hear a sad story tonight. Only happy ones. Only good ones. Especially the kind that need no words.

We seem to be on the same page about that because he kisses me and I swear I can taste some of that starlight we're enveloped in. Our tongues do the dance we've done

a thousand times before and will a thousand more. A million.

Then his lips trace kisses down my neck and that's another kind of perfect.

He knows all my spots, all my triggers, the good ones and the bad.

And he's hitting them all as his lips travel further down, trailing kisses along my collar bone, my breasts, my nipples, as he frees them from the confines of my shirt and bra.

He lays me down on the lounge chair we were sharing, kneels beside me and continues his sweet, tantalizing dance of kisses.

My skin is burning with desire, with want, while the cool ocean breeze grazes my skin, providing balance.

And I suddenly realize I truly don't need anything more than this. That my life is perfect in this moment.

So I relax into the kisses, give myself to the pleasure he's giving me, sink into it even as I float miles above the earth.

Before I know it, I'm naked, covered only in kisses. He's naked too, balanced above me, his eyes full of stars.

"You taste so good," he says. "I could do this all night."

"Then do," I say and smile at him.

That earns me another shower of kisses that lift me even higher on the waves of this perfect pleasure I was afraid to remember because I missed it so much.

Nothing else matters when we're together, when we're sharing our love like this.

Never did, never will. I was a fool to try and leave it all behind.

For thinking I had to. Because there was never any leaving him behind.

He enters me and it's just as right as the kisses, more so because it makes us one, which we already always are anyway. The rhythm of our lovemaking is like the rhythm of the ocean, of the wind, of breathing. Natural and right.

Everything is perfect and right when we're together like this. It's the only way things can be.

The waves of pleasure I was floating on a million miles above the earth are now all inside me.

Intensifying with each thrust, coiling and exploding, then relaxing and unwinding.

A dance of stars, of breaths, of moans and kisses.

A dance as natural and right as the rightest thing in the whole universe.

We're in no hurry. Just as we were in no hurry to get here. Enjoying the ride, the closeness, erasing the years that we spent apart until I'm not sure they ever even happened.

But soon there's no more holding back the orgasm he's bringing me to, no more drawing it out. And that's perfectly right too. I come as he comes, seeing stars even where there is none, the pleasure burying me under its suffocating weight even as it lifts me higher than I've ever floated.

His embrace keeps me grounded, brings me back down to earth, his breathing as it slowly steadies the sweetest music I've ever heard, his warm body pressed against mine the best thing I've ever held.

"I love how synced up we are," I say. "But that makes perfect sense. Because you're a part of my soul."

"And you of mine," he says. "The best part."

"You've always been my light," I say. "You know that, don't you? And I wish I could be that for you."

He holds me tighter, envelops me in his arms, creating a cocoon just for us. Maybe this time I'll emerge as the butterfly he deserves me to be.

"You are and you always will be," he says. "I'm going off to war soon and I'll need that light of yours with me."

"War? What kind of war?"

He makes a shooshing sound, tells me to forget he said anything. And even though my heart is starting to race, I let his soothing caresses lull me back into that world where there is no time, no hurt, no pain, nothing but bliss and pleasure. Nothing but him and me and our love.

And certainly no war. Maybe I dreamed hearing him say it. Because dreams are already overtaking my mind. And it's only the best ones. The ones I haven't dreamed in a decade or more.

Blade

We made it to the bedroom sometime before dawn, when it got so cold Bella was shivering in my arms, her teeth chattering.

Despite the magic of the past few weeks that we spent together, and all the love I could ever hope for, her chattering teeth took me right back in time, to her many failed attempts to get off the horse.

And all the insanity, heartbreak and sadness that followed.

Once we were in bed, she fell asleep immediately, ceased shivering, her teeth no longer chattering, but I couldn't.

Once the morning light became too piercing I got up, and made myself some instant coffee using the stuff that's been here since my uncle went into the nursing home.

Long expired, in other words. Just as I thought Bella and I were. And maybe we still are.

Even watching her walk towards me, wearing my shirt and nothing else, the smile on her face telling me she'd very much like me to take that off too, doesn't cheer me up. The chasm of my darkness, the darkness that was all while we were apart, is too deep this morning.

She slips into my lap, finding just enough space between my abs and the table, and rests her head on my shoulder.

“You’re in one of your brooding moods,” she observes.

I just nod my head, because why bother her with it. Eventually it’ll pass.

“Why?” she asks and I shrug. I don’t actually have a good answer for her.

“Are we moving too fast?”

“Funny you should say that.” I put a lot of emphasis on the word you . Seeing as she has always moved fast and never actually admitted it might be too much.

She pushes the table back, so she has more space, but doesn’t vacate my lap. Instead, she takes my cup of coffee and finishes it.

“Making love is great and all, but maybe we should talk,” she says, looking at me pointedly, her hair tickling my bare chest.

The sea outside the windows is reflecting all the glaringly bright light of the morning sun, making it impossible to look at. But I do anyway.

“You’re like the sun to me,” I say. “Too bright and too hot sometimes.”

“But?” she says, smiling at me. Clearly my broodiness has not killed her good mood. It rarely does. Just another way we’ve always complemented each other.

But her eyes are sad. Sadder than I’ve ever seen them. And worried. Fearful even. I have never known Bella to be afraid of much. The way she just got into that psycho’s car to try and save me is just one example of it.

“But I love it,” I say. “Because without you in my life everything is very cold and dark.”

“Now that’s what I like to hear,” she says, but her eyes are still fearful as she waits if there’s any more buts.

“My life’s pretty dark and cold without you in it too,” she says quietly when she realizes I’m not gonna speak. “For what it’s worth.”

“It’s worth a lot,” I say. “You’re worth everything. Even if you decide to leave me again.”

She gasps and stiffens in my arms. “Is that what we need to talk about?”

I shrug because I really don’t know. “Maybe.”

“I thought I was doing all of you a favor by leaving,” she says. “You most of all. Dante was still after me, my family... they might’ve come back to finish the job they started. And I had no friends at your MC. You know that. I still don’t. But most of all, I wanted you to be safe.”

“I can take care of myself,” I say. “And I would’ve taken care of you too. If you’d just let me.”

The fearful sadness returns to her eyes, her sun growing dimmer and dimmer.

“I was gonna get clean, let some time pass and then come back. But it all just spiraled out of my control. And before I knew it, ten years had passed, and I figured you wouldn’t be so happy to see me anymore. I thought you’d moved on.”

“But you didn’t think to check?” I ask.

This time she shrugs. “I was getting up the nerve. But I’d hurt you badly, I knew that, in more ways than one... I figured staying away was for the better. Especially since

you didn't come looking for me either."

I look at her very closely, to see if she's just saying that to argue, passing the ball to me, as it were. But her eyes are still sad and there's nothing but truth in her face.

"Maybe I should've... no, not maybe... I should've," I say. "Because my life's not a lot of fun without you."

"Because you love me?" she asks, smiling faintly.

"Always and forever," I say and wrap my arms around her.

"Yeah, me too, always and forever." She leans against me once more.

And I know the truth of all that through how we just had this whole heavy conversation with neither of us wanting to leave each other's arms. I think that speaks volumes. I don't think any words beyond that are actually needed.

"Maybe we could just stay here for a while," she says. "Get reacquainted some more. Talk some more. Or whatever."

"Yeah," I say and stroke her hair. Its softness has always been one of my favorite things to feel against my skin.

But it's a lie. We don't have a lot of time to just be together. Too much trouble is brewing. If I were a better man, I'd tell her so right away. But I'm weak. I want to be happy, I want her happy, I want to stay just like this, with her in my arms, thinking good thoughts for just a little longer.

"But you don't think we can," she says after a while, reading me correctly like only she can.

“There’s a lot of shit going on,” I say. “I’m needed back home.”

“Shit because of me? Because of Moretti?”

“That and other stuff,” I say. “But it’s nothing for you to worry about.”

I’ve never been big on empty promises and cliché platitudes, but look at me go now.

“Of course I’m worried,” she says, emerging from my embrace again, stiff as before. At least her eyes are more angry than sad now, though. “This is the whole reason I left in the first place happening all over again.”

I shake my head. “It’s not you. In fact, we’ve had no indication that Moretti or any of them know you’re back yet. This is something else. It started before you got here. And now we have to find a way to end it. But it’s not looking promising.”

“But it has to do with Moretti?” she asks and I nod.

I think she’s trying to catch me in a lie but I’m telling the truth. This isn’t about her.

“We thwarted some people, lost them a lot of money, and we didn’t end them,” I say. “There’s a lot of them. They’re well connected. And yeah, Moretti is one of those connections.”

“And when he finds out I’m here too, he’ll make that fight personal.”

She explained that particular nuance so much better than Rogue could when we last spoke. But that’s mostly because I didn’t want to hear it.

“Your brother’s working for him now,” I say. Something I should’ve done sooner.

“Matteo?” she asks. “But that’s OK then, he won’t let him hurt me. He’ll convince him to leave me be. He’s always been on my side.”

Her voice started out excited, but that faded as she watched my face while speaking.

“He doesn’t seem to be in a position to look out for you in any way,” I say. “It looks like he’s there as some sort of punishment.”

“What does that mean? What does that even look like?” she asks breathlessly, but then her face changes. “Oh, he’s still being punished because of me... because of us.”

It’s the one realization I didn’t want her to have. A knowing I wanted to spare her. That was a fool’s wish from the start.

“We’ll figure it out, OK?” I say. “Together.”

“I should call him,” she says and starts climbing from my lap.

With every nerve in my body I want to stop her. But I let her go.

“It’s not a good idea right now, Bella,” I say as I follow her into the bedroom where she’s rummaging through her bag to find her phone.

“I promise I’ll fix it,” I add.

She’s clutching the phone as she looks at me, her hand shaking. “How? And why would you help him? He hurt you so bad.”

“Because I love you,” I say as I walk up to her and take the phone from her hand. She lets me. Thankfully. Because I didn’t want to have to say that there’s nothing she can do for her brother. Revealing herself will probably get him into even deeper shit with

Moretti.

She hugs me tight, tighter than she ever has. And she's shaking again. Not from the cold this time.

"Thank you, Blade," she says. "For everything."

I hold her, don't tell her that there's nothing to thank me for yet.

That we're nowhere near out of the woods yet, and that there might be nothing we can do for her brother.

That we might have to face him in a battle we intend for him and his side to lose.

That there might be no other way to keep her safe.

That we're in this so deep we might never be safe again. Or alive for long.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Bella

We ended up staying at the beach for almost a week and it was everything it should've been—everything our lives should've been right from the moment we first fell in love. But the good thing is, I stopped thinking thoughts like that by the end of it. I just enjoyed every minute of it.

I've spent the day putting the house back in order and now we're just sitting on the porch, watching the sunset before we head out into the starry night to get back home.

And for the first time in forever, I can call a place home.

Because Blade will be with me and wherever he is, that's my home.

I know that now. I accept it as the truth.

The evenings are getting chilly now that fall is approaching, but that's OK because we're holding each other and that's as much warmth as I'll ever need.

The sea is calm tonight, stretching before us like an orange-colored pane of glass.

A family is walking their dogs farther out on the beach, and I've just been watching the girl and boy playing with the doggies, tossing balls, rolling in the sand with them, getting their faces licked.

I no longer don't miss or envy that kind of carefree happiness. I just want it for myself.

Blade's been quiet and tense all day. I'm sure he'll say we should ride at any minute. But I want to stay here a little longer.

"What's on your mind?" I ask, since I was never good at handling suspense in silence.

"War," he says then looks at me with shock in his wide-open eyes, like the word just tumbled out without his control.

I sit upright, stare at him, trying to control the shakes starting deep inside my chest. "What war? What are you talking about? Does it have to do with Moretti? With me?"

He shakes his head. "No, it's a thing up north. Not even our fight. We just owe the MC whose fight it is big, and they've called in the debt."

"How long will you be gone?" I ask, the last word sort of sticking in my throat. It sticks in my chest too.

"What if you don't come back?" I add, speaking my biggest fear, but so quietly I barely hear it myself.

"Of course I'll come back," he says and holds me tight. But I know what this is. He's worried, but he's trying to be brave for me.

"We'll only be there as a show of strength," he adds. "The MC we're helping, they're more than capable of winning the war on their own."

"So why do they need you?"

I know the exact layout of scars from the bullets that almost took him from me forever now. I know them like the back of my own hands. And right now, I can't stop

picturing more of them appearing, blossoming red. Ones where the blood doesn't stop flowing.

"I've been wondering that myself," he says quietly. "But we'll need them too, for the thing I told you about the other day. So we have to do this."

I lean away from him and cross my arms over my chest as I gaze out over the sea. It's not beautiful anymore, now it seems like a sea of blood, and the happy family with their dogs a slowly disappearing mirage.

He rests his head on my shoulder.

"But once I'm back, I'll make you my wife," he whispers. "If you'll have me."

He's holding out a ring too, one with a huge diamond that is also glowing blood red in this light. I gasp and clasp my hand over it, to dispel the vision, to hold on to the sentiment before it disappears like a mirage.

"Do you mean it?" I ask.

The first time I was presented a ring like this I was fourteen years old and the man offering it was the last guy on earth I wanted to marry.

But I didn't have a choice. I had to take it.

Just like I never really had a choice when Blade asked me out.

I had to choose him. Even if it meant going against every tradition I was ever taught.

He smiles. "I've meant it since the day you made sure I came out of my shell and asked you out. And definitely since the first time I kissed you."

“Yeah, well, I knew I’d say yes if you asked since before all that,” I say.

“I believe it,” he says. “You always knew exactly what you wanted and always went after it.”

“For better or worse.”

I laugh at that, so does he. And it’s the kind of laugh that can erase even a decade of pain and sorrow. And can definitely erase most of my worst decisions. Because he was always my best decision. Despite everything,

We kiss and miss the sunset because we don’t stop. Stars are twinkling above us when we finally come back to the present, to the road that leads to our future. We finally found it again. And this time, I’m staying on it no matter what.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Blade

Rogue called in the entire MC. They're all assembling in the big bar, which despite taking up almost the entire ground level of our clubhouse doesn't seem large enough.

All the tables are taken, we've brought in chairs from the Council Room and people are sitting on the pool tables which I don't like.

You can't see the walls because so many people are leaning against them.

I'm proud that we've attracted this many people to our cause by doing the work we've been doing—seeking justice for those the system has failed. But all these people are my responsibility now. And that weighs heavy, given that we're leading them to war.

I'm standing with Rogue just outside the door, in the parking lot that doesn't look like it can fit any more bikes.

The sky is the brilliant golden brown of late sunset, a color I've never seen anywhere else in the world but LA.

It's a nostalgic sort of light, one that grounds me in the here and now, but takes me back through the years too.

Learning to ride a bicycle with my dad, asking out Bella on our first date—I was a nervous wreck until we kissed near the end of it and then everything fell into place—and the first time we were able to deliver justice to a woman falsely accused

of a crime with no other means of getting out from under the charge except with our help.

“Remember the early days, when it was just the five of us in that abandoned warehouse?” I ask Rogue. “Sometimes I wish it was all still so simple.”

He looks at me and grins. “It was far from simple back then. But yeah, I know what you mean. This is a big thing I’m sending our brothers and sisters into. And it’s not what they signed up for.”

“But they did,” I say. “And we’re doing this for all of us. So that there will still be a club once all this is done and dusted.”

He looks out over the parking lot, at the stragglers not inside the clubhouse yet. “If it’ll ever be done and dusted. But you had some doubts about this move... what changed your mind? I thought you were out here to talk me out of it.”

He has every right to call me out on this. I’ve been doing nothing but complain about this move since Bella and I got back from Sunset Beach. But I’ve done some soul searching since.

“I’m with you, from day one to the last day,” I say.

He looks at me for a few moments in silence. Then he claps me on the back, nodding, the gratitude in his eyes a little unsettling.

“I’m glad for your support. I’ll need it. The MC will need it.”

“You got that too. I understand why this needs to happen and I don’t see any other way either. We have to help the Devils so they’ll help us defeat Hydra for good.”

“I was hoping Bella’s connection to the Morettis, I mean her brother working for the guy would help us make a truce with them, but her brother is more the guy’s slave than anything else,” Rogue says. “Did you tell her about that?”

His fiery green eyes are boring holes straight into my skull as he waits for my answer.

“Keeping that from her has been hard,” I say.

“But she doesn’t need to know yet and we don’t actually know the nature of their relationship.

We just know Dante Moretti is treating him like one of the lowest soldiers at the moment.

Maybe it’s some recent thing between them...

who understands the workings of those ancient families anyway? ”

It’s what I’ve been telling myself and how I’ve been justifying not telling Bella that her only surviving family member might be in a pretty bad situation.

Rogue shrugs. “It could be that, I guess. We don’t even know if the rest of her family were killed as retribution for breaking off the engagement with Dante Moretti.

But we’ll deal with that when we come back.

Because first things first, we gotta secure the Devils’ allegiance if we want hope for a future. ”

“Yeah, this Hydra organization is living up to its name. Like the mythical monster, it has so many heads we might never be able to chop them all off. And if they also keep

growing back... well, then we're really screwed."

Hydra has deep connections with the Mob and who knows who else. Skye thinks she recognized a former LA Police Chief in one of the surveillance photos Zane took, but is still confirming it.

Minx and Rock pass us as they walk into the clubhouse, nodding in our direction.

The bruise covering half of Minx's face is fading, but the cut on Rock's forehead will leave a permanent scar.

They're also both still limping. A vivid reminder of how vulnerable we are to Hydra and a vivid example of why we must take care of them once and for all.

"We just have to cut off enough heads, then maybe it'll die on its own," Rogue says. "But that's a conversation for another time. Let's go in, it's time."

"Right behind you," I say and follow him into the clubhouse and to the slightly raised podium he uses to deliver his speeches when addressing the whole club.

His presence alone is enough to quiet the room.

He's magnetic like that. In another life he would've made a great snake oil salesman, or even a preacher. He always laughs when I say that.

I stand at his side, eyeing the crowd while Alice calls everyone to order as is her place as the Sarge, even though everyone is already quietly waiting for Rogue's speech.

He raises his hands and starts telling everyone why we are riding north, why we are entering a war that is not our own and why we will give it our all to help the Devils

and secure their help in return.

He talks about how they helped us find Ghost and finally avenging Angel, and about our need to have allies in our feud with Hydra.

Because defeating them is our only path forward.

Our only path back to doing what we are meant to do—bringing monsters to justice.

There's some whispering and mumbling among the brothers and sisters, but not much, nowhere near what I was expecting. And by the time he's done, no one complains. Everyone just promises him what I promised: that they will stand by him until the end, however and wherever it comes.

If I weren't already convinced this needs to happen if we're ever gonna have peace again, I'd be convinced after his speech too.

"That wasn't so bad," Rogue says as we hang back after the meeting. "I half expected half of them to abandon the MC."

"Nah man, you could convince a dead man to rise if you wanted to," I say.

"Let's hope I never have to try," he says grimly.

The idea of that happening hits me hard, right in the chest. But we're doing this so Bella can have a peaceful life too. We're doing it so we can get back to offering justice to those that have no other way to get it. We're doing it to rid the world of scum that shouldn't be walking free.

And that's worth every sacrifice to me.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Bella

Blade picked me up at sunset and we went for a ride, the golden afternoon light slowly giving way to twilight as the tires of the bike swallowed up the asphalt. We're sitting on the beach now, watching the final descent of the sun into the waters of the ocean.

This spot used to be one of our favorite date spots.

Right by the water, sheltered by tall cliffs, hidden from the world, just the two of us.

It's not far from the first clubhouse the MC ever claimed and the place that tore us apart for a decade, because my family almost killed him there.

That fact is not lost on me. Nor is the reason for this trip down memory lane, although Blade hasn't said as much.

"You're leaving soon, aren't you?" I ask, because I need everything out in the open now.

The moon is starting to rise over the waters, large, white and almost full, making the diamond ring he gave me shimmer and glow.

I love watching the moonrise as much as I love sunrise and sunset—a love that grew even fiercer while I was in prison and couldn't watch the sky as much as I wanted.

And I love that he made me his. Finally. After all these years.

He's staring at the moon too, but holding my hand in both of his very tightly.

"Yes," he finally says. "Tomorrow morning, bright and early, we ride for Pleasantville."

Such a quaint, pretty name for a place that might take him away from me forever. My stomach is in knots, my mind spinning in a way that I never knew how to stop with the aid of drugs. Yet I have no desire to get high.

"Can I just come with you?"

He looks at me and even in the near darkness I can see the plain and simple no on his face.

"You know, I think this is the first time in my life that I regret not becoming a biker like the rest of you," I say and actually mean it. "Like Bianca did. And Angel. Do you think it's really too late?"

He smiles and releases my hands to wrap his arms around me. "That's not what you want. You really just want to be my ol' lady."

"That I do. But that's because I want to be with you. In any way I can. All the time."

I hug him back, resting my head against his chest, enjoying the sound of his deep, strong breaths and heartbeat, so reminiscent of the sound of waves hitting the sandy shore. Eternal and strong. And the most peaceful sound I know.

"I don't want to ever lose you again," I whisper.

"Me either," he says. "Which is why I'll be back as soon as I can."

It's not a promise he can make, not truly, he can only promise he'll do the best he can to come back. But I appreciate it anyway.

"Don't make this hard, Bella," he adds and I nod with my head still pressed against his chest. He smells like the sea and the road and moonlight. All my favorite things.

"I'll do my best."

He chuckles at that. "Well, at least you're honest."

I look up to smile at him. "I try to be. Now kiss me goodbye."

He does, like he did the first time I ever asked him, and whenever he could since. I taste all those things I love in his kiss, they're pouring into me like a flood, making me brave and strong despite all the fear hanging in the air around us, obscuring our future.

But at least the darkness we're facing now isn't as impenetrable as the black nothing of the last ten years we spent apart. At least our love is shining bright again, warmed by the sunlight, shimmering in the moonlight.

We've been through so much. We can get through this. I'll make it happen.

From our last conversation, I know that my family and my bad blood and history with the Moretti crime family is at the heart of this issue.

He didn't say as much, but I can read between the lines.

And if my brother is working for Dante Moretti now, I can ask for his help to get the Morettis off our backs.

He's never said no to me yet. Never wanted to control me the way my father and other brother did. Or at least not as much.

This will be the last and only favor I ever ask of him. To let me go and let me live my life with the people I love.

But I won't tell Blade anything about these plans. He'll just try to stop me again. And I don't want to be stopped. Not now that I can actually help them all for the first time.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Blade

We've been in Northern Cali for almost ten days.

By some stroke of luck all of us Rogue Angels are still alive.

By a stroke of something that probably has nothing to do with angels, at least not the good kind, none of the Devils are dead either.

Despite fighting in two battles that looked like they could go either way against enemies that were willing to fight to the death.

And these weren't even two of the bigger battles in this war the Devils have been fighting for over a year now.

A much bigger battle is brewing, if the rumours at the Devils' clubhouse are anything to go by and we'll probably be expected to lend our support then too. I'm not looking forward to that.

The best thing I can say about this experience of allying with the Devils is that I finally understand all those philosophers when they talk about war. But I also now know that I never wanted to understand them.

For the time being, we're at peace. And the gardens surrounding the Devil's Nightmare MC HQ are the embodiment of peace.

Truly. The president and his family, and several other execs, reside in a huge, turn of

the last century mansion atop a hill they seem to control.

Rolling meadows, ancient redwoods and just about every other thing of natural beauty is present in that garden.

I've just been walking it whenever I get the chance, speaking to Bella on the phone and imagining her with me, seeing us making love in the grass, in the shade of the trees, in meadows that don't get much human contact. In other words, I need her bad.

Leaving LA, I was afraid that distance would cool me off.

That Bella was the sun that fueled the last three weeks of complete surrender to passion and love we experienced, which culminated in me asking her to be my old lady.

I was afraid that the absence of that sun would bring back the darkness.

But if anything, I need her more. And I think it's the same for her. But I have to be sure.

"This garden is something else, right?" Rogue says right before emerging from behind a tall redwood tree somewhere to my left. "If stuff like this could still grow down in LA, I'd plant it all around the clubhouse back home."

I grin at him. "I'm with you. But you gotta understand that these trees have been growing here for like a thousand years."

He makes a face and flips me off. "Why you gotta always be such a smart ass?"

"Someone's gotta be," I counter and we fall in step on our way deeper into the forest.

“I’d like to ride back down to LA for a few days,” I say. “Doesn’t sound like we’re needed here right now and I’m thinking we scored enough points with Devils by now.”

He eyes me sideways and nods. “I’d like to say that’s true, but their needs are endless. I’ve been thinking of steering us back home too though. We got very lucky that we’re all still in one piece, I think. But I don’t think that kind of luck will hold.”

“The luck’s been with us only by the grace of the fact that the Devils are so well-armed and so well-trained.”

Back in the day, Devil’s Nightmare MC used to be a band of hired killers, mercenaries who could successfully eliminate any MC or enemy under contract.

They were well known for this across the country and much feared.

But in recent decades they’ve transitioned to being arms dealers almost exclusively.

And it was going very well for them until the families and friends of all those they’d killed back when they were still killers for hire decided it was time to take revenge.

That’s what this war they need our help in is all about.

And it seems that every time an enemy is dealt with, a few more pop up.

Rogue stops, laying his hand on one of the boulders we’ve reached. Beyond them a valley that truly looks untouched by man stretches before us.

“You want to see Bella, don’t you?” he says.

“Very much so,” I say and grin.

“So you’re sure about her?” he asks, turning to me and leaning against the boulder. “You don’t think she’ll just break you again?”

My first instinct is to lash out in anger at the question. But it passes in the next, just melts away in all that love I still have for her and will always feel apparently.

“Yeah, I’m more sure than I’ve ever been about anything in my life,” I say and laugh. “And you know how I’m always sure about everything.”

He laughs too. “That you are. You’re the most careful and thoughtful guy I know.”

I lean on the boulder beside him, enjoying its warmth against my back.

“I asked her to marry me,” I say. “And she said yes.”

I’ve been holding onto this news, not wanting to share it with him and the others, not sure how happy they’d really be for us.

But the doubt in Rogue’s eyes as he grins widely at me is very faint. Almost non-existent.

He claps me on the shoulder. “Well, why didn’t you say? Congrats!”

I thank him, finding it’s completely sincere. There are no hard feelings left for the way he’s spoken about her in the past.

“And here I am keeping you two apart. Go back and see her. We can hold it down without you for a couple of days.”

I bolt back upright, acting and feeling a lot like an excited little kid. “You sure?”

He nods and laughs. “Yeah, go. Might be we’ll follow you in a couple of days too. I’m gonna have a talk with Cross tonight.”

“I should be there,” I say and lean back against the rock, the balloon of excitement deflating in my chest.

“It’ll be just the two of us,” Rogue says. “I need to know where he stands on helping us with our problem and I don’t want to make it too formal.”

The excitement is back and if I wanted to, I could sprint all the way to my bike even though we’re at least a mile away from the big house where it’s parked.

So I don’t waste any more time asking if he’s sure. I just say my goodbyes and head to my bike. Not sprinting, that’d be weird, but definitely walking fast.

Excitement like this is something I only feel when Bella’s involved. And I could definitely get used to feeling it all the time. For the rest of my life.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Bella

I've almost dialed my brother's number and then changed my mind so many times in the last week that it's become like some sort of ritual.

Before I do anything else, I'll do that first. Look up his number in my phone, hover my finger over it, and have my mind flood with all the shit my family's put me through, how they abandoned me, parked me out east and did their best to forget me.

All that's also interspersed with the love I still feel for them, the love I can't do anything about because it comes with blood.

That whirlwind of emotions and memories always ends with the brutal beating they gave Blade.

That's when I shut off my phone and toss it somewhere far away from me.

Until the ritual begins again.

I'm so sick of myself for doing it. But I can't stop. And it's never gonna stop, not until I give in and call Matteo. I know that about myself. It was the same with the drugs and every other thing I was ever obsessed with.

I'd try to stay away, try to deny myself the thing I wanted, then get stuck in this cycle of wanting to and not letting myself have it. Until I drove myself nuts and finally gave in. Each and every time.

I have a client coming today. It's Karma, one of my first and most loyal clients. She's the only one from back east who has made the trip out here to get ink from me so far, though a bunch have promised.

I already have everything set up and sterilized.

I even took an Uber to get some better lights, because the work Karma likes to get done is never simple or quick.

She's also, hands down, my most pain-resistant client and I've legit done her whole back one time in an all-night session.

I'm kind of hoping tonight will be one of those kinds of sessions.

She's due any minute. I'll be busy all night, most likely.

So I won't be able to keep messing with my phone and my brother's phone number.

But I'll keep thinking about it. I know I will.

And I want to give Karma the best tattoos of her life, not sub-par work because my mind's looping around crazy town, trying to keep me away from doing something I'm gonna eventually do anyway.

Because I will eventually call my brother. I already know that. It's just a question of when at this point.

So instead of going through the ritual of almost calling, I send him a text. Don't think, just type.

I'm in LA. I want to see you. Call me tomorrow morning. ~Bella

I do it fast, press send without thinking. Then I shove the phone into the bottom of one of the kitchen drawers, my hands shaking really badly and feeling like I might be sick.

But it's done. Finally. And the relief I feel is the same as always when I finally give in to my compulsions. Overwhelmingly amazing. Like I'm walking on clouds. Like I am clouds, weightless and soft, perfect and free.

My hands are no longer shaking by the time I'm standing out in the street waiting for Karma.

I came out here because I was afraid she might think she's in the wrong place if she can't see me waiting for her.

She's a real outlaw and the most badass biker chick I've ever met.

And this is one of the fanciest and normalest neighborhoods in all of LA.

The look of fearful awe as she parks her bike next to the curb and takes off her helmet tells me I was right to wait for her street-side.

I lead her to the apartment over the garage, chatting away about this and that, mainly just happy that I have someone from my old life here, someone who knew me when I was drifting and alone, far away from home.

She had recently lost Reaper, the love of her life, and maybe I'm so chatty because I don't know how to confront that.

My nature is to just plow and burn right over any difficult feelings.

Most people think that's a lack of empathy and self-centeredness.

But it's self-preservation, because I get so lost in their sadness I can't find a way out.

"I made some sketches based on what you told me you wanted," I say, hoping she'll like them. I put everything, all the feelings I can't show or talk about into my art. Always have.

We sit on the sofa and I show her the lakeside cabin scene she wanted first, thinking that's the safer of the two. She just stares at it for a few seconds, her long blonde hair falling over her face so I can't read what she's thinking.

I'm just about to suggest I can come up with something different if she doesn't like it when she says, "This is even more beautiful than it was in real life."

She takes the sketchbook to get a better look at the starry sky reflecting on the peaceful waters of a lake at sunset she asked for. I'm so glad she likes it, because I so like drawing stars. Maybe this time it'll turn out exactly as perfect as the starry sky is in my head.

"I was thinking we'd put it under your left breast," I say. "There's still some space there, right?"

She runs her hand over the drawing, caressing it. "Everything is still exactly how you left it. I don't let anyone else draw on me."

That makes me smile widely and we work in some other details, like a late sunset that will go perfectly with the stars.

"That's it," she says as I show her the corrections I made. "I think he'll love it too."

"Your new guy? The one you spent time with at the cabin?"

If she has a new guy, then maybe the pain of getting the other tattoo she asked for won't be as harsh.

She nods. "I don't think anyone's ever gotten a tattoo to honor him before. He seemed to really dig the idea when I explained it to him. But it's all still so new..."

Now she seems sad again and I don't know what to say. So I retreat to the only place that has never disappointed me—my art—and show her the sketch I made for the other tattoo. This one is to commemorate her man that died.

It's just his name—Reaper—but in big chunky letters that are filled with pieces of the life they lived together.

There's a bike, because she once told me he's the one who taught her how to ride.

There's the two of them holding hands, because she loved to do that.

And finally there's her—the scared girl he found and the warrior she became.

I already tattooed those two on her arms a long time ago, and I think they belong in this tattoo too.

But she's just gazing at it and not saying anything

"Do you like it?" I ask.

She clears her throat. "I love it."

I lay the sketchbook down and stand up.

"Should we start with this one then?"

She nods. “Right over my heart.”

I lead her to my brand-new chair, turn on all the lights and get to work. I’m always amazed at her seeming immunity to pain, but it’s even more pronounced today. I go as gently as I can to honor that.

But just as the silence begins to grow heavy, and I think I hear my phone going off constantly, the whole drawer buzzing, she asks about Blade.

I love telling her about how we reconnected, but not about the rest of my not-so-great homecoming. I also don’t tell her that most of my family is dead and that I only have the one brother left. There’s already too much sorrow and regret in this room tonight.

But I do tell her that Blade’s MC is not too happy to see me back.

“I’m sure they’ll forgive you,” she says. “That’s what friends and family do.”

It’s what Blade tells me too. But my own family never forgave me, so why should my friends? It’s a question I don’t like to dwell on.

“What about Zane?” she asks. “Is he mad at you too? Seeing as he was something of a pariah too?”

I laugh while adding more ink. “Nope. Zane and I have the whole running away and betraying everyone in common. And he seems to be getting his forgiveness from the MC lately.”

“Yeah? Makes sense, since these are the guys who help right wrongs and give people a new chance at life, right?”

That’s pretty much what Rogue Angels MC does, and how I’ve described it to her the

last time we spoke. But something in the way she asked makes it sound like it's way more personal than just wanting to chat.

"Rogue, the president of Rogue Angels MC, and Zane used to be best friends once upon a time. Before Zane became Unholy, that is," I say. "But they seem to be patching things up lately."

"You think you could put us in touch?" she asks.

I stop tattooing and look at her. "Sure. Why?"

"I've been thinking I want to stop living the nomad life and put down roots somewhere. I heard that Rogue Angels can make that happen."

"But you're a fugitive, right?"

She cringes at hearing the word, but regains composure a second later. I don't know a whole lot about her past, but I do know she's wanted for murder and that the rest of the members of her MC, Forsaken Outlaws, are all in one way or another actively running from the law.

"I'm more like a wanted person, since they never caught me so I could run and become an actual fugitive. But yeah, basically."

"Rogue Angels could help prove your innocence," I say. "That's what they do."

"Problem is, I'm guilty as sin," she says. "But so's Zane and they're making it possible for him to live a normal life, right?"

Normal might be stretching it. And Blade is not a huge fan of Zane and how his presence in the MC has jeopardized the good work they've been doing.

Harboring him has made them outlaws, while before, they'd always worked closely with authorities, only breaking the laws they couldn't avoid breaking.

I tell her as much, but do promise to put her in touch with Zane the first chance I get.

She thanks me, but says I don't need to go out of my way, since she knows him and can look him up herself.

She sounds like she had high hopes for meeting Rogue and I've just dashed them, but also like she doesn't want to talk about it anymore.

So we don't talk until it's time for the reveal of the tattoo. That makes the air in the room heavy again. She just stands there at the bathroom mirror, gazing at her new tattoo and I'm trying very hard not to imagine having to get a similar one for Blade sometime soon, because he's at war.

As soon as that thought sounds in my head, everything else falls dead silent.

I rush to my get my phone, needing to contact him, needing to know my fear is just my fear, and nothing real.

And if I didn't already have a text from him waiting, I'm not sure how the rest of this tattooing session would go. I might've just curled up back into the darkness that's pretty much been the last ten years for me.

But there is a text. The best kind. He says he's on his way home and should be here by the morning.

I text back that I'll be waiting and feel like the sun has already come up, even though it's not even midnight yet.

There's no reply from my brother which is for the best. It was probably a mistake contacting him in the first place.

So I just shove the phone back in the drawer and get back to Karma.

There's no heaviness left in the air and my thoughts are all happy and loud and full of anticipation.

So it's great Karma wants the other tattoo tonight too.

Because I probably wouldn't sleep anyway and because I'm in exactly the perfect mood to make the happy tattoo she wants a thing of timeless beauty.

And one day, I'll make one exactly like this for myself too. One of Blade and me, doing what we do best. Being together. Loving each other. The scene doesn't even matter, anywhere will do. But it'll probably be under a starry night sky.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Blade

Before I could head back to LA, I first had to make the rounds, explaining to my brothers and sisters that I'll be right back and tell them that they're doing a big thing here.

Rogue is far better at keeping the members' morale high with his natural preacher man flair, but I do my bit, tampering his often-zany enthusiasm with cold hard facts and logic.

For some, that works better. And given that this war we're currently fighting is none of our own, some need to hear the cold hard facts about why we have to.

As a result, I didn't hit the road to make the six or so hour ride back to LA until just after midnight.

But I rode fast, imagining Bella waiting for me. In my visions she was in the garden, sipping iced tea, her soft, long, wavy brown hair stirring in the summer breeze, her smile more radiant than the rising sun.

This will not be the reality. She'll probably be in the small bedroom of the apartment over the garage and there will be no sun in the sky when I get there, but that doesn't matter, because she's always sun enough for me.

And if I didn't already know that, the surge of renewed energy I get as I turn into my mom's street despite the long ride would be all the evidence I need. If I never slept again, I'd be a happy man. Just as long as it was Bella I was riding sleepless to meet.

The street is quiet in these predawn hours and the expensive cars with tinted windows parked along the curb look like mounds of dirt in the near darkness.

Everyone that lives in this neighborhood is richer than God, so you'd think they have a spacious enough garage to fit all their cars in, but clearly not.

But that's just a passing annoyance, stemming back from the years I lived here and felt like everyone thought I was only here to steal.

A soft light is on in the living room of the apartment, the stained-glass windows full of butterflies and pretty flowers the only thing in color in this drab darkness. They're a thing of beauty.

But not as beautiful as Bella.

She's sitting on the sofa, right below those stained-glass windows.

The fuzzy white blanket slides off her lithe, perfect curves as she stands up to greet me and I swear those stained-glass windows were illuminated just by her, the small lamp by the sofa had nothing to do with it.

This is so much better than any vision of her I could've ever dreamed up.

"You're here," she says quietly as she walks towards me. "Finally."

Everything is so calm, so perfect, so right, especially as she wraps her arms around my neck and I lean down to kiss her. Our lips touching sends a surge of waking electricity through me, but other than that, this is some kind of dream. The best kind.

Time stops whenever we kiss. It's no different now. Except that maybe it is moving now, but very slowly, signifying that we have all the time in the world, that even time

itself will slow for us, because we have so much catching up to do.

She slides off my cut and I sit on the sofa, pulling her down into my lap. Since we have all the time in the world, I'm in no hurry and I plan on making every second of my return home count.

She's in no hurry either, the kiss we're sharing slow and sensuous, waking cells and nerves in my body I didn't even know existed.

My cock's rock hard, it always is for her, but that's not the most important thing.

The most important thing is getting to hold her, kiss her, feel her body against mine.

"I missed you so much," she whispers as I trail kisses down her neck. She took the words right out of my mouth.

"My, my isn't this sweet," a gruff male voice says. "Did you hear? She missed him."

A couple of other men laugh harshly.

My mind was so disconnected from reality, so lost in getting close to Bella that it takes me awhile to fully realize what is happening.

By then we're surrounded by five men wearing black suits and Bella's eyes are wide open, her breathing rapid and jagged.

In the next moment two of the men grab me and try to pull me away from Bella. But it's gonna take more than two.

I swing and have one of the guys on the floor clutching a bloody nose in a second, the other one in a choke hold as I debate whether I should toss him out the window and

ruin the pretty picture window.

“That’s not how this is gonna go,” that same gruff man who first spoke says, as though answering the question in my head.

He’s got his forearm around Bella’s throat and a huge black gun pressed to her temple. It’s Dante Moretti.

“What do you want?” I ask.

“I’ve come for what was promised me a long time ago,” Dante says. “But I’ll take you too. My new friends will like that. Release that man. Don’t make this messy.”

“Leave her,” I say. “And then I’ll come with you peacefully.”

I have no idea what he wants from me, doubtless it’s something to do with Hydra, but I’d walk into the fires of hell if it meant Bella would be free, no questions asked. But how the hell did he find her here?

“How could you do this?” Bella says looking towards the door, her eyes still wide, but hard with anger and indignation. “I thought you were my friend.”

Her brother Matteo is standing there, larger and somehow taller than the last time I saw him up close. The night him, his bother and their father beat the crap out of me and dragged Bella away.

“You have no friends here, sister,” Matteo says. “I told you that before. You shouldn’t have contacted me.”

“But we’re glad she did, aren’t we Matteo?” Dante says venomously, eyeing him with unmasked hate.

“Fine,” Bella snaps, that fire in her that I fell in love with a long time ago blazing hot. “It’s me you want so just take me. Leave Blade out of it.”

Never gonna happen, but, that’s my girl. No fear. Just fire and fight. Even in the face of utter hopelessness.

Dante looks like he’s thinking about it, but the mean gleam in his black eyes tells me that’s just for show.

“I don’t think so. You’re both coming. And if you don’t calm the fuck down and go quietly, I’ll have to add his elderly mother to the party. And if the noise you’re making wakes her up, this’ll be the last sunrise she sees. Am I clear?”

This asshole really likes the sound of his own voice.

“What do you think you are, some kind of bard?” I ask.

I still think I have a chance to fight all of them off. But that gun barrel is so close to Bella’s head...

“What the fuck’s a bard?” Dante asks, sounding offended.

It’s sad that all I can do is hurt his feelings. What I’d like to do is bash his face until there’s nothing left.

“Fine, we’ll go,” I say. “Just tell me. Are you new friends those Hydra bastards? Is that why you want me?”

Dante chuckles. “They don’t like being called bastards. And Rogue Angels stole a lot of money from them. Having the vice president to bargain with will make them really happy. You mangy dogs really bit off more than you could chew this time. Fucking

idiots.”

Everything about what he just told me lands wrong, every fucking word makes me want to rip his throat out.

There’s still the narrow staircase that could give me a chance. And the trek to whatever cars they have waiting for us—probably those black foreign numbers in the street. I really should’ve paid more attention.

My guns are in the saddle bags on my bike. I get to those and it’s game over for Dante and his goons.

But they’re holding me very tightly as they drag me down the stairs and that barrel never leaves Bella’s temple.

There will be casualties if I fight. Innocent ones. And I’m afraid Bella will be the first.

This is one messed up situation.

So I don’t fight. I let them lead me to the cars.

They separate us, stashing me in the car with two goons, while Dante takes Bella into his.

Matteo doesn’t get in the car with them.

I hope he won’t truly let his sister be hurt by that piece of shit.

And if Dante harms her in any way, I’ll murder every member of his family.

And just for abducting her, I'll murder him.

This is a promise I make myself as we speed down the road, color returning to the world that's one giant blur right now.

But I'll make good on that promise no matter how empty it sounds right now.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Bella

The car I'm in smells of alcohol breath, sweat and several types of musky cologne that don't mask any of the other stench. Dawn is rising outside, fast, turning greyness to light, but there is no light in my heart or my thoughts.

My mind is racing, remembering the last time I was shoved into a car against my will and taken away from Blade. Not knowing what happened to him. Not knowing if he was alive or dead. Not knowing how to save him.

History is repeating itself.

He's in a different car. I'm stuck in here with Dante and two of his guys.

He's talking to me, but I don't hear a word he's saying.

Because I'm not here, I'm in a car with my brothers and father after they'd just beat up Blade to get him away from me.

I fought them off and jumped out of the car, so in my mind, I'm now running up a hill, trying to find a phone to get help for Blade.

But then I'm in a car with a stranger who pretended to be a friend and then I'm chained up in a dank dark basement, face to face with death and everything is dark.

Darker than any night. But then I'm free and nothing is the same, everything is wrong.

People I love are dead, people I love hate me.

I was saved from that nightmare. I survived it.

And here I am again. Back at the start of it.

“Is she simple or something?” Dante’s goon asks from the front seat. He’s turned around, the suit he’s wearing stretching across his bulging shoulders and arms, looking at me like I’m a freak.

And I am a freak. Just not the kind he’s thinking.

I tug on the door handle and to my surprise the door actually opens. But we’re going like a hundred miles an hour, I’d never survive the jump. Nevertheless, it’s Dante’s firm grip on my arm that prevents me from tumbling out of the car.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Dante asks, panting as he pins me under his huge, heavy body so he can close the door.

Him, the driver and the goon all look scared as shit once he finally manages to do it.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I snap at Dante. “What use do you have for me? I don’t want you. I never did and I never will.”

Dante laughs, his cronies join in. But they still look and sound a little scared.

“You never did understand your limitations, Bella. You always were stuck up and acted superior to everyone,” Dante says. “A bitch, in other words. But I’m gonna teach you humility. Someone’s gotta.”

“Yeah, I’d like to see you try,” I say and lean back in my seat, crossing my arms over

my chest.

That makes all of them laugh again. I hate having these men laugh at me, just like I always hated it when my father and brothers used to do it.

“I’ll do what you want if you let Blade go and leave Rogue Angels MC alone,” I say.
“I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want, huh?” Dante has a sick, evil glint in his dark eyes.

I don’t even have to know what he’s thinking to know he’s imagining making me suffer in ways normal people can’t even think of.

But whatever it is, he’s wrong. The worst torture I can think of is putting Blade and all my old friends in danger. Again.

“Yeah, whatever,” I say.

Truth is, I’ve died inside a bunch of times already.

In that dark basement, on the streets of New York, in prison.

If it weren’t for my art, I’d just be a shell of my former self.

And if it weren’t for Blade coming back to me, showing me I’m still worth loving...

well, then I wouldn’t feel a damn thing anymore.

“You can’t, boss,” the big guy in the front seat says, sounding like a little kid. “You promised the dudes from Hydra.”

Dante cringes and mutters at him to shut up.

“Promised them what?” I ask, but I get no answer.

I ask it again and again, to the same result.

And I’m not gonna get my answer. We’re passing through the gates of the Moretti Mansion. The garden is overgrown and looks like something from a children’s storybook meant to scare. The grey walled four story mansion they live in is no better. Something way worse than evil witches live here.

Evil men. Who think they have the right to take whatever they want.

The other cars arrived before us. And I see just a shadow of Blade as he’s dragged into the house via a side door. My brother is there, slamming the door after them.

I never hated my brother Matteo. I couldn’t. He was always good and nice to me.

But at this moment I hate him more than I’ve ever hated anyone in my life. More than I hate all of them combined. He betrayed me to Moretti. All I wanted was to talk to him, reconnect, ask for me and mine to be left in peace.

And this is his answer?

I should’ve known.

I know fighting and screaming is useless, but I do it anyway. It takes three of Dante’s cronies to carry me into the house and up the stairs to a dark, cold bedroom.

I screamed and ranted, but not to get my way. I never get that anyway. I did it because it might be the last time anyone’s ever gonna hear my voice.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:14 am

Blade

I was screaming Bella's name, my heart breaking at hearing her anguished voice as she called mine.

The goons that had me pushed and shoved me through the side door of the mansion and every time I had an opening I'd swing at one of them, using my fists, my elbows, my knees, feet, even my head.

Their fancy suits don't look so fancy anymore by the time they get me to our destination—a small room in what must be the cellar of the mansion.

It smells like coal and potatoes, so I'm guessing it used to be some sort of pantry.

Now it's just an empty, dirty room, lit by a glaring white ceiling light, which makes the dust on the floor and walls look like rot. Or maybe that is rot. The single chair in the center of the room looks rotted too. But it's not. It's metal and bolted to the concrete floor.

Blood is running into my eyes, maybe from a head butt I dealt, maybe from one of the blows I received, none of which I felt.

I still feel no pain. Just an overwhelming need to get free.

Sweat is breaking out of every pore on my body, my heart racing harder than it ever has.

If I could just get my arms free I'd murder all of them then tear this house down with my bare hands looking for Bella.

They sit me down on the chair, two guys pinning me down as I thrash around. Then Matteo's face is inches from mine as he loops a zip tie over my wrists and secures my arms to the chair.

"Give it up, Blade," he hisses into my ear. "You got no chance. Save your strength. You'll need it."

I spit in the guy's face, wishing I could do worse. He wipes my blood and saliva off his cheek with the back of his hand and grins meanly. "Still just a little weakling. I don't understand what my sister sees in you. Never did."

"You don't get to call her sister, you monster," I snap at him. "You ruined her life once before and now this? Don't you dare call her sister. She trusted you. She loved you."

He chuckles darkly. "Her fucking mistake. I told her to stay the fuck away from here and from me."

The two other goons are panting as they secure my legs to the chair with more zip ties. Too bad I was so focused on cursing Matteo out, else I could've gotten a few more good kicks in.

I thrash around some more, trying to get free, trying to make up for it, but they tied me up good.

"You calm down now, Blade," Matteo says on his way out of the room. The goons follow him. "You'll have plenty of chances to rage again in a minute."

“Face me man to man,” I yell at him. “Easy to talk shit when I’m tied up like this.”

He looks at me over his shoulder. “This is not my fight.”

That just gets my blood boiling even hotter and I have no idea why I’m not strong enough to break through my restraints. I should be. I’ve never been this angry.

My voice is hoarse calling him every insult under the sun by the time I realize he was probably right. I should calm down, think my way out of this situation. Thinking was always my greatest strength. I’ve become a pretty good fighter over the years, but it’s my mind that does the heavy lifting.

It’s failing me miserably as I sit in the quiet room.

Water is dripping somewhere, or maybe that’s my blood trickling to the floor.

I can’t quiet my mind long enough to think past the fact that Bella is locked up somewhere in this house too, living her worst nightmare, possibly already getting married off to that fat, sweaty fuck Dante Moretti.

How the fuck did we let it get to this?

I never should’ve told her Matteo was with Moretti.

I should’ve kept a better watch on her, should’ve let her live at the clubhouse and fuck Rogue’s fears and wishes.

Only Skye, Judge and a handful others are there now, manning the fort, but it is built like a fort, no one we don’t want in the clubhouse can get in.

Now anyone who could help us is on the other side of the state and they have no idea

we're even missing.

And my mind's not seeing any possible way out of this. Not a single one.

The door opens. Dante Moretti walks in with a big grin on his face.

He's taken off his suit jacket, taken off his tie and undone the top two buttons of his shirt, the nasty rug on his chest showing through.

He's got a tumbler of whisky in his right hand and a fat cigar in the other.

Matteo is one of the three goons with him.

"What you gonna do, Dante? Torture me by blowing smoke in my face."

The best my mind can come up with is that I gotta make him too tired to mess with Bella. It's a shit plan.

The idiot laughs like he really finds my joke funny.

"Nah, I lit up to unwind after a job well done," he says, shuffling closer. "But I wanted to let you know what you can expect now that you're here. Before I get back to my onetime bride, that is."

I didn't think it was possible to get angrier, but here I am raging and pulling at my restraints so hard I feel like the muscles in my arms are gonna snap. Dante and the goons are all laughing. Except Matteo.

"Just calm down, you're not getting out of here," Dante assures me. "In a few hours, our mutual friends the Hydra will be here. I'm gonna suggest that they cut you up and mail the pieces to your MC buddies one by one until you pay them back what you

owe them. I think they'll like that idea."

The visual of that does give me a second's pause. But I'd submit to that willingly if it meant he'd stop calling Bella his bride. She's my bride, damn it.

"You really pissed them off bad, it seems," Dante goes on. "And then you ignored all their friendly warnings to give back what you stole. So they're taking more drastic measures and I don't blame them."

"You think I'm afraid, you sick fuck?" I yell at him. "All I'm hearing is that you're a chickenshit, small man, obeying your masters."

Dante laughs again, but not as happily as before. "I'm sure you'd know all about that kind of thing."

"Not like you, small time," I say.

One thing our surveillance of him in the past couple of weeks uncovered is that he has far less power than he wants to have.

It's why he's in bed with Hydra. Because he wants more.

And it's clearly a soft spot, because his face turns a few shades redder as he clutches his tumbler so hard his knuckles turn white.

One alternative is to have him bash my brains in before Hydra can cut me up. It's not a good alternative. None of the alternatives I can think of are good. I have absolutely no bargaining power here. But I gotta give it a shot.

"Ditch Hydra, they'll fuck you over in the end anyway," I say. "Join with us in getting rid of them and we'll help you get what you want."

He finds that funnier than anything I've said before.

"And I suppose you want me to let Bella go for that to happen?" he asks.

I nod, don't bother saying it.

"But she already promised she'll do whatever I want if I let you go," he says and that hurts me deep in my chest. I feel pain from the first time since this shit went down. "And as sweet as that offer was, I had to decline."

He takes a drag of his cigar and blows the smoke in my face.

"You see, I already have her and can do anything I want to her," he says.

The goons laugh, Matteo cringes, but is grinning when Dante looks back at them, enjoying his attentive, supportive audience for his bullshit. I don't know who's sicker. Him or Dante. She's his sister!

"And I don't need your help with anything either," Dante says, turning back to me. "Least of all dealing with Hydra. I know what they are. And right now, they're exactly what I need. They'll love this gift I got them. Meaning you."

"Yeah, I got that, asshole," I say.

Insults. That's all I got to fight him with. I feel like I'm eighteen again, getting my ass kicked by a bunch of mafia assholes for loving the wrong girl.

"Good, good," Dante says. "You think on that for a while. And I'll be back when the Hydra get here. But I think I'll have some fun with Bella before I tell them you're here."

He leaves and I continue screaming obscenities at him long after it's only the hoarse echoes of my own voice I hear.

I've read and reread so many books by great thinkers, ancient, old and new. I'm hoping for some guidance from them right now. But only one quote comes to mind now.

All our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour on the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

It's by Shakespeare, spoken by Macbeth after he learned that his queen was dead. I had to memorize it for school in the ninth grade, and I hate how eerily it aligns with my and Bella's current situation.

But I can't deny that my mind showed me the most fitting damn quote. What we're heading for here is a tragedy of epic proportions. And we've been on this trajectory since the first time we kissed. That's the truth, no matter how much I rage against it.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:38 am

Bella

They put me in a bedroom on the third floor and locked the thick wooden doors when they left.

The room smells musty like it hasn't been used in a long time, but also like furniture cleaner as though it was recently scrubbed clean.

The decor looks like something Dante's great-grandmother might have bought new.

Or brought over from the old country. There's a canopy bed with yellowed, lace lined bedding covering it.

The walnut-colored furniture is gleaming and looks like it's never been used.

There are also crystal vases everywhere, none filled with flowers.

There's no tree hanging close to the windows and they're much too high up for me to jump down. But I am considering it.

At least it's not a dank basement. At least I'm not chained up. At least...

None of those positives do a damn thing to make me feel any better about this. The truth is, rooms like this are the stuff of my worst nightmares from a time when I thought I'd have to spend my life in a forced, loveless marriage to a mafia don just because my father had full control over me.

I'd forgotten those nightmares as I left that world behind. New ones came up. And now this one is back too.

My throat hurts from all the yelling I did, blood is still pumping through my veins, but it's slowing, leaving behind that eerie, pulsing calmness which is fake, because I'm in no way safe here. But it's making me sleepy anyway.

What does Dante want from me?

And how do I give it to him so he'll let Blade go?

Those questions are looping on repeat in my brain and they will drive me insane. Because they have no answers. Or more like, there is no answer to the second one, the most important one.

I've just been standing by the window, watching the sun rise and arguing with that terrible certainty for what feels like my whole life.

The lock clicks and the door slides open, creaking like the hinges are about to give way. Stupid, fake hope that I'm being freed wells up in my chest.

But it's just Dante, holding a crystal glass filled with amber liquid and the butt of an extinguished cigar. His shirt is unbuttoned, revealing his hairy chest and the revulsion I always felt for the guy grows by a couple more degrees.

"Doesn't it bother you that you have me here when you know I don't want you at all?" I ask.

"Sure, it bothers me." He cocks a grin as he walks towards me. "It bothers me that you rejected me the way you did. That bothers me a lot."

I hate the way he speaks. Hate everything about him.

“And now you want me to pay?” I ask. “I was never yours to begin with and I never will be. Just so you know.”

“You were mine. I gave you a ring. But noted.” He places his glass on the windowsill and looks out. I wonder if I could snatch the glass, break it and then use the broken shards to kill him. One of the many crystal vases would probably work better for that.

“So what am I doing here?”

I was afraid he'd come in here to rape me, but he doesn't even seem interested in touching me. And he looks very tired.

“I'm claiming what was promised me,” he says and turns to me, pure black hate in his eyes.

The kind that knows no passion, let alone love.

I wondered how the great-grandmother who furnished this room felt about the lovelessness in this family.

“But not for myself. You're spoiled, used up and washed up.

I'm giving you to The Butcher, he goes through wives fast and he'll see it as a special honor that I'm gifting my once intended to him. ”

Some other Bella heard everything after he mentioned The Butcher.

I don't know his given name, but his nickname is one I'd heard often enough.

He didn't get it because he sells meat. He got it because he turns men into meat.

And has been known to take a bite of his enemies here and there.

That's how my brother Ricardo told me the story when I was twelve.

He went into so much detail I cried. But I am not that scared little girl anymore.

"Fine," I say, crossing my arms over my chest. "But let Blade go. He's got nothing to do with this. It's between us."

"So brave," he says, eyeing me sideways. "You know how The Butcher got his name?"

"Yeah, I know all about that," I say. "He better hope I don't turn him into meat though. This is not a nice gift you're giving him."

That makes him laugh outright. It almost sounds nice. "Such fire. I would've liked you."

Then his face turns stone cold serious. "But you're just talk. All you Rovinas are. Lots of loud words, nothing to back it up. The Butcher will like you just fine. You just won't like him."

He picks up his glass, finishes his drink and heads for the door.

"What about Blade?" I ask. "What do you want from him?"

He turns. "Oh, don't worry about him. He's already as good as dead. They'll just keep him alive long enough so they can send him back to his MC in little pieces."

“What? Who?” I rush after him, but by the time I reach the door it’s already locked again.

Doesn’t stop me from banging on it, demanding, pleading and just plain screaming for him to let Blade go. It does absolutely no good.

I should’ve gone with plan A and tried to kill him with a broken crystal vase. Because doomed to failure as it probably was, it was still the best plan I had.

Blade

Waiting has never been a problem for me. You can always find something to do while waiting. Something worthwhile. The only exception to that so far has been waiting for Bella. But I'm not learning that waiting for death is another such exception.

I'm sure Socrates had a bunch of smart things to say about being imprisoned while waiting to die, but none of them come to mind right now.

What's also not coming to me is figuring out a way out of this.

I suppose once they start shipping those pieces of me back to Rogue, the MC will try to find us.

But will it be too late for Bella? Will they even help her? Can they?

Pointless questions in the here and now.

I failed Bella once again. Failed to keep the love of my life safe.

Failed to keep her at all. Twice she was snatched away from me.

Twice I let her go. I don't deserve her.

Never did. My one happiness in the sadness that was the last ten years without her was knowing at least Dante never got her.

But now he does. I failed to prevent that too.

My only idea of how much time has passed comes via how achy my arms and legs grow. From discomfort, to pins and needles, to numbness. Hours at least. Maybe the whole day.

The Hydra assholes will be here soon. Good. I want to get this show on the road, face what's coming head on and not by sitting alone, tied to a chair in a small room. I don't mind waiting, but I hate postponing the inevitable.

I'd been thinking that for a while by the time the door of my pantry cell finally opens again.

Not in that pompous way Dante used when he visited me, but slowly, cautiously.

The cool air from the dark hallway beyond the door is a welcome change from the stuffiness and rotting potato smell of my cell.

Matteo comes in and he's alone. I have so many choice things to say to him I don't know where to start. But he taps his finger to his lips as he closes the door behind him slowly and quietly.

He's ditched the suit all these mob guys like to wear 24/7 for a sensible all-black ensemble, complete with cargo pants and boots. The knife in his hand shines bright silver in the overhead light as he walks up to me. Maybe the things I want to say to him aren't the right ones.

Or maybe he's just here to cut off that first piece of my flesh.

"What's going on, Matteo? Had a change of heart?" I ask, hoping I'm reading this right more than I've hoped for anything in a good long while.

“Don’t talk,” he says as he steps behind me and I can no longer see the knife. That fills me with the kind of dread I’ve never felt before. But then my hands are suddenly free. Still numb, but no longer bound. He saws through the ties binding my legs next.

“What is this?” I ask, standing up and shaking my arms and legs to get the feeling back.

“What’s it look like?”

“It looks like you’re setting me free,” I say. But can I trust it? Or is this just a sick little game? But what choice do I got?

“Bella’s in the second bedroom left of the stairs on the third floor,” he says, handing me a key. “The side door is unlocked, the gate in the east fence too. It’s a straight shot from the side entrance where we brought you in, but don’t take the open route, go through the trees.”

He holds out the knife too. “You have half an hour. Hydra just got here and Dante will spend at least that long talking to them before he reveals he has you. He likes to put on a show. But don’t count on them being very patient.”

I take the key and the knife, just looking at him because I got so many questions I don’t know which to ask first.

“You think I’d let my sister get taken if I could help it?” he asks.

“You tried to sell her off once before,” I say and he scoffs.

“That was different. She was gonna be married to secure an alliance. That’s how it’s done,” he says. “She would’ve had a good life.”

“Yeah, well?—”

“Stop talking and get moving,” he says. “Third floor. Get her out.”

“You’re not coming?”

“I’ll have a car waiting. And I’ll cover our escape. You do your part. Don’t make me regret freeing you,” he says. “I’m only doing this for Bella. Wait a couple of minutes after I’m gone and then get her.”

Then he stalks out of the room, closing the door just as quietly as he opened it. I wait for maybe three breaths and follow.

This is the chance I never thought I’d get and I’m gonna seize it. And this time, I won’t fuck it up.

Bella

The door opened one more time before the sun fully set. A bald, sour-faced man in a three-piece suit came in, carrying a large shopping bag with something white and lacy folded up inside it, bulging over the top of it.

He tossed it on the floor by the door, not setting foot inside the room.

“Put that on,” he barked. “Dante’s orders. You better have it done by the time he comes to check. Or he’ll chop off your boyfriend’s hand and bring it to you.”

He was gone before I could say anything, the door once again locked, once again leaving me alone with my waking nightmares that he just added a juicy detail to.

A wedding dress is in the bag he brought. Very old by the looks of it. Another thing that maybe his great-grandmother brought here from the old country. It’s covered in so much handmade lace I can hardly tell which way is up or down, let alone figure out how to put it on.

Every time I look at it, I see Blade’s dismembered hand lying next to it. And every time I think about disobeying the order I see his pained, contorted face as they cut it off. I did this to him.

So I have no damn choice.

My whole life I was raised to believe I had no choice in anything, especially love. I believed I was bred for the sole purpose of getting married so my father could make

better connections. Everything was done for me. Everything was decided for me. What I wanted played no part.

Until I met Blade.

He gave me all the choices. Gave me all the love anyone could ever give me. And more. Believed in me, supported me, fought for me.

I will not be the cause of him getting hurt. So even though I doubt it will save him or prevent anything that will happen next, I put on the dress.

It's huge, but at the same time barely fits.

Women back in the day were much smaller, and if it weren't for how tight it is across my breasts and hips, I'd look like a total marshmallow in it.

The lace it's covered with is torn in places, yellowed in others and so hard it cuts into my skin.

It smells of mothballs and a mustiness that makes my nose itch uncontrollably within a minute of putting it on.

But I'm not taking it off. The Butcher can take it off himself after he beats me into unconsciousness. Because that's the only way he gets to have me. I will give him nothing willingly.

In another life, my wedding day would be a happy day.

I'd already began to plan my and Blade's wedding.

Nothing concrete. Just that everyone would be there, happy, cheering for us, and that

afterwards we'd ride out to our spot on the cliffs and promise each other entirety all over again. In words and deeds.

But that's never gonna be my life.

I knew that as a young girl, stuck in my father's fancy cage. But back then I had dreams and believed I could change that. I don't anymore. But at least I had a life in between. However brief it was. A life worth living. I'm just sorry I brought so many people down to have it. Especially Blade.

The sky outside the windows is pitch black, no stars anywhere, and cars are arriving. That's probably The Butcher coming to get me. It's fitting that my marriage to that monster will take place in the dead of night like the nightmare it is.

Whoever is trying to unlock my door now is having a lot of trouble with it. They're making noise like they keep missing the lock, and at some point it sounds like they're just scratching at it. Like a monster is trying to get it.

My heart's racing because I've had waking nightmares before, seeing things that weren't there, fearing them so much I thought my heart is gonna explode.

The door finally opens and now my heart wants to explode in a whole different way. Blade is standing there, staring at me with his wide, warm eyes in which I can always see love. Even when it's obscured by other things.

But I've been shown good things by my mind too in the past. Great things that turned out the worst.

He rushes to me and gives me such a warm and tight embrace, I literally forget to be afraid. "Bella, thank God. I thought I'd lost you."

“Never,” I whisper.

“We gotta go, fast,” he says, holding my hand with his left and clutching a very large knife in his right.

I kick off my flip-flops so I can move faster. Whatever this is, even if it’s just some sort of hallucination of my tortured soul, I’m here for it. Because it’s better than waiting in a dark room for The Butcher to come and claim me.

But with every creaking step we take down the long dark hallway, the reality sinks in a little deeper. I am getting saved. And Blade is free too. It’s not just a dream.

He leads the way to the wooden staircase that connects all the levels of this house. Only the bottom floor is lit up and I hear muffled voices, but not what they’re saying.

“There’s another staircase. The service one,” I say and start leading the way past the main one. “We’ll be more hidden there.”

Blade looks at me questioningly, but I just nod and keep walking.

It’s behind one of the many doors, I just don’t remember which one.

I know because I’ve been here before, once when I was very young and my father promised me to Dante.

A friendly woman, his step-mother, I think, showed me the house while the men talked.

She took me all over, revealing all the hidden passages, until we emerged in Dante’s room.

He was just a boy then too. And very annoyed at seeing me.

He threw the book he was reading at me and screeched that I should get out.

I remember that very clearly, right down to the grimace on his face and that the book was actually an old Batman and Robin comic book collection. But I don't remember which door hides the secret staircase.

Then I see it. A door just like the others, only slightly narrower.

"This is it," I say and open it, hoping I'm right.

I am. Finally something's going my way.

The only light in this staircase is coming from a roof window far above us where the moon is shining down, but faintly.

I'm tripping all over the damn wedding dress as we descend the stairs.

The voices I heard earlier are getting louder as we descend, at one point I hear Dante's as though he's standing right next to us.

"I have something for you," he's saying. "Something you'll like very much. And I think you will appreciate the ingenious way I procured it for you..." "

"That pompous idiot," I whisper. "Well, the joke's on him."

"Not until we get out of here," Blade says in his pragmatic voice.

As though to punctuate his point, a set of thudding footsteps enters the room in which Dante is still bragging about his achievements. His self-important voice is cut off as

the newcomer tells him something I can't hear.

"You fucking idiots," Dante yells. "You had one little job. You fucking incompetent idiots."

"I think he knows we're gone," Blade says. "We gotta run."

We'd been going slowly and silently so as not to be heard through the walls, but now we're running. I'm hiking up my dress, almost tripping and tumbling down the stairs more than once. But I somehow manage to stay on my feet.

Men are running down the dark hallway we exit into on the ground floor, but I can only hear them, can't see them yet.

Blade takes my hand again. "This way."

Wedding dresses were not made for running in. Probably to prevent the unwilling brides from doing exactly that. But I'm running away with the man I do want to marry. And that gives me all the wind I need.

The men chasing us have their guns drawn and are yelling for us to stop. They're gaining on us, because every door Blade kicks down is the wrong one, none of them lead out into the garden.

So close. We're so close. To our freedom. To our future. But what in my life ever turned out to be easy? Absolutely nothing.

A loud bang sounds, rattling the very foundations of the house just as a flash of light brighter than the sun blinds me through the door Blade just kicked down.

I can't see, my ears are ringing and a part of my mind is sure I'd just seen the gates of

Heaven open for me. Or Hell more like, given the trajectory of my life.

My feet aren't touching the ground anymore. I'm being carried and bangs and flashes are going off everywhere, lighting up the dense darkness of night.

If I must wake up from this nightmare I hope it'll be in Hell and not that bedroom in Dante's house. But I'd much rather just not wake up at all unless it's somewhere safe and in Blade's arms.

So close. Blade and I came so close. But we didn't quite make it. Just like we never do.

Blade

The explosions disoriented Bella so bad I had to carry out of the house. I could only hope they were the diversion Matteo was talking about and not Dante unleashing hell to stop us from leaving. And that the gate in the fence would be where he said. And that I'd find it.

All the while I was creeping through the dark house, looking for the bedroom Bella was in, warnings and dark thoughts were going through my head.

That this was some sort of trap, that Dante wanted me free so Hydra could chase me down and get some fun out of it, that I'd find Bella dead, or getting raped or getting something even more horrible done to her.

So when I finally managed to break open the lock on her door and saw her standing there in a wedding dress—an ugly old thing that she nevertheless looked amazing in—I couldn't move or speak or even think.

But I knew then it wasn't a trap. I knew seeing her like that was a sign that we'd finally get our happy ever after. And that we had this one last chance to make it happen.

She was a queen thinking of the servants' stairs as a way out of the house and now I'm actually praying that Matteo really has a car waiting for us.

I find the gate. It's overgrown by a thorny bush but unlocked. Explosions are still echoing in the yard behind us as I carry Bella through the gate to the road beyond.

The dark and empty uphill road. I have no idea which way is home.

The guys who had their guns on us in the hallway can't be far behind. But where's our ride?

Bella's coming round, asking what's happening.

I'm just about to tell her we have to run some more, when a pair of headlights blink from the darkness.

I hold her tighter and run to them.

It's an old pickup, either rust colored or just rusted.

"Get in," Matteo snaps, opening the passenger door. "What's wrong with her?"

"The explosions stunned her," I say as I place her in the pickup as gently and as fast as I can. I climb in after her "That was you?"

"Yeah," he says and guns it down the empty road away from the mansion before I even manage to fully slam the door shut.

"Where to?" he asks. "Where's safe for you?"

"The clubhouse," I say and give him the address.

"Nah, better go somewhere far," he says. "Out of state if possible. The Hydra will be on you, and Dante will want her back bad. He's got a huge deal riding on marrying her off."

"The clubhouse is the safest place for us," I say. "We'll figure it out from there."

He shrugs and accelerates some more. “Fine, whatever you want. But I did warn you.”

Bella stirs in my arms, brushing hair off her face as she looks at him for the first time since we got in this car. “Matteo?”

Her voice is packed with so many emotions it hurts my chest. Regret, sadness, fear even. But definitely love and happiness too.

“And I warned you to stay away too,” he barks at her, keeping her eyes fixed on the road ahead. “All you had to do was listen. But you’ve never been good at that.”

His words might be harsh, but his voice isn’t. And I’m pretty sure it’s hard for him not to look at her.

“I just wanted to come home,” she says in a quiet voice. “And I just wanted to see you.”

“And you almost threw away your life because of it,” he says. “Again.”

The silence that follows makes even the sound of the engine and rumbling of this junker feel removed. It’s fraught with years of things unsaid, bad things barely survived, and mean words that shouldn’t be spoken, but need to be heard.

In the distance, I can already see the walls around the clubhouse. We’ll be safe behind those walls. I can give Bella that. But peace and love from her family. I don’t think she’ll ever have that, no matter how much she craves it.

But I’ll make up for it. She’ll have all the love she can handle from me and the family we create, and more.

I punch in the secret code that only the execs have to open the gate once we reach it. Judge is rushing from the clubhouse towards the car, Skye, Rock, and Minx on his heels. They must've seen us coming.

Bella turns to her brother. "Come on, let's go in. We're safe here."

"Yeah, man," I say.

"No. Let me back out, I got a plane to catch," Matteo says. "They'll be coming after me hard. You don't want to be anywhere near me."

"What's going on?" Judge asks. "What happened to you? And who's he?"

I step out of the car to explain everything to my brothers and sisters, leaving Bella to speak to her brother alone.

They need a conversation, or ten. But given that he's betrayed one of the more powerful mob families in these parts to save her, and he's set on leaving, this one conversation might be all they get.

I hope she doesn't realize that. But she's a smart woman. She probably does.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:39 am

Bella

After Blade leaves the car, I sit back in the seat, crossing my arms over my chest.

“You can try and chase me away all you want, but I’m gonna thank you for saving my life tonight,” I say.

His eyes are so hard. Much harder than I’ve ever seen them.

He has our mother’s coloring, green-grey eyes and light brown hair with golden streaks.

There used to be a gentleness to his face, especially when he was with me that isn’t there anymore.

Ten years is a very long time, it seems. A lot changes in ten years.

“Even if you were only there because of me?” he asks, his eyes growing maybe a smidge less hard and cold.

“Hey, like you said, I contacted you even after you told me not to ever do it,” I say.

“That’s how they traced me, right? The text I sent?”

He nods. “I have no privacy with Dante. He’s been running me like a dog for a long time now. He only kept me alive after he killed Ricardo and Dad to humiliate me. But that’s over now.”

I may never have cared much about the rules of the kind of life my family led, but I do know just saying you're done and leaving does not get the job done.

"I'm sorry that happened," I say and a part of me truly is. But they should've just let me love who I wanted to love.

"I don't blame you," he says, his face softening by maybe half a degree. "We never should've tried to marry you off for favor. We were over-reaching and Dad should've known that. You weren't raised to understand the importance of it. Of course you wanted none of it."

It's the kind of forgiveness I never expected to get. Carrying the knowledge that I caused the deaths of my father and brother was a heavy burden. And I'm only just realizing how very heavy it was now that I can finally set a little of it down.

"Stay here with me," I say, but he shakes his head.

"I have my own scores to settle."

"Where will you go?" I ask. "We have no family left."

My aunt, the one who took me in back east after my father disowned me was the closest blood relative we had.

"I'm going to New York," he says. "There's still a few cousins left. I'll be all right."

"You'll be all right here too."

He shakes his head and reaches for my hand. "I put you in enough danger for now."

"And I caused all this shit in the first place so we're even," I counter.

This time his eyes turn undeniably soft.

“You’ve paid your price in more ways than one, Bella,” he says. “But you’re back with your man now and from what I’ve seen, he’ll take good care of you. Tell him I’m sorry we beat him up that time. It was a mistake.”

A mistake that bred so many other mistakes.

“Tell him yourself,” I say and clutch his hand. “Come in with me.”

He takes his hand from my grip and places it on the steering wheel. “I’m going back east to get an army. Then I’ll return and take back everything Moretti stole from us. I owe that to our father, our brother, to myself and to you.”

“But—”

“We’re done talking, Bella,” he says. “This is how it’s gonna be. And once it’s all done, we’ll talk more. But until then, stay safe.”

He waves Blade over and repeats his request that he open the gate. Blade looks at me, silently asking if that’s what I want too. I give a small nod, because I do understand all about family honor. I’ve sure broken it enough times.

“Everything will work out, Bella,” Matteo tells me as I climb out of the truck, the lace on the dress getting caught on absolutely everything like it doesn’t want me to leave. “Just stay away from Dante. Especially in that dress.”

I smile despite myself, and he does too, and for that second, he looks like he used to, back when I was a girl, and he was my older brother who could always make me laugh and feel good. I hope this isn’t the last time I’ll ever see him smile. Or see him at all. But it very well could be.

“Don’t worry, man, I’m marrying her as soon as possible,” Blade says. “Just so no one else can try it ever again.”

“Good,” Matteo says and starts the engine.

Blade wraps his arms around me as we watch him drive through the gate.

“You think he’ll make it?” I ask and Blade holds me even tighter. I suppose that’s a sort of no, but what he says is, “I hope so.”

“That makes two of us.”

After Matteo is gone, he leads me inside the clubhouse where the rest are gathered, waiting for the full story, I guess.

“And what did you mean, you’ll only marry me so no one else can?” I ask, trying to sound edgy, but it just comes out flat.

The fear, sadness and adrenaline that’s been pumping through my veins for most of the day are starting to wear off and that dizzy, happy feeling of relaxation is threatening to overwhelm me.

He swings me around and holds me so we’re face to face. “I want to marry you for every reason under the sun, Isabella Rovina. I love you and I don’t want to live another second without you.”

The slight woman with purple hair sighs loudly. But not as loudly as me.

“Don’t worry, you won’t have to be without me ever again,” I say. “Because I’m never leaving your side again. Ever. I love you too much for that, Henry Steele.”

The tall, burly older man who was first out of the clubhouse clears his throat beside us.

“Should I just pronounce you married here, make short work of it?” he asks.

“Can you?” I ask breathlessly and Blade looks very hopeful too, even as he says, “Come on, Judge, don’t joke around.”

Judge chuckles. “Well, the legalities of it will be questionable, since I’m no longer an acting judge. But she’s already dressed for a wedding, and you’ve already spoken your vows, so why not? It can’t hurt...”

The smile he offers me is very genuine. “Plus, I’m sure it’ll be enough for everyone in this MC. No one will send her away for something like this to happen again if I married you.”

“Let’s do it,” I say looking at Blade who’s already nodding.

Judge clears his throat. “Do you both choose each other to be partners for life in good times and bad times?”

“We absolutely do,” we answer practically at the same time.

“And do you choose to respect, trust each other, and love and support one another whatever may come?”

“Always,” Blade says, looking deep into my eyes, showing me the truth of his words. I can only nod.

“Do you say these vows willingly and honestly?”

“Yes, completely and totally,” I say in a voice that’s much firmer than I expected it to be. This time, it’s Blade who only nods.

“Then I hereby pronounce you husband and wife,” Judge says with a big grin on his face. “You may kiss the bride now, I guess.”

Everyone in the room claps and cheers as Blade does exactly that.

As ever, his kiss is like taking a drink of a healing nectar, filling me with warmth and peace and making me whole in ways I didn’t even know I was broken. The kiss lasts and last, forever, it feels like, but still not long enough.

They cheer some more when it’s over and I lean over to Blade and whisper in his ear. “Now, it’s time for you to take this dress off me.”

I want all the love I can get after the day we’ve had, in every way I can get it. His wide smile tells me we’re on the same page about that. But that’s no surprise. We’re always on the same page. Even when separated by years, by stupid ideas, by thick walls. Because our hearts are always one.

We don’t really need to speak promises of staying together forever to each other. Because it’s already a done deal. Always was. From our first day to our last. And from this day forward it will forever be our every day reality too.

He’s my ride or die and I’m his. Since the day I first said that to him, over a decade ago, we’ve proven that simple truth in so many different ways. And I’m gonna make sure we focus on just the riding part from now on. And no dying. Ever.

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Three Months Later

Blade

We meant what we promised to each other absolutely and haven't been apart for more than half a day since the night we escaped Moretti.

She came with me back to North Cali when it was time for me to return and help the Devils some more.

We made sure we slept together every night, even if our bed was just a cot under the starry desert sky.

In a lot of ways, it was the perfect roof over our heads.

Ride or die, she promised me, before either one of us even truly knew what that meant.

But we learned since. We learned it all over again in the last few weeks of the war we helped the Devils win.

She used to complain about my biker lifestyle, but she became one of us while we chased the Devils' enemies across the forests and deserts.

Something more than a club girl, something less than a warrior.

But definitely a sister to us all. And a queen to me.

Word of her talent with the needle spread while we were up there, mainly thanks to her friend, Karma. And she's been inking our brothers and sister non-stop since we've been back.

While I've been in Council meetings non-stop. What are we gonna do about Hydra? What are we gonna do about Moretti? What are we gonna do about the police?

All of them have been coming at us, each from their own annoying but dangerous angle since we got back. Hydra want to end us, but piece by piece. Moretti's lost men trying to storm the clubhouse, and the cops are building a case against us despite all we've done to help them over the years.

Problem, upon problem, upon problem. Walls of problems everywhere we turn.

I even had to send my mom out of town to stay with her sister in New England. She's complaining about it almost every day. But safe is safe and that's not here.

The whole MC has been cooped up in the clubhouse since we got back from North Cali, and that's got its own set of challenges. But so far it's all holding and we're all alive.

I sleep like a baby in Bella's arms every night despite it all. And I'm ready to do some more of that right now.

She's in her studio, an empty room on the top floor with the best light, finally inking Rogue. He's asked for a commemorative tattoo of his former lover Angel, but one that would honor his new love, Melody too.

I swear he got a little choked up when Bella showed him the sketch for it. Hell, I did too. It's definitely some of her best work.

She's so engrossed in putting the finishing touches of it on his chest, she doesn't

notice me walk in.

So I just stand by the door, watching her create her art.

The piece looks even better on skin than it was in the sketchbook and features all the hallmarks of his life with Angel and the life he's yet to lead with Melody.

Hopefully a long one. Despite all the shit we're facing.

"There, done," Bella says and switches off the needle, speaking at precisely the right time to stop me from spiraling into dark thoughts. She always could switch the darkness off for me. And I'll never stop striving to do the same for her.

Rogue takes the mirror she's offering him and I swear he's getting choked up all over again as he gazes at the image. Neither of them has noticed me yet because I'm still standing in the dark shadows cast by the strong light she's working under.

"This was definitely worth the wait," Rogue says.

He was the last of the members to get his tattoo, maybe letting everyone go first, maybe dreading the trip down memory lane it doubtlessly brought.

He mourned Angel for over ten years, no one thought he'd ever stop.

Until Melody came into his life. Somehow—by the magic of her talent, I guess—Bella managed to depict all that in his tattoo as well.

He looks up at her.

"I'm sorry for the way I treated you, Bella," he says hoarsely. "It was too much and too harsh. The fault for what happened to Angel wasn't yours."

“I guess you just needed someone to blame,” she says.

“Someone other than myself, yeah,” he says. “But I was wrong, and I apologize. Whatever you need, whenever you need it, it’s yours.”

I let them bask in the moment for a couple of minutes before stepping into the light.

“What she needs now is some time with me,” I say. “Before you both start hugging and crying or whatever.”

Rogue laughs at that, a little too loudly, like maybe I wasn’t that far off with the mention of tears. Not that he’d ever admit it.

Bella comes to me and gives me a kiss, holding me gently.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m going,” Rogue says, getting off the chair.

“Wait, I still have to wrap that,” Bella says, but he waves her off.

“Melody can do it,” he says. “She’ll want to see it first anyway.”

He leaves the room with his usual purposeful speed and then it’s just us, half in the bright light and half in darkness. I kiss her again, because I need to and because I can and because that’s all I ever really want to do anyway.

She leans against me as she returns the kiss, until I’m not sure whose strength is keeping me upright, hers or mine. Our strength combined, I think is the answer to that. Not that I need an answer. I just need to let this moment take me. Because it holds everything I will ever need and more.

“I wish we could take one of our rides through the stars,” she whispers later, when we’re just holding each other, which is also all I ever want to be doing.

“We can go up on the roof,” I suggest. “Some stars are bound to be visible up there.”

She agrees, leaves everything and follows me up there.

It’s a clear night, plenty of stars to see, twinkling above us as we kiss and hold each other some more.

“As soon as this is over, we’ll go find all the stars we can,” I promise her.

She leans her head on my shoulder, looking up at the sky. “I’m not missing anything right here.”

“Yeah, me neither,” I say and hold her tight.

And it’s the absolute truth. Bella in my arms, happy, mine... that’s always been and always will be enough for me. Everything else is just the backdrop for our love.

* * *

THE END

Thanks for reading!