



Deliver Us From Evil (The Satan's Knights MC North Carolina #4)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Darkness always works overtime.

It thrives in the depravity of grown men.

Hardening hearts and leaving them empty.

It destroys everything and everyone it touches.

Now its coming for our innocent beacon of light.

Stronger than she knows, but still so fragile.

In the fight of her life, all I can do is watch.

Theres no outlaw justice for what shes facing.

No protection from the cold realities of life and death.

But theres also no limit to what I would do for her.

Total Pages (Source): 27

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am

CAPONE

Present Day

Lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil.

It's what we say when we call on The Almighty God to help us because we can't resist the Devil merely on our own strength. I spent eight years taking catechism classes as a kid and received all my sacraments. I recited that prayer every fucking day. But instead of becoming one with God, I grew to be a man who proudly wears the Devil on his back.

His plan was never to guide me back to him.

God saw my wicked ways and he led me straight to temptation.

He dangled that forbidden fruit right in front of my face.

Stripped me of my strength and made me a weak man.

Took this depraved sinner and robbed me of all my defenses.

Made me fucking helpless.

Anger surges deep within and I feel my hands curl into fists at my side. My gaze darts all around the room in search of something to destroy before landing on the bed. I flex my fingers as memories of her and I, tangled between those sheets, flash before

me.

All the death and destruction.

Every crime I committed.

It was all child's play.

Kissing Tara in that bed was my first true taste of sin, and God laughed.

It was his gotcha moment.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am

CHAPTER ONE

CAPONE

Weeks earlier...

As the youngest of five, and the only boy, I've seen my pops go to war for each one of my sisters. Hell, the man kept a baseball bat under his bed and another next to his recliner in the living room. The latter he took extra care with, making it even more of a lethal weapon by wrapping barbwire around the length of it. Pretty fucking savage if you ask me, but he was always ready to attack. My mother, on the other hand, wasn't the fighting type. She'd let my pops go handle business and when he got back, a crying sister in tow, she'd fix him a sandwich.

That was not the dynamic here.

Tara Burnside calls her daddy, crying, begging him to come get her, and her mother hops on the back of her father's Harley—the two of them leading a convoy of bikes, ready to maim and murder whoever is the cause of her tears.

And while Maverick is no doubt a badass motherfucker, my money is on Holly.

We pull up to the entrance of Knightdale Environmental Park and judging by the volume of cars and the belligerent teens loitering around, it seems as though the princess of the Satan's Knights decided to party it up in the woods.

Ah, to be young and stupid again.

I'd give my left nut to go back ten years, to a time when I had zero responsibilities and my Nonna's biggest concern was whether she was serving pasta or gnocchi on a Sunday. These days, the old troll is worried about my sperm going dry before I can carry on the family name. Someone should tell her I play with guns all day and that there is a lethal cartel biding their time, waiting for the perfect moment to obliterate us. Not to mention a bunch of other unsuspecting threats we don't even know about.

But, hey, so long as I leave behind a couple of Capizzones—who cares?

I drop my boots to the gravel, keeping my hands wrapped tightly around my handlebars and wait for someone to tell me where we're going. I mean, what's the actual plan here? Are we the keg police now?

Maverick and Holly dismount and I take that as my cue to kill the engine on my bike and join the others. Holly points to a silver BMW parked about a hundred feet away.

“That's Mark's car.”

Figures.

I bet the kid just got his license. He's probably still on probation but I guess that didn't stop his parents from dropping a couple of G's on a fancy whip. And everyone wonders what's wrong with this generation. They're a bunch of spoiled fucks, that's what's wrong. Do you know how much grass I had to cut before my pops finally caved and got me a twenty-year old used car? The paint was rusting on the damn thing, and I had to crawl into the car from the passenger side, but I drove it around Chicago like I was sporting a brand-new Cadillac.

Christ—would you listen to me? I sound like my old man. By the end of the night, I'll be pulling up my pants, asking someone to find me the 'clicker' for the television.

Maverick stalks toward the BMW, Holly hot on his tail, Shady and Ghost not too far behind. Mav opens the driver's door and pulls Tara's boyfriend out of the car, slamming the tall football player against the hood of his fancy whip just as Holly tags her daughter from the passenger seat of the car. I don't get a look at Tara. My focus is lasered in on her boyfriend, who looks like he's one breath away from pissing his pants.

"I...uh...I'm sorry, Maverick, I... uh..."

Mark continues to stammer and slur, revealing Tara caught him with his pants around his ankles and his dick in another girl.

Fool.

"I didn't mean it," he blurts.

"Oh, yeah, she just fell onto your dick, right?" Tara shouts over her mother's shoulder.

"Maybe if you put out you would've been the one to fall onto it."

I shake my head.

Fucking fool.

Of all the things the little fuck could possibly say, that has got to be the worst. My gaze swings to Tara and my eyes nearly pop out of my head as I take in the revealing outfit she's wearing—a pair of skintight jeans and a crop top that if it were any shorter would show the undersides of her tits, and by the looks of it—the girl ain't wearing a bra.

Normally I wouldn't blink an eye. I've seen grown ass women wear a whole lot worse. Our clubhouse may have gotten quite tame since Maverick and Holly reunited, but there was a time when we had porn stars roaming the joint and those bitches walked around wearing scraps of clothes no bigger than dental floss.

This, though—Tara in that top, her nipples hard and pointed for the world to see and those fucking jeans that mold to her ass—it's quite the opposite of anything I've ever seen her wear before. And the knee-high boots really throw the outfit over the edge.

I'm surprised Maverick let her out of his sight, much less out of the house.

If she were my daughter, I'd lock her up and throw away the key. I'd never give a punk like Mark a chance at her, and I certainly wouldn't give a dirty bastard like me the opportunity to ogle her.

Jesus Christ.

It doesn't get lower than this, does it? It don't matter how old she looks, she's just a kid and it would do me a world of good if I kept that in mind the next time she decides to parade around in an outfit like the one she's wearing. For fuck's sake, I'm ten years older than her. She was likely playing with Barbie's while I was getting my dick sucked for the first time.

How's that for a harsh reality?

Feeling ashamed, I tear my gaze away from her body and let my eyes travel north. I expect the sight of her face to sober my racing mind, but it's like she grew up overnight and I'm just seeing her for the first time. I don't know if it's the makeup she's wearing or the streaks she's got going on in her hair. Maybe it's the nose ring—when the fuck did she get that?

I shake my head.

Any way you slice it, all the traces of a young girl seem to have disappeared. Her face has slimmed out and her features have become more pronounced. And that fire in her eyes—that's new too. The girl has Mav and Holly's blood running through her veins and a fiery spirit, something she makes clear when she pulls out of her mother's hold, and lunges for Mark. Maverick still has him pinned to the hood of the car, so she doesn't get too far.

It's a damn shame.

I for one would've liked to see how that played out. Her heart may be broken, and she may have called her dad in hysterics, but I bet there is a little vixen in there somewhere and God help everyone when she unleashes that part of her.

Shady grabs his niece around the waist and pulls her back.

"He ain't worth it, girl," he grinds out. With a firm grip on the little firecracker, he calls out to his brother, but Maverick doesn't move. "I'm taking her home," Shady says to his back, then turns to Holly. "You're riding with Ghost."

"I'm not going anywhere," Holly spats.

Still keeping a firm grip on Tara, he levels Holly with a look.

"In ten seconds she's gonna be in a puddle of tears. You know it and so do I. Now, I'm equipped for a lot of shit, but drying my niece's eyes is not one of those things. She needs her mother. Mav will handle Mark."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Holly chokes.

Considering her words, Shady turns to the rest of us. A lethal expression flits across his face as his eyes darken and his jaw clenches.

“Make sure he doesn’t kill him,” he says, then his eyes zero in on me. “You got this?”

A while back I went on a run for Shady. He was hiding his woman, Bianca—who, if we’re getting technical was actually Ghost’s woman at one time—in his apartment, away from the club, and I, not knowing who he was hiding, went and bought her some necessities. You know the basics like, sweats, toiletries, and Nutella. Don’t argue with me, that hazelnut spread is life. It’s a hill I’m willing to die on.

Anyway, he asked me to keep it quiet until he got a chance to plead his case to the club and I did. Ever since then I’m like the Robin to his Batman.

I jerk my chin.

“Yeah, brother. I got this.”

Then for some odd reason, I look at Tara. Shady was off by a couple of seconds, but he was right about the tears—they rain down her cheeks, smearing her mascara all over her pale skin. I don’t like seeing any girl cry, and maybe that’s because I’ve been surrounded by women my whole life, but I especially don’t like seeing Tara Burnside cry, not over some two-bit prick who ain’t worth her spit.

Shady leads her to his bike and fixes his helmet to her head before he swings his leg over the seat. Curious to see if she’s a natural like her parents, I watch as she climbs onto the back of her uncle’s bike and sure as fuck, she does it in one fluid motion, straddling the Harley and winding her arms around Shady as she plants the soles of her boots on the pegs, making it clear she’s not only a natural, but she’s biker royalty too.

Shady peels away from the scene, Ghost and Holly too, leaving the rest of us with a very angry Maverick and a drunk little punk. I crack my knuckles and roll my neck, bracing myself. Hawk sighs loudly beside me.

“Well, let’s hope he doesn’t kill him, with Ghost gone one of us will have to dig the hole.”

“I say we skip the hole, and put him in the smoker at Sally’s,” Ink volleys. “If it squeals like a pig, who’s to say it isn’t?”

It’s not a bad idea, but I don’t share that much. Instead, I make my way toward Maverick. The fact that he’s still standing there holding the kid against the car throws me. For as long as I know Maverick, he’s always been the leader who acts on instinct and apologizes for it later. This is a new tactic, and I don’t know what to make of it.

I come to a full stop a couple of feet away from him and call out to him, but he ignores me. Grinding my molars, my gaze slides to the kid. Eyes wide with fear, his lower lip trembles. What the fuck Tara sees in this guy is beyond me. He’s nothing but a little bitch.

“Please don’t kill me,” he begs, tears rolling down his face.

Maverick’s grip on him tightens and he pulls him forward only to slam him back against the hood of the car again. Then he releases the kid altogether, taking a step backward.

“Kill you?” he scoffs, his tone venomous. “I wouldn’t waste a fucking shell on your sorry ass, boy.”

I arch an eyebrow.

I guess we're not digging a hole or throwing his ass on a spit after all .

Bummer.

Mav swipes a hand over his bald head and cranks his neck from side to side before taking a step forward.

“Stand up straight,” he orders.

Mark stalls and stares at him completely bewildered.

“Now,” Maverick roars.

The kid scrambles from the hood of the car and sways on his sea legs, which I'm assuming is a side effect from being drunk and scared shitless. He lifts his chin and meets Maverick's gaze.

“I'm sorry, Mr. Burnside. I had too much to drink and, well, you know how it goes.”

I flinch. Maybe killing him isn't off the table, and if that's the case, the kid will dig his own hole before we shove him into it.

Maverick clucks his tongue against the roof of his mouth and nods.

“You're right, I do know how it goes, that's why I ain't gonna harm a single hair on your head.”

“You're not?” Mark croaks, sounding just as shocked as I feel.

Surely we're going to rough him up a little. Break a couple of bones. I vote for his legs, but I'll settle for a finger or two. Hell, even his nose.

“No, the penance you’re going to receive is far worse than any beaten I can give you. You see, I’ve been where you’re at and what’s coming is fucking torture. You don’t know it yet because you’re too young and too inexperienced, but you just lost the greatest thing you’ll ever have, and I don’t say that because she’s mine. I say it because she’s Holly’s. I lost Tara’s mom. I watched her move on and live her life without me and the same hell is coming for you. It won’t hit you now, it might not even hit you ten years from now. But one day you’re going to find your sorry ass sitting in a dark room, wishing you kept your dick in your pants. And when that happens, you’ll try to get back in her good graces. You’ll apologize and beat yourself up. You’ll beg and barter for a second chance, but you won’t get it because I’ll be the roadblock standing in your way.” He pauses to crack his knuckles. “You fucked up tonight, kid. You humiliated my daughter. Broke her fucking heart, but the right guy is out there waiting to put it back together and he ain’t you.” He points a finger at Mark. “Stay away from Tara. You see her walking the halls at school, you walk the other way. Don’t call her. Don’t text her. Don’t even fucking look at her. I find out you do any of those things, I’ll break your fucking arm and I’ll break it so that you not only never play football again, but you’re unable to jerk your own dick.” He pauses and Mark gulps. “Understand?”

The kid nods.

“I don’t hear you,” Maverick growls.

“Yes...Mr. Burnside, I...uh...understand.”

Maverick turns around, his eyes scanning over all of us.

“We’re done here,” he announces, then he starts for his bike.

That’s my cue to follow suit, but a foreign feeling sweeps over me, keeping me rooted in place. My gaze cuts back to Mark before sliding to his shiny BMW.

So fucking pristine.

I really hope everything Maverick said is true, that one day this little cunt realizes he fucked up. I hope and pray he's haunted by regret. But I'm not willing to take any chances. There needs to be definitive punishment and maybe I'm just the guy who delivers it. Reaching into my kutte, I pull out my tactical knife. It's not my usual weapon of choice, but there isn't time to pull a page from my old man's book and wrap barbwire around a baseball bat.

I stalk toward the car, turning out the blade. Mark's eyes widen and he fumbles with his words as I crouch down beside the rear tire on the driver's side, pushing the sharp tip of the knife into the rubber and slicing it wide.

"Hey, what the fuck are you doing?" Mark cries.

Ignoring the cheating pig, I rise to my full height and brush past him, making my way to the front tire. I slash that one too.

Nice and fucking wide.

But I don't stop there.

I meander to the passenger side, destroying both tires on that side too.

"Capone," Maverick calls curtly.

I stand tall and meet his gaze over the roof of the car. I can tell by the scowl on his face he isn't happy with me, but that doesn't deter me. I turn to the little punk who is pulling at the ends of his hair, gawking at his slashed tires.

"Dude! My car."

I pocket my knife and walk around the front of the car, getting right up in Mark's face.

"Now call your daddy, prick face, and tell him you need a ride. That should go over real well."

I step around him and stride toward my bike, pausing when I pass Maverick. He leans against his Harley, his arms crossed against his chest.

"What the fuck was that?" he growls.

I shrug.

I won't apologize.

"I've got four sisters, man. I'm just doing what I would've done if it were one of them who got their heart broken tonight."

Oddly enough, that's a lie. I've seen my sisters through heartbreak, and I've never slashed any tires before tonight.

But for some reason, I just couldn't help myself.

CHAPTER TWO

CAPONE

I watch Maverick reach for the bottle of Jack and pour himself another shot—his fourth since we returned to the clubhouse. But, hey, who’s counting?

“You hear from Holly?” Leftie questions. The old geezer parked his ass on the stool to Maverick’s left as soon as we got back and hasn’t stopped blabbering since. Everyone else scattered, leaving him and I as Mav’s handlers. I ain’t gonna lie—this shit ain’t my jam. When things get heavy and personal around here, I run. I’m not the brother that lends an ear, or drinks with you until you have a life changing epiphany, and I certainly don’t offer advice to anyone. I’m the brother you call when you want to go for a joyride. The guy who disobeys every traffic law in the state just to get an adrenaline rush.

Defying death is a favorite pastime of mine.

It’s right up there with fucking and your boy has made an art of charming his way into the panties of all the single broads from here to Wilmington.

Lifting the shot to his lips, Mav downs it with ease. Then he lowers the glass back onto the bar, a tortured expression filling his face as he gruffly answers Leftie’s question.

“Yeah, I’m gonna stay here with the boys tonight.”

I don't know why the guy looks so fucking miserable. I think he handled that little prick like a fucking champ.

"Good idea," Leftie returns. "I'll make breakfast in the morning."

I attempt to lighten the mood. "Do we get breakfast too or just the kids?"

"Don't get smart with me, boy," Leftie warns, narrowing his beady eyes at me.

"I wouldn't dare," I mutter.

Even I know better than to fuck with grandpa over here.

So much for lightening the mood, though.

What's that saying? If you can't beat them, join them? There ain't no beating this dead horse, and I'm not going down as the sober mate on this fucking ship. I bring my own glass to my lips, shooting back the shot as Maverick pours himself a refill.

I'm not a whiskey guy. Tequila is more my speed.

Maybe that's why I shudder as the liquor slides down my throat and a chill runs up my spine. I flip the glass over and slam it on top of the bar, turning my attention back to Maverick.

"What's the plan here? Are we drinking until we pass out or just long enough for Leftie to become pleasant? I'm down for either, but if the goal is to get blackout drunk, I'm gonna need tequila. Preferably Patron." I pause for a beat before adding, "And a bag of limes."

There is a saltshaker in the kitchen, no need to add that to the list.

“We’re drinking until I figure out how the fuck I’m ever going to look my daughter in the eye again.”

I stare at him for a beat. I don’t know what the fuck that means, but I’m a fake it until you make it kind guy, so instead of asking any more questions, I simply nod.

Doordash it is.

Reaching into my kutte, I grab my phone and immediately open up the delivery app. I add the largest bottle of Patron to my cart and am about to add some limes when Maverick snatches the phone out of my hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Let’s be real, Mav. I’m dumber than dirt and he’s...” I point my finger at Leftie. “...well, he’s older than it.”

“Watch it, boy,” Leftie growls.

Ignoring him, I continue, “Even if we blow through every bottle behind the bar, that shit tequila included, I don’t think we’re equipped to deal with whatever this is.” I wave a hand around his miserable face. “I need the good stuff.”

If I’m being honest, I don’t even think Patron can help. I have no idea how to deal with Maverick when he’s like this, and Leftie promising bacon and eggs doesn’t seem to be helping the cause. Where the fuck is everyone?

Then it dawns on me. Hawk, Ink, Wiz, and Torque all took off but Ghost and Shady never returned from dropping Tara and Holly off at the house. If anyone is equipped to deal with Maverick in this state, it’s his vice president and his brother.

I clear my throat, plucking my phone from Mav's hands.

Doordash can wait. I close the app and bring up my contact list before glancing back at Maverick. If looks could kill, my remains would be on a smoker at Sally's. Clearing my throat, I stand my ground.

"I'd feel better if we called a professional. Ghost or Shady, your pick."

"I can handle my own shit, Capone. I don't need?—"

His words are cut off by the sound of the front door opening. My gaze darts over his head, and my eyes widen as Ghost and Shady stroll into the clubhouse.

It's like a divine intervention. The big guy upstairs heard my call for help and answered.

Leftie's eyes swing back to me.

"How the hell did you do that?" he slurs.

"Beats the fuck out of me," I mutter.

Just last week I asked God for a leggy blonde with double d's and got nothing. I guess my ma was right... He does work in mysterious ways.

"Seeing as no one called me to dig a hole, I'm gonna guess you didn't kill the little bastard," Ghost says as he and Shady make their way toward us. He slides behind the bar, grabbing two beers, and passing one to Shady before taking a seat next to Leftie.

Maverick turns around in his stool, his hands firmly wrapped around his glass as he stares at the amber liquid inside of it.

“The kid is alive and well, save for the four flats Capone gave him before we left,” he grunts.

Ghost raises an eyebrow, surprise flickering in his blue eyes as they find mine from over Maverick’s slouched shoulders.

I was hoping that wouldn’t come up. Lord knows, I’ve spent the better part of the last hour trying not to dwell on it myself. There was no good explanation for why I slashed that little cunt’s tires. One minute I was in awe of how Maverick handled the situation, the next I was taking matters into my own hands like I had skin in the game. Like it was my fucking right.

Shady claps me on the shoulder. At first I take it as his silent version of an atta boy , but his grip tightens and when I look at him his jaw is clenched tight.

Ghost hums, lifting his beer to his lips. “I knew we were keeping you around for a reason.”

“Thanks,” I grunt as I try to shrug my shoulder free from Shady’s grip. “I think.”

Shady finally releases me and sets his long neck on top of the bar. “So, do we know what happened?” His eyes find his brother and I slowly inch away from him.

“According to Holly, Tara found him in the woods with another girl and immediately took off. That’s when she called me. Her phone died and she went back to his car, figuring it was the safest place. Mark caught up with her there and started apologizing.”

I roll my eyes.

“How is she doing now?” Ghost questions.

“Holly says she’s stopped crying.”

My fingers flex around the phone as an image of Tara crying earlier fills my head. Desperate to purge it, I toss my phone back on top of the wood, and make my way around the bar, plucking the bottle of cheap tequila from the shelf.

“Good. That little prick doesn’t deserve her tears,” Ghost says, and I raise the bottle, tipping it toward him in agreement before I chug it.

“No, he sure as hell doesn’t,” Maverick agrees, topping off his glass with more poison. “Just like I didn’t deserve her mother’s. Tara is no fool, she knows all my sins. She knows I played her mother dirty, something she likely overlooked because she didn’t know any better. But tonight... tonight she learned how it feels to be on the receiving end of that filth and I’m terrified she won’t look at me the same—like I’m not the man who hung the moon and the stars. Like I’m not her fucking hero.”

I lower the bottle from my lips, swiping the back of my free hand across my mouth. That’s some deep shit.

“Bro, with all due respect, I think you’re reading too much into this. Tara isn’t comparing you to that little fucker. Hell, I’ve got a twenty that says they’re back together by Monday.”

Maverick turns abruptly to glare at me.

“Over my dead body,” he growls.

“Man, why would you say that?” Ghost hisses.

Leftie points a wrinkled finger at me as he regards the others. “The boy wasn’t lying when he said he was dumber than dirt.”

I set the bottle of tequila on the bar and cross my arms against my chest.

“I’m just going by what I’ve seen. My sisters have dated their share of losers, and I can tell you for a fact, dickface will most definitely come sniffing around Tara when he pulls his head out of his ass.” I point a finger at Maverick. “You said it yourself tonight. He’ll realize his mistake and once he does, he’ll be on Tara like white on rice. She might make him sweat for a bit, but mark my words, she’ll take him back. It’s just the way it goes. You’re beating yourself up over nothing, man. Give your liver a rest and go home to your wife. Tara will only think less of you if you don’t.”

The room goes silent, and Maverick seems to contemplate my words. Felling slightly victorious, I smile smugly. Looks like I didn’t need to call in a favor to God tonight after all.

“I did say that, and if Mark is anything like me, he’ll think it’s his right,” Maverick grunts, a disgusted expression filling his face.

My brows pinch together as I stare at him. I think he’s missing my point. I open my mouth to elaborate, but the words don’t come fast enough.

“That doesn’t mean she’ll give in,” Ghost says pointedly.

They’re harping on Tara taking Mark back when the bigger issue at hand seems to be that Mav’s worried his previous sins are about to wreak havoc on his relationship with his daughter. I focus my attention on Maverick and try to steer us back to the initial reason he’s sulking.

“Look, all I’m saying is that you shouldn’t worry about facing Tara. In a couple of days, she’ll forget all about this and she’ll still look at you like you’re an astronaut.”

I think that’s the reference he used. There was a line about stars and the moon. Shit

from outer space.

Maverick turns to Ghost.

“I told Mark karma was going to get him, that one day he’d realize what he lost, and it’d be his biggest regret.”

“Tara ain’t stupid,” Shady defends.

“No, she’s not, but she is forgiving,” Maverick says. “Just like her mother.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

I huff out a breath. These guys are more hardheaded than my pops.

“Right, and if the kid has any game whatsoever, he’ll wear her down,” I return. “It’s nothing against Tara, it’s the whole female species. They all want to fix us, and that makes them eager to give us a second chance. Even when we don’t deserve it.” My gaze darts from one man to another. “Can we stop drinking now? I mean, we’re all in agreement that she’s probably going to get back with him, right? No need to damage our livers anymore. I can call you an Uber.”

Ignoring me, Ghost stares at Maverick.

“It took Holly a long ass time before she forgave you. Tara will move on by then.”

“Holly moved on too,” Mav volleys. “And that didn’t stop me. I kept at her, man, even when I knew she was better off without me. I convinced myself I wasn’t chasing her but at times I even used my kids as an excuse to get a fix. I relented a little after she married Colt and got pregnant with Theo, but that’s only because every time I looked at her it felt like my heart was beating outside of my chest and I couldn’t stand

it. But if things didn't work out the way they did, I'd still be that desperate man fighting dirty for my second chance."

My shoulders slump in defeat. It's nights like this when I wish I would've gone into the family business. I lift the bottle of tequila to my lips and take a healthy swig.

Fuck it.

"You and Holly are different," Ghost argues.

"Ghost is right," Shady adds.

"Holly was a year younger than Tara is now when I first laid eyes on her, and I fucked around until she was eighteen."

I take another gulp, ignoring the burn in my stomach.

"Yeah, but when she turned eighteen you made her yours and you didn't stick your dick where it didn't belong," Shady argues.

"No, I waited until I put a fucking ring on her finger and two babies inside her before I did that," Mav sneers.

The room suddenly goes quiet, and I lower the bottle of tequila from my lips, my gaze trailing from one man to the next. I'm almost afraid to ask what they're thinking. That's why I let my mind wander back in time. A sense of déjà vu washes over me, and I recall a similar situation. But instead of keeping the memory to myself, I decide to share it with my brothers. Blame it on the cheap booze.

"You know I remember when my sister Carmella broke up with her high school sweetheart...I think his name was Gino or maybe Tony. Anyway, that doesn't matter.

The son of a bitch cheated on her the night before their prom. Now, there are two things you don't do to an Italian man." I lean over the bar and flip up my index finger. "The first is hurt his daughter..." I raise another digit. "...and the second is go after his wallet. Between Carmella's dress, the limo, and everything else—my pops went for a pretty penny. He started following my sister after that just to make sure she never spoke to him again."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Leftie questions.

I shrug, focusing on Maverick. "If you're so worried about Tara getting back with him, follow her around. I mean didn't you tell him you'd be the roadblock standing in his way?"

Maverick shakes his head.

"As much as I don't want Mark sniffing around Tara, she would hate me even more if I started following her around."

"What if you had someone else do it?" Ghost asks before draining his beer.

"Like a prospect?" Leftie asks.

Ghost lowers his beer and shrugs.

"I was thinking more along the lines of this guy," he says, jutting a thumb toward me.

Instantly my eyes go wide. I'm the last person who should be following her around, especially after I reacted the way that I did. It's like my subconscious took one look at Tara all grown up and decided she was mine.

"Me? Why me?" I shake my head violently. "No, no, no. Forget I said anything. It's a

horrible idea. Why does anyone listen to me?”

“To be fair, we usually don’t,” Leftie retorts.

“Yeah, well now isn’t a good time to start changing tactics,” I snap, heat creeping up my neck. Ghost can’t be serious. I’m half fucked in the head, and even I can think of five people who are better suited to act as a shield between Tara and Mark than me. People who didn’t lose their shit at the sight of her tonight. There’s no fucking way I’m putting myself in a position to ogle her every fucking day.

“You’re young and the least embarrassing choice,” Ghost continues. “Every girl wishes she had an older brother—you can be Tara’s stand-in.”

I stare at Maverick, my pulse hammering. He’s drunk. There’s no logical part of his brain that will let him go through with this... right?

“You’re not seriously considering having me shadow your daughter, are you?” When he doesn’t respond, I swipe my hand over my face and groan. “Fuck, you’re serious.”

I should remind him that there is a cartel gunning for us, and that my efforts would be best suited elsewhere, but I’d only be wasting my spit. While everyone else has been surveying Valeria’s local stash houses, and identifying all members of her hit squad, I’ve been watching his kid’s pet lizard.

Yeah, you fucking read that right.

Just call me Dr. Doolittle.

“You can’t have Capone tail Tara,” Shady interjects. “Holly will fucking kill you.”

Those words hold weight and after a few agonizing moments, Mav reluctantly agrees

that facing the wrath of Holly would be a far worse consequence. I release a breath I didn't even realize I was holding and reach for the crappy tequila again. This time, I chug it like my life depends on it.

“That's why we're not going to tell Holly the truth.”

Tequila splutters from my mouth, and I lower the bottle.

“I'll tell her things are escalating with the cartel, and adding protection detail to Tara is just a precaution until I decide to put the club on full lockdown. She won't question that, especially if I keep Leftie with her and the boys for the time being.” He takes another swig of whiskey before continuing, “It's not a complete lie. Got some intel today on the cartel that I planned on sharing before Tara called. I'll explain more of that tomorrow when everyone is here, but my focus needs to be on how we're going to respond to their advances. I can't be distracted worrying about my daughter.”

Why no one is responding to this lunacy is beyond me. I turn to Shady, expecting him to be the voice of reason, but he remains stoic. The motherfucker is a traitor, drinking the same Kool-Aid as the rest of these fools.

I glance back at Maverick, my jaw clenching slightly. His eyes meet mine, and he raises his empty glass in mock salute.

“Consider it a promotion,” he says. “As of now you're officially off lizard duty and on Tara duty.”

CHAPTER THREE

TARA

The only thing worse than having caught your boyfriend cheating on you is seeing the evidence of it splashed over social media.

Notification after notification.

Video after video.

Tag after tag.

My phone hasn't stopped pinging and there doesn't seem to be any end in sight. If my mom's Aunt Fern were still alive, she'd call this a classic case of 'be careful what you wish for' and tell me I manifested this nightmare by sharing too much of my life on social media.

In a quest to go viral and become the next TikTok sensation, I followed the guidelines set by the most successful content creators and posted to my socials daily. In the beginning, I posted all kinds of content and followed the hottest trends, trying to find my niche and an algorithm that liked me.

On a whim, I posted a video of me and Mark. It was a tidbit from one of our first dates, and my views skyrocketed. I thought I struck gold. I started posting less of myself, and more of us. He was a good sport about it. He never gave me a problem with making a video and took part in all the viral challenges I asked him to. When I

presented the idea of a series to him, he jumped right on board and ‘ A Day In The Life Of Your Favorite High School Sweethearts’ was born.

It really took off and our popularity soared after our homecoming proposal. So much so that if I were eighteen, I’d be eligible to receive compensation from the Creator Fund on TikTok. But even if I were able to claim a piece of that pie, I’m not so sure that’s even a possibility after tonight.

I’m learning most of my followers—the ones I’ve never met—well, they actually can’t stand me and the only reason they follow me or like my stuff is because of Mark. I’ve been their bridge to the up-and-coming stud who doesn’t post much to his own socials. Their ticket to the guy behind the highlight reels all the D1 colleges are fighting over.

And then there’s the people I do know.

Fellow students and such.

They’ve spent the last couple of hours capitalizing on my heartbreak, documenting everything from Mark walking off with Claudia, to me finding him fucking her against a tree in the park. My outburst that followed has been stitched countless times, and I’ve been labeled a self-centered bitch as a result.

You tell one guy to fuck off as you found him with his pants around his ankles and his dick in another girl and suddenly, you’re the bad guy.

Someone, please, make it make sense.

It’s like everyone believes I deserved to have my boyfriend cheat on me.

A girl from the volleyball team posted a thirst trap video of Mark with a caption that

read, “ Did she really think he was going to wait for her to wake up one day and decide she didn’t want to be the only virgin left in Knightdale anymore?”

The commentators all agreed he deserved someone willing to service his dick and more girls from Knightdale High decided to engage, feeding the masses on social media.

I heard she wouldn’t even blow him.

That came from a girl in my English class, and it was a total lie. I might not have been very good at it, but I did blow him. Twice and I only gagged once. Although, I hear guys like that so maybe I should consider it progress.

My mom turns her car into the compound that acts as the sacred ground of my dad’s motorcycle club. A place I consider a second home, filled with people who are family. Some through blood and others through choice. Almost all of them came running when I called my parents in hysterics last night.

And when I say hysterics, I mean I could very well be a contender for an Oscar.

They probably assumed I was in grave danger. I can only imagine what they thought then when they realized all my limbs were intact, and the reason I called my parents was because my boyfriend is a cheating pig.

I inwardly groan.

How fucking embarrassing.

“I’ll wait in the car,” I tell my mom, shrinking back against the passenger seat. I drop my sunglasses onto my nose and silently pray none of the members of my dad’s club are lurking around the lot.

“Not today, sweetheart,” mom says as she parks haphazardly across from the line of Harley’s. “Your dad called a family meeting.”

Judging by her tone, she isn’t too happy about that, which can only mean trouble is on the brink. That’s nothing new, though. These days it seems like the Satan’s Knights are always at war with someone. It’s just part of the life. When dad says we’re on lockdown, everyone hunkers down at the clubhouse while we ride out whatever shitstorm has found it’s way to the club.

By the second day I want to pull my hair out, but that’s because it interferes with my social life, and spending time with Mark. But seeing as my social life is basically non-existent now that my relationship went up in flames, this lockdown might be the perfect distraction.

I can hide away in one of the rooms and watch TikTok’s until my eyes bleed. Nothing like a good dopamine fix to make you forget your life is a dumpster fire.

“Let’s go,” my mom urges, patting my thigh.

We make our way out of the car and into the clubhouse. The second we cross the threshold my little brothers come charging at us, Nerf guns locked and loaded, foam bullets scattered all around the common area. Before Shepard can take a shot at us, my mom closes her hand around the barrel of the toy gun.

“I thought I banned these things.”

“You banned them at home,” Shep clarifies. “But since we slept here last night, and no one seems to know what to do with us, Uncle Leftie sent Capone to get us some guns. He loaded us up too.” He glances at me. “I heard dad say you broke up with Mark. Does that mean Theo can shoot him in the nuts now?”

“I wish someone would shoot him in the nuts with a real gun.”

I’d do it myself, but orange isn’t my color.

Mom takes the gun from Shep. “No one is shooting anyone in the nuts. Now get rid of these things. If we’re gonna be stuck here for days, I am not going to be dodging foam bullets.”

“Better those than real ones,” I mutter.

My mom shoots me a glare. “Really, Tara?”

I shrug. It appears my lovely mother has lost her patience with me. I can’t say I blame her; I’ve been pretty unbearable since Uncle Shady and Ghost dropped us off at the house last night. One minute I’m a puddle of tears, the next I’m on a rampage, deleting photos and throwing the sweatshirt Mark gave me out the window.

She took pity on me at first and introduced me to a song she played on repeat when she learned my dad had been with another woman. It turns out Breaking Dishes , by Rihanna is a banger for breakups.

Eventually the tears returned, and we ate our weight in dark chocolate. At some point I fell asleep, but when I woke up and checked my social media, I lost my shit, and it’s been touch and go ever since. My dad summoning us here didn’t help the situation.

Mom is perimenopausal, and I’m PMSing my way through a breakup.

We’re doomed.

Suddenly a slew of bullets wiz past my head. Theo takes cover behind the bar, and Shepard spins around like a ninja, cocking his Nerf gun on his shoulder to fire back.

My gaze darts toward the assailant, and I automatically perk up when I see its Capone, the youngest member of the Satan's Knights, and the only one who completely ignores me.

"That's for jumping on me this morning," he shouts, repeatedly pulling the trigger on Shepard. "And that's for shooting me in the ass while I was in the shower." He sends another bullet flying. "And that...that's for shits and giggles." He laughs manically, sending another round of foam bullets through the air. When he finally runs out of ammo and the boys plead for mercy, he pushes the protective goggles to the top of his head and puffs out his chest, raising his torpedo of a Nerf gun above his head in victory.

"Are you done, you big dope?" My mom asks, placing her hands on her hips as she sternly looks at Capone.

A startled expression fills his face as his eyes shoot to where we're standing, and he quickly drops his gun.

"Shit. I didn't know you were here," he says, his gaze darting from my mom to me, then back to her. Shep takes advantage of the opportunity and blasts him right in the side of the head.

"Shep! That's enough," my mom shouts. "Where the hell is Maverick?"

Capone points to the chapel. "He's in there with Leftie, Ghost, and Shady."

It's a known fact that when the door to the chapel is closed, no one is allowed to interrupt or enter, except my mother. Without skipping a beat, she shoves the gun under her arm and marches straight for the chapel.

"Boys, clean up this mess." She glances over her shoulder, pinning Capone with a

narrowed look. “That includes you too.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Satisfied, she turns her back to him and storms into the chapel. Shep takes off without cleaning anything, and Theo follows him.

“Hey, come back here,” Capone calls. “I’m not cleaning all this shit by myself.”

I roll my eyes behind the safety of my sunglasses. He must not have any younger siblings.

“There isn’t a shot in hell those two are coming back to clean their mess. I’ll give you a pro tip, though—grab a broom. It’s easier to sweep these little fuckers up than trying to collect them all by hand.”

He quirks an eyebrow but remains silent. Typical for him. I think I can safely count on one hand how many times he’s spoken to me. Back when I had a crush on him, it would bother me, but then I met Mark. Things got serious between us, and I forget all about the silly crush I had on a man who didn’t even acknowledge my existence.

Feeling foolish for even speaking to him, I cross my arms over my chest and stride for the hallway. I take three steps before my mom pokes her head from the entryway of the chapel. Our eyes lock but my dad is the one who calls my name, asking for me join them.

“You too, Capone,” he adds.

I peer at my mother, trying to figure out why I’m being summoned, but her poker face is firmly intact which means she’s stepped into role as the queen of the Satan’s Knights. She gives nothing away when she’s in that mode.

“After you,” Capone’s deep voice sounds, jolting me slightly. I glance over my shoulder, and there he is, towering over me, making me feel smaller than I actually am. His dark brown eyes meet mine for a fleeting second before he tips his chin toward the chapel, silently commanding me to get my ass in gear.

I spin around and make my way inside. My gaze cuts to the head of the long wooden table where my dad is seated. The gavel my mom had custom designed for him sits in front of him, right beside the ashtray that houses his favorite cigar.

He lifts his chin, his eyes softening as soon as they land on me.

“How you doing, baby?” He rasps.

I round the table, bypassing my uncle, and give him a quick kiss on the cheek. I was surprised when he didn’t come home last night, but after speaking with my mom, I realized everything that happened between Mark and I, hit a little too close to home for my parents.

“Surviving.” I turn to my uncle. “Thanks for taking me home last night.”

“You never have to thank me,” he says, eyeing me curiously. “You gonna take those glasses off so I can see your eyes?”

“Be careful what you ask for, Uncle Shady.” I pull my glasses from my face, revealing my swollen eyes. “It’s not pretty.”

“Bullshit,” my father grunts. “You’re beautiful. Puffy eyes and all.”

“I agree,” Uncle Shady says. “And it’s a helluva lot better than seeing you with tears streaming down your face.”

I shrug. “It’s still early in the day. Give it an hour before the mood swing goes into full effect.” Bringing my attention back to my dad, I watch my mom slide onto his lap. He instantly winds his arm around her waist, pulling her even closer to him.

My parents didn’t travel an easy road to get where they are today. They suffered a lot of heartache, and made some epic mistakes, but their love for one another was always obvious no matter how hard they tried to hide it. I’ve always been envious of that and the way my dad looks at her. As much as I want to believe Mark looked at me like that, he didn’t. He looked at me like I was a shiny object, one he couldn’t wait to play with, not something he couldn’t live without. I think my subconscious knew that, and maybe that’s another reason I didn’t go all the way with him.

“Here,” Uncle Shady says, interrupting my thoughts. He rises from his chair, and motions for me to take a seat. The room goes quiet, and everyone stares at me for a moment. It’s weird, and uncomfortable. I feel like I’m display.

“So are you recruiting prospects or something? Because I’m not really in the market to become a biker.” I pause when a thought pops into my head. “Wait a minute—did you finally come to your senses? Are you going to let me start a TikTok channel for the club?”

“Jesus Christ,” Capone mumbles. “Make it stop.”

My gaze snaps to him, and I narrow my eyes. I think I liked it better when he didn’t know I existed. “Excuse me?”

Leaning against the door, he crosses his arms against his chest, his chocolate brown eyes peering at me like I’m some kind of idiot.

“A TikTok channel? In case you’ve been living under a rock the last seventeen years, we’re trying to fly under the radar, not go viral.”

When he puts it like that, I feel like a giant fool. My cheeks flame and I try to think of a smart retort, but my mind goes blank.

“I...it was just a joke.” It wasn’t. BikerTok is a thing. I’m not about to share that now, though.

My dad slams his fist against the table, startling me, but when I turn to him, his eyes are lasered in on Capone, and he looks like he just might kill him.

“Watch your tone when you’re talking to my daughter,” Dad warns. “Tara’s just trying to be helpful.”

“Alright well, maybe she can put her phone down for five minutes and we can have her start filing the serial numbers off our guns then.”

I balk at him. The audacity on this guy is off the charts.

“I resent that. I’ve been here for like twenty-five minutes and I haven’t even looked at my phone once.”

“What the fuck is your problem?” Dad growls.

Closing his eyes, Capone drags in a deep breath. When he opens them again, he meets my father’s glare. “I’m sorry.”

I don’t know too much about him, but I do know when a person is sincere, and Capone is totally full of shit. He isn’t sorry about anything.

“It isn’t me you need to apologize to,” Dad says before turning his attention to me. “Excuse Capone, baby. He had a long night. Babysitting your dad isn’t an easy job.”

That piques my interest. “Why was he babysitting you and not the lizard?”

“Oh, she’s got jokes,” Capone grunts. “Great.”

“The only joke here is you,” I spat.

“For fuck’s sake,” my dad mumbles. “You two are like oil and vinegar.”

“This isn’t going to work,” Mom says.

I have no idea what she means by that, but I’m losing my patience with all of them. I can’t believe I got out of bed for this. I mean I should get a pass. My boyfriend humiliated me. I should be allowed to sulk for a week. Biker enemies be damned.

“Can I please go?”

“Not so fast, sweetheart. There’s a reason I called you in here, and if you and Capone could stop bickering, I’d be happy to clue you in.”

I cross my arms against my chest and slink back in the chair.

“I’m listening.”

“Things with the club have taken a turn, and I’ve made the decision to put everyone in the family on a soft lockdown. Leftie and Wiz will be tailing mom and the boys, and Capone will be your shadow until I say otherwise.”

My eyes blow wide. “You’re kidding me, right?” I look from him to my mother, then my uncle. When no one speaks up, I glare at my dad. “He is not following me around. Are you trying to ruin my life?”

“That’s a bit dramatic, Tara,” Mom says. “Dad is trying to keep everyone safe. You’re old enough to know the drill by now.”

“Um...yeah, I’m familiar with the drill when it entails all of us hunkering down here for days on end. After last night, I’m the laughingstock of this godforsaken town and now you want him to be my babysitter. Are you kidding me? I rather crawl under a rock and die.”

My dad sighs.

“Tara, it’s temporary. You won’t even know he’s there.”

Those sound like some famous last words, and I’m calling bullshit.

CHAPTER FOUR

TARA

So apparently I lied, it turns out there are a lot of things that are worse than catching your boyfriend cheating on you and a bunch of people talking shit about you on social media is low on the list. Things like coming face to face with the cheating prick for the first time.

If I hadn't spent all day fighting with my parents over my new accessory, AKA Capone, I might have prepared myself for the moment I spotted Mark and Claudia together by the lockers. He looked right at me, and acted as though I didn't exist.

That stung.

The wounds split open, never to be patched again, and it felt like salt was poured over them every time I changed classes and saw them together. It also didn't help that I was the talk of the school. Some pitied me, but most thought I got what I had coming. I managed to tune most of that noise out, but during lunch I heard Christy Sanders mention my dad's club, and I lost my shit.

The only reason he stayed with her for as long as he did was because her father is the president of the Satan's Knights. Someone said she called him to come and get her and he wound up slashing Mark's tires. Can you imagine?

That was news to me and highly unlikely. My dad would take blood before he took a tire.

Still, my lunch tray accidentally slipped from my hands when I went to throw it out, splattering marinara sauce all over her white shirt.

As gratifying as that was, I needed a break from all the humiliation. Putting on a brave face was exhausting. So when my best friend Sadie suggested we cut out the rest of the day, I jumped at the chance. Her dad doesn't track her every move like my parents do, so we took her car, and left mine at school. I even stashed my phone in the center console, that way if my mom decides to check the Life 360 app she will be none the wiser.

I sling my backpack over my shoulder and loop my arm through Sadie's as we enter the Waffle House and find a booth. When you grow up in Knightdale, Waffle House becomes a childhood staple, and you're raised to believe that there isn't a crisis that can't be contained by the power of pecan waffles and a side of hash browns.

The waitress comes over, placing two glasses of water on the table and we rattle off our order. Once she's gone, Sadie regards me with a curious look.

"So are we going to talk about it?" she questions as she works the wrapper off her straw. Peeling her eyes away from me, she inspects the straw and frowns. "I hate these paper things. They melt in your mouth."

"First world problems," I tease before reaching into my bag. I pull out a handful of plastic straws and hold them out for her to take one. I hate those paper things too.

"Care to explain why you're hoarding plastic straws?" She asks as she plucks one from the bunch.

"Sally's BBQ hasn't gone green yet, so anytime I'm there, I grab a bunch of straws."

A perk to my father's club being a silent partner in one of the best barbeque joints in

North Carolina.

She drops her straw into her glass and points a finger at me.

“You’re single now, you can’t go around telling people you steal straws from restaurants. They’ll think you’re a spinster waiting to adopt a cat.”

“A simple thank you would’ve been the proper response,” I mutter before I take a sip of my own drink. “And to answer your original question—no, I don’t want to talk about Mark anymore.”

Her perfectly arched eyebrows pinch together, and she shakes her head.

“Fuck Mark,” she says, her eyes darting over my shoulder. “I was talking about Captain Hottie over there by the counter.”

Narrowing my eyes, I glance over my shoulder to see who she’s referencing, and I find Capone sitting at the counter. My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I study his strong profile. He needs a shave, but even with all that scruff—he’s still hot. It’s annoying as all hell.

Why are all the hot guys such dicks?

“I’m pretty sure he followed us from school,” Sadie reveals pointedly, drawing my attention back to her. “So what is it this time? Another crazy lock down? Is this where we part ways, and you go into your tower for a week until your dad feels it’s safe enough to send you back into the wild?”

Her words aren’t meant to be insulting. Sadie and I have been friends for nearly half our lives, she’s familiar with how my dad’s club operates and has seen me through lockdowns, arrests, and even a few deaths.

My gaze snaps back to Capone and I watch as he tucks his menu behind the salt and pepper shakers on top of the counter. The waitress saunters over to him, a flirty smile playing on her lips as she leans close to him.

Turning to Sadie, I reply, “So because my life is one embarrassing shitshow after another, my dad decided to spring a new babysitter on me. We’re not on lockdown yet, but it’s coming, and until it does, everyone in my family has a shadow. That one is mine.”

“Lucky.”

“Not really. He may be pretty to look at but when he speaks, he’s a giant dick.”

“Ah hah! So she finally admits he’s hot.”

Just because someone doesn’t openly say something, doesn’t mean they don’t think it.

“I’m not blind, Sadie. Every girl with a pulse knows Capone is hot.” Dragging my hair away from my face, I tie it up in a messy bun on top of my head and sigh. “But yesterday when my dad sprung the news that he would be following me around, he acted like a jerk. To him, I’m just an unruly teenager with a fascination for TikTok. If he had it his way, he wouldn’t be caught dead with me.”

Which is rich considering I walked in on him having a Nerf gun war with my brothers. He isn’t exactly the poster child for maturity.

Sadie’s phone dings inside her bag, halting the conversation. She digs for it and my gaze cuts back to Capone. The flirty waitress is gone, but he still doesn’t look my way or acknowledge my presence.

I guess my dad wasn't kidding when he said I'd barely notice him. Unless it's a total coincidence that he's here. I mean, I didn't see him enter the restaurant, and he isn't supposed to be following me until I get out of school. There's no way he could've known I cut out. Maybe he has a thing going on with the waitress.

"Shit," Sadie hisses, drawing my eyes back to her. "I completely forgot I have a meeting with my guidance counselor last period. I can't miss it, or they'll call my dad. We have to cancel our order. I'll drop you at your car back at school."

We both turn to flag down the waitress but my gaze locks with Capone's instead. I guess he finally got bored of staring down the waitress' shirt and decided to take in his surroundings.

He climbs off the stool, and my pulse quickens. I'm not ready to go a couple of rounds with him just yet.

"Looks like you've been spotted by Captain Hottie," Sadie murmurs. "Wish we could stay to see how this pans out."

Sadie grabs her backpack and loops it over her shoulder as she starts to slide out of the booth. "Hello? Did you hear me? We gotta go."

Oh, I heard her alright. I just can't seem to fucking move.

"Well, well, if it isn't the princess herself," Capone croons as he comes to a stop right behind Sadie, towering over her like some sort of dark knight.

"We were just leaving," Sadie says just as the busty waitress appears next to Capone with our order.

"Two orders of pecan waffles, with hashbrowns and a side of sausage."

“I’m sorry,” Sadie begins. “There’s been a change of plans. I have to leave. Is there any way we can we take it to go?”

“No,” I blurt, finally tearing my eyes away from Capone to stare at the waitress. “You can leave it.” She nods, setting our plates on the table, then she turns and touches Capone’s arm. “Yours should be ready any minute.”

“Can you bring it over here?” he asks, keeping his eyes on me.

“Uh...yeah. Sure.” Her lips turn down as her hand drops away from Capone’s arm, and she wipes her palms against her apron. “I’ll go grab your drink too.”

“Appreciate it, babe.”

She hesitates for about ten seconds then clears her throat and heads back behind the counter. My cheeks heat under the weight of Capone’s stare and I try to figure my next move. Why did I tell the waitress to leave the food? And why the hell did he tell her to bring his food here? I could never sit through a meal with him. Not without killing him or staring too long.

“Okay, well this is weird,” Sadie says, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “Tara, I have to go. If I stay any longer, I’m going to be late. How are you going to get back to your car?”

I look up at her only to laugh at the way her eyes are bulging as she tries to silently communicate for me to get the hell out of the booth.

“I’ve got her,” Capone says. “You can go.”

Sadie and I both look at him, but only one of us stares at him with a slack jaw. She turns back to me, raising a brow. “Um...is that okay with you?”

“Sure,” I say, trying my best to play it cool. “I’m stuck with him for the foreseeable future anyway. After this I might make him take me to Target.” I look back at Capone. “How do you feel about shopping?”

“I hate it.”

“Good, then we’ll go to the mall.”

“Ok, well since you two seem to have it all figured out, I’m going to go.” A mischievous grin spreads across her lips as she leans down, speaking quietly against my ear.

“You know what they say...the best way to get over someone is to get?—”

Narrowing my eyes, I cut her off.

“Don’t finish that sentence,” I hiss.

“I was just going to say the best way to get over someone is to get on the back of someone else’s bike,” she whispers before straightening to her full height.

She has no idea how sacred the men of the Satan’s Knights consider their bikes or just how precious that back seat truly is. My parents got divorced—my mom even got remarried—but my dad never put another woman on the back of his bike. I always found that so odd. He had another woman in his bed before the ink officially dried on their divorce papers, but his bike only belonged to my mom.

I shake my head, dismissing those thoughts. I romanticize their relationship entirely too much.

“Goodbye, Sadie.”

She gives me a cheeky grin. “Ciao!” She glances behind her at Capone, giving him a little wave. “Take care of my friend.”

Then she’s gone, leaving me alone with the big brute of a man who is too handsome for his own good, and two orders of pancakes.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

With a bored expression on his face, and his dark brows pinched tight, he stretches his long arms wide across the top of the booth. At the motion, his t-shirt stretches over his bulging biceps.

Don’t stare. Whatever you do, don’t fucking stare.

I repeat those words over and over, and still my gaze zeroes in on the tattoo that crawls along the inside of his right arm. I can’t make out what it says, but I’m fairly certain it’s not English.

Maybe it’s Italian.

I could ask him but I wouldn’t want him to think I’m interested.

“Let me guess, you’re one of those girls who doesn’t eat in front of a guy.”

That snaps my attention away from the tattoo, and I glare at him.

“I bet I can out eat you any day of the week.”

His lips quirk and he winks at me. “I don’t know about that, princess. I like to eat.”

There’s something about the way he says that last sentence that makes it sound dirty.

Mark never went down on me. He said it had nothing to do with me, that the act itself grossed him out. It never bothered me. I accepted it and I guess that's mainly because I don't know what I'm missing, but I'd be lying if I said I'm not curious, especially since Sadie says it's the best feeling in the world. She prefers it over sex.

I stare at Capone for a beat. I want to ask him what he likes about it, but I stop myself.

He pushes my plate closer to me and reaches for the syrup, generously pouring it over my waffles.

"Eat," he orders, gruffly.

"I don't like syrup," I deadpan. It's a lie. I love syrup. But fucking with him might stop me from asking him insane questions.

"Bullshit. Everyone loves syrup on their waffles."

I dig in, cutting through the fluffy goodness with my fork. Just as I take my first bite, the waitress appears with Capone's order, placing a tall glass of chocolate milk and two dishes in front of him. One is stacked high with chocolate chip waffles and the other with peanut butter chip.

Hmm... I guess someone has a sweet tooth.

"Your bacon will be right out, sugar," she croons as she leans over him to rearrange the plates, giving him another opportunity to ogle her tits. Capone's eyes cut away from her cleavage and he winks at her before she saunters away, making a deliberate attempt to sashay her hips with every step she takes.

I don't think she needs to try as hard as she is. He looks like he would be happy to

screw her in the bathroom when her shift is over.

“So why aren’t you in school?”

His question forces me to tear my eyes away from the waitress, and I watch as he pops a forkful of waffle into his mouth.

“You’ve never cut out of school?”

“Of course I have.”

“Then you know there are a bunch of reasons why I’m not there.”

He hums thoughtfully, taking another bite. The waitress returns with his side of bacon, and this time she gives his shoulder a squeeze before she moves onto the next table. My grip on my fork tightens.

“I didn’t really peg her to be your type,” I mumble, stabbing my waffle.

He barks out a laugh.

“Now, what would you know about my type, princess ?”

“You usually go for brunettes.” I tuck a flyaway strand of hair behind my ear, twirling it around my finger for a moment. “Not mousey brown like mine, but dark and lush like Megan Fox.”

Surprise filters across his features and he raises an eyebrow.

“You keeping tabs on me, princess?” he asks, amusement in his tone.

“You’re far more entertaining than Leftie.”

The corners of his mouth turn up slightly. “I won’t argue with you there.”

He reaches for his glass, chugging the chocolate milk like he’s dying of thirst. It’s such an odd choice of drink for someone who prides himself on being such a badass. Draining the rest of the milk, he sets the empty glass on top of the table and leans forward.

“When you get out of diapers and start dating real men, you’ll learn variety is the spice of life.”

Just when I think we might be able to be civil, he strikes below the belt.

“When I get out of diapers?”

He eyes me for a second then starts to attack the peanut butter waffle.

“I didn’t stutter, did I?” he volleys over a mouthful of deliciousness.

“I’ll be eighteen soon enough.”

“My apologies. You’re practically ancient.”

I slam my fork onto the table. “What the hell is your problem with me?”

He steals a sausage link from my plate and pops it into his mouth. His jaw works as he chews, and the anger in me rises to new heights as it becomes clear he doesn’t think I deserve an answer.

“You’re an asshole,” I hiss.

“Because I stole one of your sausages?”

He may be pretty, but he sure is dumb if he thinks this is about sausage.

“Fuck the sausage and fuck you too. In case you need a reminder, I didn’t ask my dad for you to follow me around, and I sure as hell didn’t invite you to sit with me. You came over here on your own accord and told Sadie you’d take me back to my car.”

“Thanks for the recap.”

I push my mostly full plate toward him, tamping down the urge to actually dump the contents over his head, and signal for the busty waitress.

She makes her way over to us, her eyes bouncing from Capone to me.

“Need something?”

“Yes, can I have my check please?” I grab my backpack and open the front zipper to grab my wallet.

“Ignore her, Wendy, she’s just showing her age.”

Oh, so Tits Magee has a name. Fantastic .

I stop digging in my bag and shoot him a glare. Screw throwing the dish at him, I’m ten seconds from pouring the syrup over his head.

“I’ll take a refill on the chocolate milk, and while you’re at it why don’t you bring her a glass too.”

I smack my hand against the table, which is about as effective as a toddler stomping

its foot.

“I don’t want chocolate milk, and I said I’m leaving.” I look at Wendy. “Can I please have the check?”

“Sure thing.” She smiles slyly, slipping her hand inside the front pocket of her apron, and hands me my check. “I’ll be right back with your chocolate milk, sugar.”

Before I can do any more damage to my suffering ego, I slide out of the booth, dropping enough money to cover my check and a tip. I’m about to flee when Capone jumps out of the booth. He tags my wrist, and spins me around, caging me against the table.

“Sit down,” he grunts, his breath wisping across my lips

“I don’t take orders from you,” I spat.

“Hmm...” He angles his head, his tongue slicking over his teeth. “Might be fun.”

I narrow my eyes and snap, “What?”

“Ordering you around. It might be fun.”

My eyes widen as my anger flares. I try to leave, but he widens his stance, bracketing me not only with his muscular arms, but with his thick denim clad thighs too.

“Let me go,” I demand, clenching my teeth. “You’re making a scene.”

“Are you going to sit?”

“Fuck no.”

He inches closer, his eyes darkening slightly as they bounce around, taking in every inch of my face before they finally lock with mine. The air suddenly becomes too thick, and the noise filling the restaurant seems to be muffled. All I can hear is the sound of our breaths—heavy and ragged.

“Thought I imagined it,” he growls. His jaw clenches and shakes his head. “That fire I saw in your eyes that night in the woods—I thought I imagined it, but it’s there, isn’t it, princess? You just need someone to ignite the flame.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about. But I can’t seem to focus. He’s way too close, and for someone who doesn’t really have sensory issues, I’m currently feeling very overstimulated.

Suddenly, he releases his grip on the edge of the table and takes a step backward. He doesn’t break our stare as he shoves his hands into the front pockets of his jeans, making it easy to detect the mischievous glint in his eyes.

It’s dare from him to me and I never back down from a dare.

CHAPTER FIVE

CAPONE

A while back I asked Maverick if I could borrow one of his kids to pass off to my Nonna as my own. His seventeen-year-old daughter was not who I had in mind, and since we're clearing the air, I want to remind everyone that when I suggested he keep a close eye on her after that little douchebag cheated on her, I didn't mean my eyes—eyes that are known to wander where they're not supposed to. And while today's outfit is a little less revealing than what she had on the night we rescued her from that cheating prick, my eyes still don't seem to comprehend that she's jailbait.

It's becoming a real fucking problem and the number one reason why I've been such a dick to her.

I should've let her walk out of the restaurant. Maverick would think I suck at my job, and he'd put somebody else on her.

But no. I had to taunt and tease.

Get under her skin like she's gotten under mine.

Now she's all riled up and I have no idea what to do with her.

“Put your money away,” I growl, stabbing a piece of my peanut butter waffle. Without looking at Tara, I pop it into my mouth and chew.

“I can pay for my own waffles,” she sasses, pushing the money toward me. I pause mid chew and stare at her pretty face. She’s not wearing much makeup today, revealing patches of freckles I didn’t know she had. I also didn’t realize how long her eyelashes were or that there were flecks of gold and the subtle hints of jade in her brown eyes.

When I got her to sit back in the booth, I made a promise to myself that I wouldn’t look at her.

I didn’t even last two minutes and now here I am finding miniscule pops of color in her eyes.

It’s safe to say I’ve lost my mind.

I swallow the piece of waffle in my mouth and slap my hand over the bills, sliding them back to her.

“Did I say you couldn’t?” She opens her mouth to snap at me, but I hold up a hand, halting whatever smart remark she’s about to deliver. She’s feisty as fuck, and I like it a little too much. “Your father would kill me if I let you pay for your own meal.”

He’d string me by the balls if he knew the thoughts racing through my mind, but I digress.

“You can fight me on a lot of things, and I might even enjoy it, but this one is on me.” I eye her plate. She’s only taken a few bites of her waffle, and I didn’t really give her a chance to touch the side of sausage she ordered. I fucking crushed that shit, right after I finished devouring her friend’s food.

“Besides, you’ve hardly eaten anything. It would be criminal of me.”

She glances at the barely touched food on her plate, and I take the opportunity to stare at the freckles that dot the bridge of her nose.

I wonder how many there are.

It's got to be at least a dozen, and that nose ring—I like that too.

Lifting her eyes back to mine, her pouty little mouth twists into a scowl as she crosses her arms against her chest.

“I’m not really hungry.”

I shrug and reach for her plate. “Your loss. If you ain’t gonna eat, I am.”

“Go for it, but I’m taking your chocolate milk.”

“Oh, no.” I press a hand to my heart. “Not my chocolate milk.”

Ignoring me, she grabs the glass of chocolate milk Wendy brought me. I watch as she searches her backpack for a moment, then she pulls out a bunch of straws.

“You carry your own straws with you?” I ask, mildly amused.

“Don’t judge me,” she says. “I don’t like the taste of paper in my mouth.”

She drops the straw into the glass and takes a sip. My eyes betray me, and I stare at her lips for a little too long. When I finally snap out of it, I start attacking her waffle. A comfortable silence settles between us as I eat, but it only lasts about a minute.

“So you and the waitress...”

“What about it?”

She plays with the straw, twirling it around in the glass of ice, avoiding eye contact with me as she worries her lower lip between her teeth. Then her eyes slowly find mine, and I can’t fucking help but smile at the way her cheeks flush.

I like the fire, but I think I like this too.

Pushing her limits, seeing what she’ll give me—it’s a power play.

“You seem close,” she hedges.

I bark out a laugh which causes her cheeks to flame even more, and her eyes flit to mine, narrowing slightly. She’s cute as fuck when she’s mad.

“Why is that funny?”

I push the plates away from me and drop my forearms onto the table.

“If you have a question, ask it.”

“I was just making an observation.”

She quickly looks away, and I react instinctively, reaching across the table to cup her chin. I turn her head slightly, forcing her eyes to lock with mine.

“No, you made an observation because you were too chicken shit to ask what you were thinking.”

Her dainty little fingers wrap around my wrist, and she pulls my hand away from her chin.

“Okay, well, since you seem to know everything, tell me what I was thinking.”

“You were wondering if I fucked her.”

She cocks her head to the side and raises an eyebrow.

“Did you?”

Impressed with her bluntness, I give her the truth.

“Once.”

To her credit, she doesn’t react. She holds my gaze for another moment, then takes another sip of my chocolate milk.

“Was that so hard?” I press.

“Was what so hard?”

“Asking what was on your mind.”

Hesitating, she diverts her eyes.

“No,” she huffs. “I guess not.”

“Try it again.”

Her gaze snaps back to me.

“You want me to ask you another question?”

I nod.

“Make it a good one.”

She sighs, the pink in her cheeks fading only slightly as she leans her back against the booth and works her lower lip between her teeth. I’m a sucker for a lip biter.

“Do you uh...want to do it again? You know...with her. Is that why you came here?”

“I came here because you and your little friend decided to be a bunch of rebels and it’s my job to follow you around, but I’m not particularly interested in a repeat with Wendy.”

That answer must surprise her because her eyes widen.

“How come?” she asks. “I mean...it seems like she’d be totally game.”

I glance over at the counter where Wendy is pretending to refill the syrup bottles. Our eyes lock, and she gives me that flirty smile of hers.

“Oh, she’d jump on my cock. All I have to do is say the word. No questions asked.” I’m not trying to sound arrogant either. That shit is a fact. I bring my attention back to Tara. “Getting her off my cock once it’s over—now, that’s the problem.”

It took three weeks after we fucked for Wendy to realize it was a one and done type of situation.

I shudder at the memory. She popped up everywhere—Sally’s, the clubhouse, even Booker & Mann. No place was off limits to her. I’m glad I never took her back to my apartment. I probably would’ve found her camped out in the hallway.

“No one ever talks to me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m not the president’s daughter.”

Well, fuck. I guess I crossed a line there, didn’t I? The thing is, I forgot she was Maverick’s daughter for a moment. For a brief pause she was just a girl, and I was a guy who couldn’t ignore her any longer.

I lift my hand and scrub the side of my face.

“I guess I’m not like everyone else.”

A fact I’m starting to think might get me killed.

My phone rings and I reach into my kutte for it, groaning when I see it’s my mom. I silence it and set it down on the table. I’m sure she’ll leave a message.

“My turn,” I say, lifting my gaze back to Tara. “You got to ask me questions—some of them very personal. Now, I get to ask a few.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m not that interesting and even if I was, I’m not telling you anything.”

“Why not?”

“Mainly because I don’t trust you not to tell my parents.”

“What makes you think I won’t tell them I caught you cutting out of school?”

She shrugs. “You just told me you fucked the waitress. I highly doubt my dad would appreciate you having that kind of discussion with me.”

Amused, I cluck my tongue against the roof of my mouth. There’s the little spitfire from the other night.

“Are you blackmailing me, princess?”

She opens her mouth to respond, but gets distracted by my phone that lights up, alerting me of a voicemail.

“Aren’t you going to listen to that?”

I glance at the phone and tap the play button on the screen. Instead of hearing my mom’s voice, I hear my niece Sophia giggle.

“Uncle G, it’s me, Sophia. Grandma says you don’t love her anymore and don’t answer her calls so I’m calling you to...why am I calling him grandma?”

My moms voice sounds. “To tell him to come to your birthday.”

“That’s right,” Sophia says. “Don’t forget my birthday party is...grandma when is it?”

The corners of my lips curve, and I glance at Tara to see her smiling too.

“Friday,” my mom whispers.

“It’s Friday. Be there. And get me gift. Okay. Bye. Love you.”

The voicemail ends and I laugh, shoving the phone back inside my kutte.

“The Capizzone family takes birthdays very seriously,” I explain. “My mother especially. The woman has no chill whatsoever. My oldest nephew’s birthday is the day before Christmas Eve and last year she rented a fucking donkey to parade around the yard. The kid still thinks Dominic the Donkey climbed the hills of Italy just to be at his birthday party.”

Tara throws her head back and laughs. It rattles me for a moment, and all I can do is watch her.

The sound of her laughter...well, it’s nice.

Even if it’s at my expense.

And the smile that follows—that’s even nicer.

“I’m sorry,” she says. A blush stains her cheeks as she sobers up. “So, wait a minute...your real name starts with a G? Is It George?”

I’m not sure how we got here, but I’m not mad about it.

I shake my head. “Definitely not George.”

“It’s Garrett, isn’t it? Or maybe Grayson.”

I know I’m going to regret this, probably in more ways than one, but I feel compelled to share. I’m just not sure why. Maybe it’s the fact that she looks genuinely comfortable for the first time since she sat in the booth with me. Or maybe I just want to keep the excitement in her eyes. Either way, I decide to throw her a bone.

“My real name is Gianluca.”

Her eyes light up at the revelation and she smirks.

“That’s quite the mouthful.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. If she were any other girl, I’d tell her my name isn’t the only thing I’ve got that’s a mouthful.

“It is,” I agree. “That’s why the only people who call me that are my parents and my sisters. The kids call me Uncle G.”

“What should I call you?”

“Master,” I deadpan.

“Never happening.”

“Capone. You call me Capone.”

“I don’t know,” she singsongs. “I kinda like the sound of Gianluca.”

“Tara,” I warn.

“Oh, so I’m not princess , anymore?”

I sigh. “You’re a pain in the ass is what you are.”

Just then the bell rings, drawing my attention to the front door. A group of teens enter, but only one is familiar. My jaw tightens and my fists clench on top of the table as Mark slings an arm around some girl’s shoulders, pulling her closer to his side.

He lifts his head, and spots me, his face instantly paling.

I tip my chin. “How’s your car?”

It isn’t until Tara mutters a curse, that I finally snap out of it, and turn my attention back to her.

“That was you? ”

“If you’re referring to the four flats, yeah, that was me.”

Laughter bursts free and my brows pinch together in confusion.

“Christ,” I hiss. “What the hell is so funny about that?”

“Mark’s parents are the most uptight people I’ve ever met. They’re pretentious, and all about appearances. I’m just picturing Mark’s face—panicked and full of torment, explaining those four flats to his dad.”

Her laughter dies and she pulls her lower lip between her teeth once again as her gaze swings toward the group of cackling teens. The longer she stares at them, the more her expression transfixes. I can’t tell if she’s angry or just plain sad, but I know I don’t like it.

“Are you done?”

Her eyes snap back to me, and that’s when I notice they’re full of unshed tears.

Gritting my teeth, I slap my hands against my thighs. Fuck this place and fuck those little cunts. We’re out of here.

“You’re done.”

Sliding out of the booth, I reach into my back pocket and drop enough bills on the table to cover both checks. This time she doesn't argue. She just grabs her bag and slings it over her shoulder, eager to make a quick escape.

"Let's roll," I say gruffly, extending my hand toward her.

She quirks a brow, glancing down at my hand before lifting her eyes back to mine. "I'm not holding your hand."

I lean into her, my lips unintentionally brushing her ear when she turns her head slightly.

"Put a pin in the tantrum, princess. We got eyes on us. Now we can either give dickface and his friends something to laugh about or we can give them something to talk about, your call."

Pressing her hand to my chest, she shoves me back a step. I wait for the sass to spill from her pretty little lips, but she surprises me by sliding her hand into mine.

I don't bother to say goodbye to Wendy as I hold the door for Tara. I don't even turn around to give Mark another glare.

Once we're outside, I place my hand on the small of her back and lead her toward my Harley. I secure her bag to the back of my bike and hand her my helmet.

Her eyes latch with mine, and our fingers brush as she takes it from me.

"What's the difference?"

"Huh?"

“Between giving them something to laugh about verses giving them something to talk about?”

“You’ll see.”

She pulls the elastic tie from her hair and the messy bun falls free. Once again I find myself staring. It’s like I got front row tickets to a show I didn’t realize I was dying to see.

She shakes out her hair, and fits my helmet to her head, expertly snapping the chin strap into place.

I take a step forward, checking her work, my fingers grazing the side of her cheek as I tighten the strap just a little—every bit aware that I’m about to put precious cargo on the back of my bike.

When I’m satisfied the helmet is secure, I drop my hand away from her face and turn to my Harley. Throwing my leg over the seat, I grip the handlebars and wait for her to climb on. I don’t realize I’m holding my breath, until I feel her arms come around my middle and her tits press against my back.

Fuck.

“You good?” I ask, my tone sounds a lot gruffer than I intend.

She rests her chin on my shoulder, her breath tickling my ear.

“I’m good.”

My grip tightens around the handlebars as my engine roars to life. No girl... no fucking woman has ever been on the back of my bike. That knowledge causes my

pulse to pound. I glance back at the restaurant, easily spotting Mark through the window.

Fuck him.

Throttling the engine, I peel away from the Waffle House.

But not before lifting my middle finger to the fool who gave me the chance to carry his girl on the back of my bike.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am

CHAPTER SIX

CAPONE

“Thanks for getting me out of there,” she says as she tucks my helmet under her arm and brushes her fingers through her long brown hair.

Look away, Capone.

Look the fuck away.

By some miracle of God, I manage to listen to the tiny voice inside my head, but it doesn't help matters much. I feel just as rattled as I did thirty seconds ago when I killed the engine on my Harley. You would think the fucking bike was on fire by the way I jumped off the thing. But I needed to put some space between me and her because it felt like I was being burned alive.

The flames licking up my legs where Tara's thighs hugged mine.

Incinerating my kutte and branding my back where she pressed her perky little tits.

If I wasn't so sure I'd get myself into more trouble, I'd strip myself of my clothes and douse them in kerosene. I'd take a bath in bleach and pray her scent washed away.

I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me.

This is little Tara Burnside.

Maverick's daughter .

The princess of the Satan's Knights.

She's the picture of innocence and I'm the definition of filth.

I recite all those things over and over and tell myself to snap out of whatever the fuck this is. Then I glance back at her, and I really wish I didn't because seeing her straddle my bike, a bashful smile playing on her pretty pink lips, it's worse than hell.

One ride on the back of my bike and she's got me feeling unhinged, staring at the freckles on the bridge of her nose, wondering if she has them anywhere else on her body.

I tear my eyes away from her and focus on my helmet. How the fuck am I supposed to put that thing on my head ever again?

My eyes dart around the school parking lot, searching for her car.

"Where are you parked?"

"I'm in the next lot over. This one is for faculty only," she says.

I drag my eyes back to her, watching as she slides off my Harley, setting my helmet on the seat. I was so desperate to get rid of her, I didn't even realize I pulled into the wrong parking lot.

"I could take you over there," I mutter. The thought of her body clinging to mine again makes me break out into a sweat.

"It's not a far walk." She moves to the back of my bike, and bends over to untie her

bag from it, giving me a perfect view of her ass.

Jesus Christ.

If my crimes as an outlaw didn't already buy me a ticket to Hell, ogling Tara's ass is bound to do the trick.

"I got it," I growl, making my way toward her. I undo the bungee cords and release the bag. But instead of giving it to her, my fist tightens around the strap as I straighten to my full height. Unfortunately, my gaze snags on her chest. She appears to be wearing a bra today— a plus if her nipples weren't hard and visibly poking through the thin fabric of her tee. I guess she's not a fan of stuffing her bra with tissues like my sisters used to.

"I'll walk with you."

"Oh, that's okay." She holds out her hand for the bag, but I don't budge. I'm a glutton for punishment.

"Wasn't asking for permission, Tara."

Instead of leading the way to where her car is parked, she just stands there, crossing her arms against her chest, unintentionally exposing a hint of cleavage.

Fuck my life.

"Any day now," I growl.

"Did I do something wrong?"

Losing my patience, I turn my back to her and start to walk away. "I don't know what

you're talking about."

"Well, it's just... we seemed to be getting along before Mark showed up. It felt like we called a truce."

I stop in my tracks, muttering a curse. It's not her fault I can't control myself. That shit is on me. My jaw ticks and I grind my molars.

"I'm sorry. I'll lose the attitude." Nothing about that sounds apologetic though.

"I'm still sensing a bit of irritation from you. It's not a good vibe."

"For fuck's sake, I'm not irritated."

"Oh, so you're always this grumpy?" She uncrosses her arms and shrugs her shoulders. "I never noticed."

"Yeah, well, there's a lot I didn't notice about you either."

Like her perky tits, and that cinched waist. And let me not forget that ass...round, firm, and just fucking perfect. I clear my throat and force myself to focus.

"I guess that makes us even."

Lies.

So many fucking lies.

Her brows furrow with confusion for a second, then she snatches the bag from my hand, and steps around me.

“Thanks for the ride.”

As much as I'd like to leave her here so I can go home and bleach my eyes, I can't. Maverick was specific with his rules and unless she's with the family, or at the clubhouse, I need to stick close.

“Where are you going?” I call out.

“That's none of your business,” she says, not bothering to turn to face me. She continues to walk toward the other lot, and I follow like the gopher I am until she almost trips. My reflexes are quick, and I extend my hands, clutching her hips to steady her before she falls face first against the pavement.

Her hands cover mine as she tries to balance herself out, but the second she tries to put her weight on her right leg, her back falls against my chest.

“What's wrong?”

“I don't know,” she replies. “I think it's a Charlie horse or something.” She goes to straighten herself again, only managing to put weight on her left leg. Latching onto my arm, she stretches her right leg, bending it at her knee, and extending it slowly.

“It might be from the way I keep my legs on the bike. It happened the other night when Uncle Shady took me home too.”

“What did you do to make it go away then?” I ask.

She shakes her head as she continues to stretch her leg, only wincing slightly this time. “Nothing, it went away pretty quickly on its own.”

Still holding onto me, she lowers her foot back to the ground and slowly transfers her

weight.

“I think I’m okay,” she says, cautiously releasing my arm. She takes a few steps, and there is a visible gait to the way she walks.

“I’ll drive you home.”

She shakes her head. “No, I’m fine. Besides, don’t you have to follow me? If it happens again, I’ll just pull over.” She takes another few steps and her gait gets a little better. I stay close to her until we reach her car, then she turns to me. “I get it.”

Not following, I ask, “You get what?”

“The difference between giving people something to laugh about and giving them something to talk about. There’s a good chance I won’t be the butt of a cruel joke when I walk into school tomorrow. People will be too busy talking about how you flipped Mark the bird before you rode off with me on the back of your bike.” She flashes me a smile. “The tires were a nice shot, but that was a giant fuck you. And I’m not mad about it.”

That fucking smile is devastating to a guy like me.

I take the keys from her hand, and hit the locks, opening the door for her. My eyes lock with hers, and for a split second I get lost in the colors I find there.

“Glad I could oblige.” My gaze trails down her body, back to her leg. “Are you sure you’re okay to drive?”

“I’m fine.”

She tosses her bag in the car, and slides behind the wheel. Desperate to put some

distance between us, I slam the door shut without saying another word. Maybe tomorrow the big guy in the sky will take pity on me and make her go home straight after school. The less interaction the better.

“I don’t get you,” I call out to Tara as she stalks away from me.

In the last week it’s become a trend of ours. We get along for about ten minutes, then I get spooked and say something to sabotage the moment, and she takes off.

I’ve never chased a girl in my life, but I sure as fuck seem to be making up for lost time.

“What happened to the girl in the woods? The one that lunged for the guy who wronged her? Huh? Where the fuck did that girl go?”

Her steps come to a halt, and she turns to face me, narrowing her eyes into tiny slits.

“She’s standing in front of you, getting ready to kick you in the balls.”

I scoff. “Of course, because you’re so quick to give me shit, but you’re a fucking mouse when it comes to dickface.”

I wasn’t going to call her out on the fact that she’s cut out of school every day since the Waffle House. I was a senior in high school once, and I forged passes to my car every fucking day. I would tell the teacher I left my textbooks in the trunk. Getting past the security guards was a breeze. They worked on bribes and loved the pizza from my pops’ shop. I kept them fed, and they kept me out of school.

But I wasn’t cutting out to avoid an ex like Tara, something she let slip yesterday when she left before her last class of the day. Apparently, Mark and the new flavor of the week sit in front of her in physics.

I caught her leaving school right before the last class and followed her just as I did all week. I don't know if I'm good at tailing her, or if she's just oblivious but I didn't make my presence known until she went to Starbucks, and I snuck up behind her while she placed her order. The goal was to rattle her, but then she distracted me with her pretty fucking smile, and that smart mouth of hers.

Today, I'm not letting her leave the school parking lot without laying out some facts. I'm starting to feel like a fucking creep sitting out here every day. I'm not supposed to be on the clock until she gets out at ten to three, and I'm here at one every afternoon because I never know when she's going to dip out.

"For as long as I've been a member of your dad's club, all I hear is how fierce you are. How you're a clone of your mother. But I'm looking at you, and all I see is a girl who is running scared from a piece of shit who never deserved her to begin with."

As soon as the words leave my lips, I wish I could take them back because her eyes shine with unshed tears.

"Fuck you," she snaps, her lower lip quivering. I shouldn't feel so fucking victorious, but damn, I do. Those two words are proof of life.

"There she is..." Before I can think better of it, I close the distance between us, but she quickly takes a step back.

"I don't want to be near you right now." She turns abruptly and starts to power walk toward her car. I follow her, my long legs easily eating up the space she tries to put between us.

"You're Tara Burnside," I yell at her back. "You were born into biker royalty. It's high time you start acting like it. You do that, and no one will ever shit on you. Not some guy who can't keep his dick in his pants, or some little girl who can't keep her

legs closed.” I grit my teeth. “No one.”

She turns around so quickly that we almost collide. My hands instinctively fly to her hips to steady her, but she beats me to it, laying her palms flat against my chest as she shoves me back.

That’s it, princess.

Get mad.

“You really think I don’t wake up every day and wish it were me who slashed Mark’s tires? That I don’t lay in bed every night imagining how sweet it would be if I could humiliate him and Claudia? I fucking dream about it and in my dreams I always knock her perfect teeth right down her throat. But I can’t do any of that because that’s exactly what everyone expects of me. You think being Tara Burnside is such a blessing, but it’s not. Everyone thinks I’m biker trash. Claudia...her friends...the whole fucking cheer squad. Hell, I bet the football team does too. But when I was with Mark, they respected him enough to keep their mouths shut. Now, everyone and their mother has an opinion and if they’re not talking shit behind my back, they’re sitting behind their phone screens, commenting on all my videos. So excuse me if I don’t feel like giving them the fucking satisfaction of being right.”

It takes a minute for all that to sink in, but as soon as it does, anger starts to rage inside of me. Us bikers get a bad rap, even the ones that abide by the law and serve their community. People see the leather and they make their ignorant judgment calls. I never thought all that shit would bleed over and make the ones we’re close to guilty by association.

“Fuck them,” I snap.

She rolls her eyes. “You would say something like that.” She huffs out a breath. “But

it's easier said than done.” She crosses her arms against her chest and cocks her head to the side. “Why do you think I’m still a virgin? I can promise you it’s not because I’ve grown an attachment to my hymen or am contemplating becoming a nun. The second I started dating Mark, everyone started calling me a slut. They said the only reason he was dating me was because I put out. Holding onto my v-card gave me power over their lies and let me control the narrative. But I can’t win no matter what I do. If I’m not the biker slut dating the football player, I’m the stupid little virgin who let her boyfriend stray because she didn’t spread her legs on command.”

The last thing I want is to be discussing her fucking virginity. Jesus Christ how the fuck did we get here?

“Tara—”

“Don’t fucking Tara me, Capone. I’ll get over Mark cheating on me, and one day I’ll be able to see him with Claudia and not give a damn, but today is not that fucking day, and tomorrow might not be the day either. Now, I’m getting out of here. You can either follow me like a good little biker in case the cartel decides to off me, or you can get lost. Either way, I don’t care.”

She goes to spin around, but I snag her wrist.

“I go where you go. Pick a place, any place, just please don’t mention your virginity to me ever again.”

I will get on my knees and beg if I have to.

She eyes me skeptically.

“Anywhere?”

I'd take her to the fucking moon so long as she shuts her mouth.

"Anywhere you want. Just leave your phone in the car like you always do so Holly doesn't track you."

I don't know what encouraging her to deceive her parents says about me, but I'll worry about that later.

"Fine," she says, smacking her lips together. "I want to go shopping. I need a new a bra, and there's a pair of leggings in Lululemon I heard does wonders for your ass. Can we stop at the food court while we're there? I'm craving Italian."

I bite back a groan and grit my teeth.

This girl is going to be the death of me.

But maybe if she gets a new bra, she'll be more inclined to fucking wear one.

"Great," I grind out. "So long as you straighten that crown, princess."

"I'm sorry," she says, laughing hysterically.

Yeah, she's sorry alright.

"I'm just picturing you with a unicorn hat on your head."

I sigh, uncurling my fists. "You won't have to picture it, you're gonna see it play out in real time because you're coming with me."

The playful expression falls from her face, and she raises an eyebrow.

“I am?”

“Yeah, I don’t have time to take you back to your car.”

“Scared of Mommy, are you?”

I shake my head. My mother is crazy but she’s also a saint and me being her only son has me sitting at the top as her favorite.

“No, it’s my Nonna who terrifies me. I love the old troll but put her in a ring with ten of the baddest motherfuckers and she and her wooden spoon are coming out the champs.”

For some reason that makes Tara’s smile return.

“Big, bad Capone is scared of his granny.” She throws her leg over the bike and slides off, making her way toward me. “I never would’ve guessed.”

“We all got something, princess.”

“So let me get this straight, you don’t have time to take me home, but you have time to make a pitstop at Walmart?”

“Yeah, well, if you didn’t take an hour to pick out a bra, I could’ve dropped you off at your car and been on my merry way. I’m already late, and I won’t show up to my niece’s birthday party empty-handed. To you I’m big, bad, Capone, but to Sophia, I’m Uncle G and I always deliver the best birthday presents.”

She smiles even wider. “Uncle G. I like that.”

“Don’t get any ideas, princess. The only people who call me that are my nieces and

nephews.”

“What does the rest of the family call you?”

“Gianluca.”

“I think I’m going to start calling you that too.”

“I thought we already established that you’re going to call me master if Capone doesn’t work for you.”

“You wish.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. There are so many ways I could reply to that, but none of them are appropriate, so I let her have the last word.

On the way to the mall, I made a pact with myself. I was still reeling from all that shit about her being biker trash that she revealed outside the school. I wanted to fucking torture everyone who ever made her feel less than what she is. But as I thought of all the ways I’d do that, I realized I was no better than those ignorant fucks. We are stuck with one another, and I can’t keep acting like a dick just because I can’t get a grip on my own shit.

I need to find a way to deal with her. Keep things light. Focus on the humor of the situation and not the fact that I suddenly find her attractive or that I’m quite possibly infatuated with the freckles on her nose and the way her perky little nipples always seem to salute me.

She loops her arm through mine like it’s totally fucking natural for her to touch me and drags me into the store. We make our way to the toy section, and she helps me pick out the perfect gift for my niece—the latest Ariel doll to add to her Disney

princess collection. Then she gives me shit for not wrapping it, claiming that ripping the paper off a present is the best part of receiving one. So me being the sucker that I am, buys the roll of pink wrapping paper. Tara even gets me for a bow and some scotch tape. I draw the line at a card, though. Sophia's three, she can't read, and those four dollars and ninety-nine cents are better in my pocket than Mr. Hallmark's.

After I pay, we make our way to the parking lot where she wraps Sophia's present. I secure the gift in my saddlebags and throw the rest of the pink paper in the trash. I tamper down the urge to bitch about wasting five dollars on a roll of wrapping paper and take the high road. The present does look nice. I might even hire Tara to wrap all my Christmas presents this year. I'll be the MVP this holiday season and throw my family for a loop when I show up to Christmas Eve and my gifts aren't shoved in plastic bags from the gas station.

I straddle my bike, and I wait for Tara to wrap her arms around my middle. I've gotten used to the feel of her pressed against me. Hell, I even crave it.

Last night I took a ride to ease the restless feeling in my bones, and I found myself wishing she was wrapped around me. It fucking ruined my head.

I'm about to take off when my phone rings. I balance the bike between my thighs and grab my phone from the inside pocket of my kutte. As soon as I see Holly's name flash across the screen, I mutter a curse.

"What's wrong?" Tara calls over my shoulder.

It probably wasn't a good idea to tell Tara to leave her phone in her car at the school, but at the time I was worried Holly would track her and find out that she was cutting school. But school got out two hours ago, and neither of us thought to call Holly to let her know she was with me.

I'm not sure that information would help the situation. I'm supposed to be running interference between Tara and Mark. High jacking her for the rest of the day wasn't on the agenda. But at least she wouldn't be worried her daughter was lying in a ditch somewhere.

The phone continues to ring, and I stare at it like its bomb about to detonate at any fucking second. How the fuck am I going to explain any of this shit?

Before I can figure it out, Tara plucks the phone from my hand and accepts the call.

"Hey, mom," she says. "No, I think I left it in my car. It's fine, though. I'm with Capone."

She pauses for a beat. "We're leaving Walmart. I know, I know, but we called a truce."

I brave a glance at her through my sideview mirror and our eyes lock. She flashes me that smile of hers and something in my chest tightens. Fuck the freckles and her ever hard nipples, the girl has a killer smile. The kind that punches a man in his gut every time she unleashes it. "No, he had to pick up a gift for his niece. I don't know what time I'll be home. We're going to her birthday party. Hold on."

Keeping her eyes pinned to mirror, she leans into my back and holds the phone over my shoulder. "She wants to talk to you."

Fuck me.

Tearing my eyes away from her reflection in the mirror, I take the phone.

I'm not equipped to deal with Holly on a good day and today is clearly not one of those days. I finally find my balls and lift the phone to my ear, bracing myself for the

verbal tongue lashing.

“Holly,” I greet, clenching my jaw. “How’s it going?”

“Cut the shit, Capone. What’s going on?”

I flinch at her tone. Holly terrifies me about as much as my Nonna does and she doesn’t have a wooden spoon tucked into her apron pocket. That’s not saying she doesn’t carry a signature weapon of her own. For all I know the woman has a pocketknife tucked away in those Timberland boots she’s always sporting.

I clear my throat, dismissing the thought.

“What do you mean?” I return.

“I mean a week ago you acted as though you wanted to turn in your patch and now you’re taking my daughter to meet your family. What happened to making sure she got to and from school without any enemies kidnapping her? Is something going on with the club? Is that why Maverick hasn’t been home in two days?”

I’m not about to get involved in their marital shit. I couldn’t even if I wanted to. Since Maverick ordered me to tail Tara, I’ve been out of touch with whatever is going on with the club. I don’t know if that’s intentional or not, and I sure as fuck don’t know why Maverick hasn’t gone home.

“Mav is probably at the clubhouse,” I tell her. “You should go there. Talk to him.”

Ask him these questions, not me.

Tara’s eyes meet mine in the sideview mirror again, and I can tell by the way she chews on her lip, she’s worried about what she’s overheard. When you’re around

someone so much, you learn to read their cues. Holly and Maverick might be together now, but they've been a part most of Tara's life. It doesn't surprise me that she's concerned there may be trouble in paradise.

Without thinking, I lay my hand on her thigh and give it a reassuring squeeze.

It's totally inappropriate, and yet, I let my fingers kneed her through the denim that encases her leg. I won't allow it to be more than that. Not now, and not tonight when I'm lying in my bed, and I start to wonder how those toned things would feel bracketing my waist.

That would be fucking sinful of me.

Holly sighs through the line, jarring my attention back to her.

"When I finish up with my family, I'll take Tara back there and you and Mav can take her home from there."

"Look at you giving out orders."

I stop myself from scoffing. Does the woman think I have a death wish?

"No, Ma'am. It's just a suggestion."

"Where is Tara's car?"

"Fuck. It's at the school still."

"I'll have Leftie drive me to pick it up. Keep my girl safe, Capone."

My fingers dig deeper into Tara's thigh, and I stare long and hard at her through the

mirror.

“That I can do.”

It’s not a total lie. I can keep her ex-boyfriend away from her. I can probably shut down any fucking rumors those jealous little bitches want to spread about her too. And if there was ever a threat to her safety because of the club, I’d make sure no one got close enough to harm a hair on her head. But keeping her safe from me—well, that not something I’m certain I can deliver on.

I disconnect the call and shove the phone back inside my kutte.

“What was that about?”

My gaze locks with her in the mirror. “Nothing you need to worry your pretty little head over.”

Then I give her thigh one last squeeze.

I don’t do it to comfort her.

I do it for all the wrong reasons.

I do it for me.

I do it because I like looking at her.

I like teasing her.

I like touching her too.

But most of all I do it because I like her smile.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CAPONE

“You’re late...” My mom’s words die on her tongue as her eyes connect with Tara. “Oh, hello.” She lifts a hand to right the unicorn party hat that sits on top of her head. “Gianluca are you going to introduce your mother to your friend?”

I refrain from rolling my eyes as a shit-eating grin stretches across her face. The woman is so transparent.

“Mom,” I warn. “Get that look off your face.”

“What look?”

“You know what look,” I return.

By the time Sophia blows out the candles on her cake, my mother will be planning my wedding, and Nonna will have knitted a pair of booties for the kid I’m never going to have. That’s what happens when you never bring a girl home to meet the family. They lose their fucking minds at the first sight of a female and jump to all sorts of ridiculous conclusions.

Reluctantly, I glance over my shoulder at Tara. She has no fucking idea what she’s in store for. I almost feel guilty, then I remember the stint in the mall, and how she had me sifting through the clearance bins in Victoria’s Secret in search of a hot pink thong she just had to have.

I tag her hand and bring her to my side. “Tara, this is my mother, Francesca. Ma, this is Tara, Maverick’s daughter.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs...” Her voice trails as she leans into me. “How the hell do you pronounce your last name again?”

Before I can respond, my mother does.

“It’s Capizzone, dear. But please call me Francesca.” Keeping her smile in place, she looks from Tara to me. “Maverick. Why do I know that name?”

“My dad is the president of the motorcycle club Capone is a member of, so essentially he’s like Capone’s boss.”

My mom crosses her arms against her chest, pursing her lips as she gives me a pointed look.

“Capone, huh?”

I turn to Tara. “She’s not a fan of my road name.”

“It’s insulting,” my mother scoffs. “Then again, I wasn’t a fan of you joining that motorcycle club in the first place.” She brings her eyes back to Tara. “No offense to your father, but we hoped Gianluca would go into the pizza business like my husband. Did you know we had a pizzeria in Chicago? We were known for making the best deep-dish pies in the Magnificent Mile.”

It’s true. The Capizzone family recipe is unmatched, but when Carmela announced she was getting married and moving to North Carolina, my parents sold the pizzeria and moved us all here. There was no way they were going to be miles away from their grandchildren. A couple of years ago my old man tried opening another pizzeria,

but it didn't take off like the one in Chicago. We went from making pizzas to pouring cement. If you need pavers, call Capizzone Landscaping. We're the best. You need a pair of cement shoes? We do that too—not that we've ever actually sent a body to the bottom of the river, but we could if we wanted too.

“You know what else is insulting? The fact that you haven't let us inside the house. But you don't see me calling you out on that, do you?”

My mother snarls at me, dropping her arms to her sides as she glances back at Tara. “I'm sorry, dear. This boy has a habit of testing my manners.”

I was Tara's age when I shot to my full height, towering over her by an entire foot. The fact that she still refers to me as a boy is comical. Then again, she'd still cut my food into tiny pieces if I let her.

She takes Tara's hand, finally leading her inside the house. I follow them, balancing Sophia's present as I close the door behind me. The scent of my mother's cooking fills the house, as does the boisterous voices of my obnoxious family.

It's going to be a long night.

“I did know about the pizzeria, Francesca. A while back my parents bought one of those outdoor pizza ovens, and my dad, well, let's just say appliances aren't his thing. He can take apart a Harley with his eyes closed, but he calls someone to change the filter on the heating system. Operating the pizza oven was way out of his wheelhouse, so he called in the reinforcements.” She pauses and turns to me, a smile playing across her pink lips. “Capone saved the day and probably my parents' marriage. He even taught my dad how to make sauce from scratch. It was hands down the best pizza I ever had.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. I vaguely remember the day she's talking about. It was

around the same time Shady was hiding Bianca in his apartment. Certain Maverick knew I was covering for his brother, I was paranoid as fuck and couldn't wait to leave the Burnside house. How I allowed myself to get roped into making a fresh marinara sauce is beyond me. But what's more mind boggling is the fact that Tara remembers the day so vividly.

"Best pizza ever, huh?"

She winks at me. "You should make it again for me some time."

The odds of that happening are slim to none. Imagine me asking Maverick if I can borrow his pizza oven so I can feed his daughter? He'd shove my head inside the oven and tell me to fuck right off.

My mom pipes in. "Yes, you should, and you should invite your mother over when you do." She leans into Tara. "You don't mind if I crash your dinner, do you? I've only seen the inside of his apartment once. Can you imagine? His father and I put a roof over his head for twenty plus years and now that he's on his own, he never invites us over. He knows how to drop his dirty laundry off on my doorstep every Sunday though."

Jesus Christ.

"Ma, please."

She an eyebrow, silently daring me to argue. It's not like I'm intentionally avoiding my mother. I'm here, aren't I? That should count for something. So what if I haven't had her or my dad over to my place. I don't even have a fucking table. I have two bar stools and a countertop. If she saw the beanbag chairs I use as a sofa, she'd have a stroke. And let's not forget, it's never just her and my dad. They're a traveling circus. They always have Nonna and a grandkid or two in tow. Where would they all sit?

“Would it break your heart to make your mother a pizza?” Tara questions, pulling me away from my racing thoughts. My gaze slides to her, instantly recognizing the glint of mischief in her eyes. I think the girl might like toying with me just as much as I like toying with her. I can’t tell who is better at it, though. Right now, she’s winning for sure.

I glare at Tara. “This is all your fault.”

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “I was only trying to praise your pizza making capabilities. I didn’t realize you were a scoundrel who abandoned his parents.” She wags a finger at me. “Tsk. Tsk. Capone. You should invite your mother over to your apartment. Cook her dinner. Afterall, she did give you the gift of life.”

Man, what I’d give to swat her ass right now.

I bet that would shut her up.

Instead, I flip her the bird and follow her and my mom into the dining room.

Mature, I know. Maybe I’m regressing.

As soon as Tara enters the room, everyone goes silent. It takes a minute for the chaos to ensue but once my mother starts introducing Tara to the rest of the family as my quote-on-quote friend , it’s on.

My sister Annmarie is the first to attack.

“Friend, huh?” she questions as she bounces the baby in her arms. As the second oldest of my sisters, she tends to break my balls the most.

“Shut up,” I grunt. My eyes scanning the room for the birthday girl. Maybe if I give

her the gift now, we can cut out before the cake. “Where’s Sophia?”

“She’s in the living room with the boys. She can probably use your help. Being the only girl in the family sucks, even when it’s your birthday.”

Try being the only boy.

I can almost guarantee that shit is ten times worse.

My sister seems to forget she and her friends used to polish my nails whenever they had a sleepover. Once they even put a full face of makeup on me. I looked like a ten-year-old drag queen. Shuddering, I push that miserable memory to the back of my head where it belongs and point to the baby in her arms.

“She’s not the only girl.”

She glances down at her daughter, pressing a quick kiss to the top of Gianna’s head.

“Yeah, well, all this one does is eat and shit. She doesn’t care about princesses or unicorns yet. Hence why her sister is celebrating her birthday with a Nerf gun battle in the next room.”

“Speaking of princesses...” My voice fades as I hold up the perfectly wrapped present. “Where should I put this?”

Annmarie eyes the gift. “Did you wrap that?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous. Tara did.”

She smirks at me. “Your friend Tara wrapped your niece’s birthday present.”

“Yes, and to be honest, calling her a friend is generous. The only reason she’s here is because her father asked me to watch over her. She just broke up with her boyfriend and he’s afraid she’ll get back with him.”

Annmarie scrunches her nose. “Oh, I remember those days. Daddy getting involved, sticking his nose where it didn’t belong.”

I want to tell her that I remember those days well too. That the memory of them is what got me into this fucking mess in the first place, but I keep my mouth shut.

“You bringing her here though is a pretty bold move. It’s going to give Nonna ideas.”

I don’t know if that’s such a bad thing. If Nonna thinks Tara is my girlfriend, it might buy me some time on the whole producing an heir saga.

“Good, maybe then she’ll get off my back.”

“Are you kidding? She’s going to make daddy take her to the vault to get her engagement ring for you.”

Annmarie is right. This can go either way.

“You’re fucked,” she says in a rather matter of fact tone.

“Thanks.”

Chuckling, her gaze cuts over my shoulder.

“Incoming,” she warns. I turn around just as our other sister, Daniela, rushes toward us.

“Oh my God! I love her,” Daniela gushes, giving my arm a friendly punch. It’s the Capizzone language of love. If we’re not busting balls, we’re hitting one another.

“Easy,” Annmarie cautions. “He gets squeamish when you mention the L word. Besides they’re not even friends. Our little brother here is just babysitting the pretty girl who keeps making googly eyes at him.”

“She’s not making googly eyes at me,” I mutter, my gaze cutting across the room to where Tara is sandwiched between my dad and Nonna and sure as fuck those hazel eyes of hers are pinned to me.

I frown.

Why does she gotta look at me like that ?

“You should probably rescue her before Nonna gets her ear,” Annmarie suggests.

“No way,” Daniela argues. “That girl can hold her own. You should’ve heard her correct Pop when he called her father a gangbanger. It was priceless.”

I tear my gaze away from Tara.

“Shit,” I hiss. I need to get her away my old man before he says anything else insulting. I shove the present into Daniela’s arms. “Put this with the others, would you?”

I don’t give her a chance to object, as I step around her and make my way to the dining room. I take two steps into the room before my oldest sister, Carmela, bombards me. Its days like this when I wish was an only child.

“You’re dating a seventeen-year-old? Really?”

Ah, there she is. The voice of reason. If you need a hard dose of reality, see Carmela. By the time she's done with you, she'll have you questioning your purpose for being on this Earth.

"I'm not dating anyone."

"That's not what mom says, and here I thought you were looking to graduate from the kids table."

In my twenty-seven years, I've learned I cannot win when it comes to my sisters. They're incorrigible and I'm just here for the hazing. I stare over Carmela's head at Tara, watching as she laughs at something my dad says. She seems to be holding her own just like Daniela said. If I go in there, the rest of the clan will likely grill me and I'm tired of explaining the situation. It's not like anyone actually listens to a word I say anyway.

That's why I leave Tara in the trenches taking grenades and make my way to the family room to join the Nerf gun battle. If one of my mother's Giorgio Armani statues breaks, so be it.

"Uncle G to your left!" Carmine calls. As the second to youngest, he jumped at the chance to be on my team and we're currently kicking his two older brother's asses.

I crawl across the floor, hiding behind my dad's recliner as I fire off a round of foam bullets, effectively taking out my oldest nephew, Vito.

"Take that, sucker!" Carmine cheers.

"I'm out of ammo!" My namesake, the second oldest cries.

Carmine's head pops up and he leans over the back of my mother's couch.

“That means we win. Right, Uncle G?”

I bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from laughing. In an attempt not to lose an eye, he fixed a pair of swim goggles to his face. They’re entirely too big for him, but he looks cute as fuck.

“That’s not up for me to decide,” I tell him, turning to Sophia who sits perched on the recliner. A glittery tiara rests on the top of her head, appointing her the birthday girl. “Princess Sophia must declare the winner.”

“Uncle G’s team wins!”

A grin spreads across my face as I roll onto my side, propping my head on my hand as Carmine tosses his gun to the floor and jumps up and down on the couch, celebrating the victory.

“I want a rematch,” Vito calls from across the room.

Normally, I’d give in—anything to avoid spending time with the adults who always seem to be on my case. But I’ve left Tara in the dining room with my family for too long.

“Sorry, kid. I’ve gotta go rescue Tara from the rest of the clan,” I say, pulling myself up.

I shove my little Nerf gun into the waistband of my jeans and tousle the top of Carmine’s head.

“Good match.”

“Leaving us to go smooch with your girlfriend?” Vito taunts, halting me in place.

I turn to him, narrowing my eyes.

“Not you too.”

“She’s not his girlfriend,” Sophia says. “Uncle G is never getting married. My mom says he’s a butcher for life.”

“Bachelor,” I correct with a smile.

“No, she said butcher,” Sophia insists as her wide eyes lock with mine. “Do you really cut the hearts of all the girls?”

Jesus Christ.

“No. Don’t listen to your mom.”

“But she’s my mom.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“Grandma said she’s your girlfriend when you got here,” Vito argues.

My eyes slice back to Vito. “Your Grandma’s got pipe dreams. Now, help your brother pick up all the bullets, and while you’re at it, put the cushions back on the couch.”

“What about you?” he volleys.

“One of the perks of being an adult is that you don’t have to clean up.”

“That’s not fair.”

“It isn’t but it gives you something to look forward to.” I think back to the Nerf gun battle I had with Shep and Theo. Tara was right about the broom. I glance at my nephew. “Get the broom. It goes faster if you sweep them up.”

“What about Sophia? Doesn’t she have to help?” Carmine asks.

“No, it’s her birthday.”

With that I leave the boys to the mess and head for the dining room. Annmarie stops me before I can enter the room, shoving her baby into my arms. It’s like they can smell me or something.

“She just spit up all over me. I have to change my top before we do the cake.”

“And I’m the only one who can hold her while you do that?”

“Your girlfriend seemed up for the task, but since you’re the baby whisperer of the family....” Her voice trails as she disappears up the stairs. I don’t know when I got dubbed the baby whisperer. What happened to just being fun Uncle G?

I glance down at the baby. “Don’t spit up on me too.”

“Hey.”

Startled by the sound of Tara’s voice, I lift my head.

“Hey, I was just coming in there to rescue you.”

Her gaze bounces from Gianna to me and she raises an eyebrow. “A little late for that, no?”

I flinch. “I’m sorry.”

She shrugs. “It’s okay. I think I won your mom over. I’m not sure about your dad, though, and your grandma...well, I can only make out every other word she says. The good news is I seem to have a job babysitting your nephews on Thursday.”

“What?”

She nods. “Your sister needs to get her IUD switched out and your mom has to take your dad to pick up his car from the mechanic.”

My brows pinch together. “An I U what?”

“It’s a form of birth control.”

I shudder. That can be added to the list of things I never want to discuss, along with Tara’s virginity.

“You’re not watching my nephews. If Carmela needs someone to watch the boys while she gets her tubes tied, I will.”

She laughs. “Your sister isn’t getting her tubes tied. An IUD?—”

I cut her off.

“I don’t need the details.”

“Fine,” she relents. “But you’re not off the hook. I told her to drop the kids off at your apartment after three. It was either that or have her drop them at the clubhouse, and I didn’t think that was the best idea considering your dad thinks we’re a gang.”

I lick my tongue over my teeth.

I balance the baby in my arms and clear my throat. “Don’t you have some teenage shit you should be doing on a Thursday afternoon?”

Her eyes narrow. “Nothing screams teenage shit more than babysitting now does it, Gianluca?”

“What did I tell you about calling me that?”

“Consider it payback for leaving me alone in there. If you disappear again, I’ll tell all the guys at the clubhouse your mom breastfed you until you were three.”

My eyes widen and she grins cheekily at me.

“I learned a lot about you today, Capone. Don’t try me.”

She turns on her heel, sashaying her hips as she meanders back into the dining room. I stand there watching her for a moment, then I reach for the little pistol tucked into my jeans and I use the last foam dart to shoot her in the ass.

She glances over her shoulder at me.

“Payback,” I mock. “It’s a bitch, darling.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

TATA

Capone wasn't exaggerating when he said birthdays were a big deal for the Capizzones, between the excessive amount of unicorn decorations taped to every surface and the massive amount of food, you would think little Sophia was turning sixteen instead of three.

"For crying out loud, Vito, do something! One of them is going to go through the window and I'm not going to the hospital for stitches," Carmela shouts.

She and her husband, Vito, have four boys—Vito Jr., Gianluca, Carmine, and Antonio. They're all eighteen months apart and apparently their favorite pastime is tying each other up with their Grandma's curtains. I can't wait to see what kind of trouble they will get into on Thursday when Capone and I watch them at his apartment.

"They're boys, Carmela. They're supposed to be wild," Vito argues, shoving a piece of salami into his mouth.

Carmela glares at him, then turns to Lucia, the youngest of the sisters.

"Don't do it," she warns. "Don't get married."

"Are you crazy?" Mr. Capizzone roars, his eyes darting from his oldest daughter to his youngest. "Don't listen to her. I already put a deposit on the catering hall and your

mother hired her second cousin, Maria Maria to make the cake.” He points a finger at Lucia. “You’re getting married. End of story.”

I nudge Capone. Since I threatened to oust all his secrets to the club, he hasn’t left my side. I guess he really doesn’t want anyone to know he was on the boob until he turned three.

He swipes a hand over his face. “Don’t ask.”

“But...Maria Maria? That’s her name?”

“Yes,” he says, lowering his hand from his face.

Nonna, who sits on the other side of me, decides to poke me in the arm. Capone wasn’t kidding, for a tiny little thing, she sure is wicked. A point she proves when she leans over me and glares at her grandson.

“She’s too skinny. Why don’t you feed her?”

That’s another thing—apparently, she does speak English, something I learned when Capone sat next to me. I guess she only speaks Italian when she doesn’t want you to know what she’s saying. It’s like getting a pedicure. You have no idea what the technician is saying, but you know for certain she’s talking about your feet.

Nonna also thinks I’m Capone’s girlfriend. It doesn’t matter how many times he explains the situation, Granny over here still swears I’m going to carry the Capizzone heir one day. Hence the reason she’s so concerned over my weight. How’s an itty bit of a thing like me going to carry a ten-pound baby boy?

Oh, yeah, it’s going to be a boy in case you were wondering.

“Nonna—”

Pressing a hand on his thigh, I stop him from continuing. There’s no point in arguing with the old lady, she’s set in her ways. Kind of the same way Leftie is. We might as well let her hold onto the dream.

“Oh, don’t you worry, Nonna, Gianluca feeds me all the time. We’re big fans of Waffle House.”

Capone drapes an arm over the back of my chair and leans next to my ear. Goosebumps flash across my arms at the sound of his deep voice and my heart skips behind my ribs. I don’t know what’s happening, but ever since he put his hand on my thigh earlier, something inside me short circuited. Now, every time he gets too close or touches me, my body reacts in ways it shouldn’t.

“Just because I’m out of foam bullets doesn’t mean there aren’t other ways I can get my revenge on you, princess.”

He wins one Nerf gun battle and takes a single shot at my ass, and he’s a self-proclaimed sniper. Well, little does he know my aim is unmatched. Come Thursday Capone will be picking foam bullets out of places he never dreamed those little suckers could go.

Keeping my smile aimed at his grandma, I elbow him. “She doesn’t like when I call you Capone.” And judging by the way her bushy, gray eyebrows hit her hairline, she’s not fond of us eating waffles either. Suddenly, she’s muttering in Italian, reaching for the spoon that sits in the front pocket of her apron. Worried, I’ve somehow insulted the old woman, I quickly glance over at Capone.

“Did I say something wrong?”

He shakes his head. “Don’t pay her any mind. She’s nuts.” He leans over my head and says something in Italian to her.

Can we talk about that for a second?

I had no idea Capone was bilingual. I could listen to him talk Italian all day, every day. It doesn’t even matter that I have no idea what he’s saying, it all sounds so dreamy. I’m a big fan.

Whatever he says effectively silences Nonna, and she leaves her handy dandy weapon tucked safely away in her apron.

Phew. That was a close one.

“Come on,” Capone says as he pushes out of his chair. His gaze drops to me, and he holds out his hand.

“Are we leaving already? We haven’t even sung Happy Birthday yet. Isn’t that a deal breaker?”

As crazy as the Capizzone’s are, they’re also very entertaining. I’m not ready to leave them just yet. Not to mention, I really want to see Sophia open her present. If for no other reason than to simply prove I was right to her uncle—tearing the paper is the best part of receiving a gift.

“No, we aren’t leaving. We’re just going to hang out with the only normal person in this house.”

Curious to see who he’s deemed normal out of the bunch, I slide my hand into his and let him pull me to my feet. A sharp pain shoots from my hip down my right leg and my knee gives out. I nearly fall backwards onto the chair, but Capone is quick. He

releases my hand and grips my hips, holding me steady.

“Fuck,” he growls loudly.

My cheeks flame as the room suddenly becomes very quiet. I want to tell him I’m fine, that it’s no big deal—anything to take everyone’s attention off me—but the pain is so intense I can’t even speak. I close my eyes and count back from ten, praying it will pass by the time I reach one.

“Tara,” he calls, his tone abrupt and commanding. My eyes spring open and lock with his. “Same pain as last time?”

“Yeah...” I stammer. “It cramped up.”

“Eat a banana,” Nonna says. “You need potassium. I told you she’s too skinny.”

“Are you drinking enough water?” Carmela asks. “Maybe you’re dehydrated.”

“You want a shot of Sambucca? That cures everything,” Mr. Capizzone adds.

Biting through the pain, I force a weak smile.

“I’m okay. Thank you.”

Capone doesn’t seem to buy it though. While keeping one hand on my hip, he lowers himself back into the chair he vacated and pulls me between his spread thighs, inspecting my leg for any sort of visible injury.

“Where does it hurt?”

I’ve dubbed myself the queen of humiliation this week, but I think this takes the cake.

I try to push his hands away, and take a step backward, but the pain is excruciating. It's like my nerves are on fire.

"I'm fine," I grind out. "Really."

Not buying it for a single second, he lifts his chin and those dark eyes lock with mine.

"Where?" he clips.

Realizing he's not going to let it go, I whisper, "Everywhere. It starts at my hip, but it winds around to my lower back and travels down my leg."

He moves his hand to my hip, gently massaging it. Then his fingers travel north, his massive palm stilling when he reaches the span of skin exposed by my crop top. Nonna says something I can't make out, but Capone ignores her, moving his free hand to my other hip. I'm about to tug at the hemline when he squeezes my hip. His gaze narrows and the next thing I know, he's pulling the waistband of my jeans down an inch. I don't care how much pain I'm in, I can't have him touching me like this in front of his entire family, even if it's innocent. My body doesn't seem to understand that.

"Capone," I hiss. "Everyone is watching."

He lifts his gaze back to mine once again, completely ignoring what I said.

"You have a bump on your right hip. Did you bang into something?" He presses against it again, and I wince, tears filling my eyes as the pain intensifies. He quickly drops his hand. "Shit. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I drag in a deep breath before feeling around my hip. My fingers instantly find the bump and I rack my brain, trying to recall how I could've gotten a knot the

size of golf ball, but I don't remember falling or anything like that. I don't even remember seeing anything out of the ordinary when I tried on the bra earlier.

"I'll be fine." I glance from my right hip to my left trying to see if it's noticeable, but everything looks normal.

Narrowing his eyes, Capone leans back in his chair. His gaze cuts across the room. "Luce, can you take a look?" He brings his eyes back to me. "Lucia is an intern at Rex Hospital in Raleigh."

"What's this intern business?" Mr. Capizzone grunts. "She's a doctor. I've got the canceled checks from medical school to prove it. Just say she's a doctor."

Panic surges as I glance at Lucia who is already up and out of her chair.

"Oh, no, that's not necessary. I really am fine." I straighten to my full height and shake out my leg to prove there's no need for an exam in the middle of the Capizzone dining room, that Capone is just overreacting. "See?" I say, biting the inside of my cheek to stop myself from cringing. "It's just a cramp. As for the bump, well, I'm known for being clumsy." I turn back to Capone, my eyes desperately pleading with his. "Can we give Sophia her present now?"

"Tara it's not nothing. It's the second time it's happened."

Actually, it's the third time, but I'm not about to remind him it happened when my uncle gave me a ride home too.

"I promise I'm fine. Let's give Sophia her present. I can't wait to see if she likes it."

He stares at me for a beat, then slaps his hands against his thighs.

“Yeah. Right. Whatever you want.”

Relief washes over me the moment he stands. He waits for me to take the lead, no doubt to see if I can walk without assistance. There is no masking my limp as I start for the living room, but the pain level drops from a ten to a seven. I glance over my shoulder, hoping to find Capone trailing behind me, but he remains rooted in place, his hands in his pockets, his eyes on my legs, a deep frown on his face.

“Capone.”

He lifts his eyes to meet mine.

“Stop,” I whisper, my cheeks flaming. “You’re embarrassing me in front of your family.”

Slicking his tongue over his teeth, he removes his hands from his pockets and tips his chin as he closes the distance between us and lays a hand against the small of my back.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. You’re hurt and I’m concerned. Lucia is a doctor?—”

I cut him off.

“You’re making a big deal out of nothing. It’s just a bump. I don’t need your sister to examine me in your parents dining room with your whole family watching.”

He opens his mouth to reply but I quickly press my hand to his lips

“Fine,” he relents, talking against my hand. “Lead the way, princess.”

Smiling, I drop my hand. As soon as we hit the living room Capone reveals who the only normal Capizzzone is as he makes a beeline for the birthday girl. It's also safe to say she's his favorite of the bunch. I watch as he snatches her up from the floor where she opens presents with her mom, Annmarie, and throws her over his shoulder. Her sweet giggles fill the room as he twirls her around.

"More, Uncle G! More!"

"No more," Annmarie calls. "She's going to throw up all over you." Holding her other baby girl with one arm, she smiles and shakes her head before making her way over to me. "He doesn't listen."

"I'm learning that."

I plop down on the couch, mindful of my stiff leg, and offer her a smile as she takes a seat beside me.

The baby reaches for me, cooing as she wraps her chubby fist around a lock of my hair.

"Neither does this one," Annmarie says as she tries to make quick work of prying her daughter's fingers away from my hair. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I have two little brothers. The youngest, Theo, used to pull my hair all the time." The baby holds out her hands for me and I lift my gaze to Annmarie. "Can I hold her?"

"No mother will ever deny a second set of arms," she says, eagerly handing her to me. "Have at it. I'm going to grab a glass of sangria."

The pain in my leg subsides as I sit with her, and soon it's forgotten altogether.

Capone gives Sophia her present and I watch in amusement as he lowers his tall frame onto the floor to play with her.

“Do you like princesses too?” Sophia asks as I bounce her sister on my left knee.

“Love them,” I say. “My favorite is Ariel just like you.”

Her eyes light up at that. “Did you see the movie?”

“Only about a hundred times.” I go to reach into my pocket for my phone but remember it’s in my car. “Can I borrow your phone? There’s something I want to show Sophia.”

He forks it over, and I search his apps for TikTok, when I come up empty, I balk at him. “You don’t have TikTok?”

“Not all of us are obsessed with our phones, princess.”

“You’re so quick to judge me about my phone habits, but I bet you have no idea that content creators are making bank. Some make more money than teachers, and independent journalism is on the rise.”

“Are you telling me you get paid to play on your phone?”

“I don’t play on my phone,” I hiss, tapping the screen to download the app to his phone. “I make videos, and right now I’m not eligible to receive money, but I will be in a couple of weeks.”

“What happens in a couple of weeks?”

“I turn eighteen.” The app finishes downloading and I start to create account for him.

“When is your birthday?”

“What are you doing?”

“Creating a TikTok account for you.”

“I don’t want a TikTok account, Tara.”

“You can delete it later. I’m not signing into my account on your phone.” I glance at him. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

I hand him the phone. “Just add your birthday for me.”

He sighs exasperatedly, taking the phone from me. When he’s done punching in his birthday, and filling out the rest of the requested fields, he hands it back to me and takes the baby from my arms.

“What kind of videos do you post?” He asks as he juggles the squirming baby from one arm to the other.

“Well, when I first started creating content, I stuck with the latest trends, but then I posted a video of me and Mark, and it went viral. Since then, most of the videos have been about us. I haven’t posted since we broke up. I’m kind of contemplating quitting altogether.”

“Why would you do that? You just said you’re close to making money on this thing. It seems foolish to quit now.”

I really don’t feel like telling him about all the cyber bullies, especially not after I

already divulged that the people at school think I'm biker trash and the only reason I'm still a virgin is because I thought I could prove everyone wrong.

"I don't know. I'd basically be starting from scratch, and I'm not sure people will find me all that interesting," I say honestly.

He scoffs. "You won't know unless you try."

"Are you encouraging me to play with my phone?" I tease as I find the video I'm looking for. "Maybe my next viral video will be of you."

"Not a chance."

"Hmm...give me time. I'll change your mind. I can be very persuasive when I want to be."

He hums thoughtfully, his gaze lowering to my lips.

"Yeah, I bet."

My cheeks heat, and I clear my throat before turning my attention back to Sophia. She climbs on the couch next to me, her Ariel doll tucked under her arm. I press play on Capone's phone. "This is my favorite song from the movie," I tell her as Brent Morgan comes on the screen, singing his version of Kiss The Girl . "Do you know what part in the movie that's from?"

"When they're on the boat!"

I smile at her. "That's right."

"And Prince Eric has to kiss her so she can get her voice back. Those mean fish turn

over the boat before he can though.”

“Those eels are the worst,” I agree.

She turns her attention to Capone. “Uncle G what’s your favorite part?”

I laugh. The thought of Capone actually sitting through any Disney movie, much less one about a mermaid who falls in love with a human prince, is pretty comical.

“The crab.”

My gaze cuts to him and my eyes widen.

“You’ve seen The Little Mermaid?”

“Don’t look so surprised. I’ve got four sisters, Tara. I’ve probably seen the movie more times than you have,” he says, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “How’s your leg?”

“Better,” I say, watching as he nuzzles his niece’s neck, breathing in her sweet baby scent. “You’re really good with kids.”

He continues to love on her but pauses to shoot me a pointed look.

“Don’t let my Nonna hear you say that.”

A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. It’d be cruel to let him withstand anymore of her meddling, but damn is it amusing.

“I think they like me because they see me more as big kid than as an adult,” he says thoughtfully.

“And you’re okay with that?”

He shrugs, then bends his head to blow a raspberry on the baby’s cheek.

“It is what it is.”

Sophia hops off the couch and runs to Capone, wrapping her short little arms around one of his legs.

“Uncle G can we watch The Little Mermaid after I blow out the candles?”

He tears his eyes away from me and looks down at Sophia.

“I don’t know, kid. I’ve got to get Tara home. I tell you what, how about I come by your house one day this week, and we’ll watch it? I’ll even bring snacks.”

She puts her hands on her hips and gives the suggestion some thought.

“Fine but bring your own fruit snacks. You ate all mine last time.” She turns to me.

“Will you come too?”

I glance at Capone, raising a single eyebrow.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asks.

“Well, I don’t want to say yes if it’s not okay with you.”

He repositions the baby in his arms.

“You didn’t care about that when you offered to watch the boys, so what’s the difference?”

I worry my lower lip between my teeth. I guess he has a point.

CHAPTER NINE

CAPONE

I pull into the lot with Tara on the back of my bike and instantly spot the convoy of bikes parked in front of the clubhouse. Ink, Hawk, and the prospects are the only guys who call this place home during the week, the rest of the brothers have apartments or houses of their own. But aside from the usual squatters, Ghost, and Shady are both here tonight too, along with Torque, Leftie, and Wiz.

It's a full fucking house and that sounds an alarm.

I swing my Harley in line with the other bikes and kill the engine. Balancing the bike between my legs, Tara loosens her arm around me. I don't have to look toward the clubhouse to know the guys meandering around the picnic table outside all have their eyes pinned to me, watching as my precious cargo climbs off my bike.

"It looks like everyone is here," Tara comments.

I don't think I'll ever grow tired of the sight of her pulling my helmet from her head and shaking out her hair. Unfortunately, that sight comes with a strong desire to run my fingers through the silky strands. Something I'd be doing if I didn't have a fucking audience.

Truth be told, I've been struggling to keep my hands to myself since I touched her thigh, and the battle only intensified after her leg gave out at my parents' house. Feeling her up in front of my entire family was not on my bingo card. As innocent as

my intentions were, touching her—letting my hands roam up her legs—well, it was a giant mistake because now it's all I want to do.

If she were someone else's daughter and age was just a number, my hands would be permanently glued to her body.

“There's my favorite girl.”

At the sound of Shady's voice we both turn and find him walking toward us. Tara hands me the helmet and takes off for him, throwing her arms around his neck as soon as she reaches him. He's her uncle, it's only natural he gets to hug her. I shouldn't be fucking jealous and yet I am. How's that for fucked in the head?

Tearing my gaze away from them, I hang my helmet on the handlebars before dismounting and making my way to the back of the bike to retrieve Tara's bags.

Shady breaks the embrace but keeps her at arm's length, “Your mom and dad are inside. But you might want to give them a minute.”

Tara's brows furrow. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, girl, everything is good. They're just doing what they do.”

I don't know if Tara is hip to what that means but I am. Holly and Maverick are either duking it out or fucking their brains out—neither of which I'm sure their daughter wants to be privy to. Tara's eyes lock with mine before she takes the bags from me, flashing me that killer smile.

“Thanks.”

I shove my hands into my pockets and give her a curt nod before sliding my gaze to

Shady. I don't know what's expected of me at this point and I feel the longer I stand here with his eyes on me, the more likely he'll see through my bullshit and realize I like his niece.

I like looking at her.

I like touching her.

I like having her around—period.

End of story.

“Holly says you took Tara to your niece's birthday party.”

“Uh...yeah. She helped me pick out a gift for her. Seemed only right I fed her afterward.”

“Capone's mom is a great cook,” Tara chirps. My gaze involuntarily darts to her, and she winks at me. “And his Nonna makes the best tiramisu I've ever had.” Her grin widens and she playfully smacks her uncle's shoulder. “She offered Capone her engagement ring. If she has her wish, we'll be married by the end of the year,” she adds, cheekily.

The girl wants me dead. There is no other explanation.

“She's kidding,” I blurt. “No one's getting married.”

“Yet,” she taunts with a wink.

“You're a menace,” I growl.

“Don’t pretend like you don’t like it, Gianluca.”

If her uncle wasn’t standing two feet in front of me, glaring at me, I’d show her just how much I fucking like it, and I’d be creative with my efforts. Instead, I meet Shady’s death glare.

“You got her?”

I can feel Tara’s stare burning through me, but I ignore it. I need to get out of here before I fuck myself and I don’t mean that in a literal sense.

“Got somewhere you need to be?” Shady questions, raising an eyebrow.

“Actually, I do.”

Swallowing thickly, I brave a glance at Tara. Her smile is gone and I’m perfectly fine with that. In fact, I’d be totally okay with her never smiling at me again. It’s way too dangerous and it provokes filthy fucking thoughts. “I’ll see you around.”

Her brows pinch together, but she quickly recovers, plastering a saccharine smile to her lips. Fake as it is, it still punches me in the gut and rattles my bones.

It’s too late.

I’ve already fucked myself.

I can’t look at her and not recall how her tits felt against my back. I fear what’s going to happen if I keep spending time with her. It’s only a matter of time before I start wondering how she tastes and then I’ll really lose my shit because I’ll remember Mark doesn’t have to wonder.

I hate that kid.

Taking a baseball bat to his windows still isn't off the table either.

Might even wrap it with barbwire and take it to his face. Cut him real good.

“No school tomorrow, so maybe you can go back to lizard watching. Although, I do plan on going to the gym with Sadie. Maybe go see a movie. Should I keep you posted on my whereabouts?”

If her father wasn't such a liar, my services wouldn't be needed tomorrow. With her not going to school, it's highly unlikely she'll run into Mark, but since everyone thinks I'm following her around because of some invisible threat, I'll probably have to see her at some point.

I grit my teeth. “I'll ask Maverick what he wants me to do.”

Hawk and Ink walk up to us, temporarily evicting my ass from the hot seat.

“It's about time you showed your face around here. Where the fuck have you been all day?” Hawk questions.

“Who gives a shit where he's been,” Ink interjects, throwing an arm around my shoulders. “All that matters is where he's going.” Grinning, he turns to me. “We're headed to Sally's. You coming with us?”

“Why don't you tell him why we're really going over to Sally's?” Hawk taunts.

Dropping his arm from my shoulders, Ink grunts. “Ghost is right, you're worse than a gossiping bitch.”

Ignoring his jab, Hawk turns his eyes to me. “Ink over here is finally going to pull the trigger and make a move on Emmy.”

I don’t know why Hawk is acting like this is something new. It’s no secret that Ink has had a thing for the head bartender over at Sally’s. He parks his ass there four times a week and she’s always hanging around the clubhouse. At first they tried to hide it. She’d trail along with her cousin, Birdie, who also happens to be Ghost’s girl, but then Ghost and Birdie got a place of their own and Emmy couldn’t use her blind cousin as her crutch anymore.

Ink scoffs. “Shows you how much you know. I’ve been making moves on Emmy since Ghost made Birdie his ol’ lady. I’m just letting you tag along tonight because they hired a couple of new girls and with any luck one of them will hop on your dick. Maybe then you’ll stop paying attention to mine.”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, he inwardly cringes, and his eyes slide to Tara.

“And that is our cue to leave,” Shady says. “Let’s go Tara.”

“Sorry Tara,” Ink mutters.

She’s too busy glaring at me to acknowledge him.

“Ta?” Shady questions, his eyes bouncing from me to his precious niece. Any minute now the big brute is going to send his fist flying in my direction. I can feel it coming.

Tara squares her shoulders back and glances up at Shady, looping her arm through his just the way she did mine earlier. I hate that too.

“Have fun guys.” Then she finally turns to me, her smile faltering. “Thanks again for the ride.”

Her words are cold.

Her eyes sharp as lasers.

Hyper aware that Shady's eyes are pinned to me, I simply nod. A second later, she's walking away from me, dragging Shady with her.

"So are you coming with us or what?" he asks. "You can tell us all about your new babysitting gig."

If I wasn't completely focused on Tara, I'd tell him to fuck off somewhere. She takes another few steps, and her limp returns. Shady stops midstride, lowering his gaze to her legs, but she brushes him off with a wave of her hand.

I'm no fucking doctor, and I'm definitely not a hypochondriac either, but something isn't right.

"Earth to Capone," Ink calls.

I scrub a hand over my face before returning my attention to the two men eyeing me suspiciously. I don't know what company I'll make in the state I'm in, but I might actually lose my fucking shit if I stick around here.

"Get me the fuck out of here," I say gruffly.

I don't wait for them to respond or even follow me; I just turn and stalk toward my bike. My gaze lands on the helmet dangling from the handlebars. There is no way I'm putting that thing on my head, not after she wore it.

I'll take my chances and leave my fate in the Devil's hands.

“So let me get this straight, you helped her cut out of school and accompanied her to the mall, then instead of taking her home, you took her to your parents’ house to celebrate your niece’s birthday.”

I knock back the shot—my third since I parked my ass on the stool. I thought coming here guaranteed me a break from Tara, but she seems to be the topic of conversation since we got here.

Slamming the empty glass onto the bar, I glare at Hawk. “Can we not talk about this? Where the hell is Ink?”

Hawk tips his chin toward the other end of the bar where Ink sits with Emmy perched on his lap, his mouth on her neck.

Great. I guess I’m not getting a refill anytime soon.

“You know what you need?” Hawk questions, drawing my attention back to him.

I quirk an eyebrow. “A lobotomy?”

“Probably,” he agrees, throwing his arm around my shoulders. With his free hand, he grabs my chin and jerks it in the direction of the two new girls Emmy hired. It’s the first time I actually pay them any mind and while they’re pretty enough—the brunette especially—my dick doesn’t so much as twitch.

“Pick one. Hell, take both if that’s your kink.”

I swat Hawk’s hand away from my face and jerk out of his grip, staring at him warily. Hawk isn’t one to pass up pussy. The whole reason he wanted me to come out tonight was so that I’d be his wingman, and now he’s offering up both chicks? Either he’s onto me, or he’s got a secret of his own.

“If I take both doesn’t that defeat the purpose of you so anxiously coming out tonight?”

Reaching for his beer, he shrugs a shoulder.

“My cock ain’t hurtin’ brother. I’ve got a couple of broads on speed dial and with Ink so preoccupied with Em these days Cherry is just itching to hop on my dick.” He takes a swallow of his beer, then lowers the bottle and angles his head. “Come to think of it, she’d probably take a ride on yours too if you’re into gingers.”

I shudder at the thought.

Back in the day, Cherry and the rest of her porn star posse would hang around and regularly service any brother in need. Cherry mostly stayed on Ink’s dick, but her friends were on rotation. I never got in on that action, mainly because those fucking women got more mileage than my fucking Harley. Don’t get me wrong, I like no strings attached sex as much as the next guy, but I don’t need to be worrying if the woman I’m fucking is rehearsing for her next cum shot film.

That’s a hard no from me.

“Thanks, but I’m good, brother.”

He drains the rest of his beer, setting the empty bottle on top of the bar. Then he turns to me, his blue eyes quietly assessing me.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Something is up with you and it’s deeper than Maverick saddling you with looking out for Tara.”

It's not like I can tell him the truth, that I'm all kinds of twisted because I suddenly find myself attracted to her. He'll think I'm a fucking pervert, and at this point, I'm not sure he'd be wrong. So, I do what any self-respecting asshole would do, and I keep lying through my teeth. I blame my foul mood on the fact that me shadowing Tara shows how little Maverick thinks I'm capable of.

"You got it all wrong," he argues. "He's trusting his daughter to you, Capone. That is the ultimate show of respect."

"He's not trusting me to take a bullet for her, Hawk. He's got me spying on her, making sure that little cocksucker doesn't try to get back with her—which, in case you were wondering, doesn't appear to be an issue. He's already got a new piece of ass."

Bastard.

I glance back at the two new bartenders, hoping one of them will catch my eye and refill my glass since Emmy and Ink are all but dry humping at the other end of the bar.

"But you would, wouldn't you?"

I look back at Hawk.

"What?"

"You'd take a bullet for her."

The reply flies past my lips in an instant.

"I'd take ten." I stare at him, swallowing past the lump in my throat. "You would

too.”

Any Knight would.

It’s what we do.

It’s who we are.

Hawk swipes a hand over his face.

“Yeah. I guess you’re right,” he says, then he lifts his gaze back to me. “But I’d be doing it out of duty.”

I quirk an eyebrow.

“And I wouldn’t?”

He cocks his head to the side.

“I’m not sure.”

“You’re insane, man.”

He nods. “Maybe, or maybe I’m thinking there were a bunch of us in the woods that night and only one of us had to urge to slash that little fuck’s tires. I ain’t blind, brother. Tara’s hot. You see it too and the more time you spend with her, the harder it’s gonna be to contain any other urges.”

“She’s seventeen,” I sneer.

“And that’s what scares me. Bro, Holly was young when Maverick dug his claws into

her too. He'd get over the age thing if you played your hand right. But you're so disgusted with the fact you're attracted to her, that you can't think straight."

"What? I'm not attracted to her."

"Dude, you could be in the back office fucking both those girls or at the very least, you could have one of them suck your cock, but instead you're sitting out here drinking yourself silly."

He ain't wrong.

Any other day, I'd already be pulling up my zipper.

He slaps a hand to my back.

"The crime ain't in the attraction, brother. It's in the execution."

They're wise words.

Too bad I let them go in one ear and out the other.

CHAPTER TEN

TARA

“Then what?” Sadie asks as we make our way toward our lockers. I’ve been trying to tell her what happened on Friday, but our schedules haven’t been syncing. We were supposed to hang out on Saturday, but I didn’t feel well, and yesterday she had to go somewhere with her dad.

I pop the lock on my locker and pull it open, shoving my books inside as I try to recall where I left off. I think I was at the part where we escaped to his parents living room after my leg gave out. But there’s no reason to go through all that with Sadie, especially when I really want her input on what happened when he dropped me off at the clubhouse.

He was hot and cold with me all day, so his flippant attitude to be rid of me isn’t what bothered me. It was his eagerness to go out with Hawk and Ink that sparked my rage. I know how the guys in my dad’s club get down and I also know it would take zero effort from Capone to pick up a random girl and take her to bed. What I didn’t understand is why that bothered me so much. I spent much of Friday night picturing him with a girl like Wendy from Waffle House, wondering if he took her back to the clubhouse.

It was infuriating.

I was never more grateful to be sick than I was on Saturday because it meant I wouldn’t have to see him.

“Ugh,” Sadie groans. “Heads up. Here comes Mark.”

I close my locker and turn around just as he comes to stand behind Sadie. He moves to her left, but so does she. Then he tries to go right, but she’s too quick, effectively blocking him from advancing toward me. An exasperated sigh leaves his lips as he glares at her.

“Don’t you have some place to be, Sadie?”

She props her hands on her hips and cocks her head to the side.

“Don’t you have another girl to rub your dick on?”

I stifle a laugh. Straight and to the point. That’s Sadie.

Mark ignores her, his eyes connecting with mine.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Logically I know the correct response would be for me to tell him to fuck right off, but my curiosity gets the best of me.

“Fine,” I say, hitching my bag over my shoulder as I tip my chin toward the hallway.

“You can talk while I walk to my next class. I don’t want to be late.”

Sadie spins around so quickly she knocks my books out of my hands.

“Are you kidding me? You’re going to give this fool a chance to talk to you?”

Torn, my teeth sink into my lower lip. If she thinks I’m stupid for giving Mark the time of day, the whole school will probably think so too.

Mark bends to grab my book, but Sadie catches sight of him, and kicks one of my books clear across the other side of the hall. My gaze shoots back to her.

“Was that necessary?”

“You tell me,.” she spats.

Mark mutters a curse as he tucks my books under his arm. Then, then he rises to his full height and crosses the hall to retrieve the book she kicked away. Alone, I bring my gaze back to my best friend.

“I’m curious to hear what he has to say.”

She rolls her eyes. “I can tell you exactly what he’s going to say, Ta. He’s going to apologize for sticking his dick inside Claudia and tell you it meant nothing. Then he’s going to beg for a second chance.”

“He had his tongue down Claudia’s throat this morning. They looked... happy .”

“Then why was she crying in the bathroom ten minutes ago?”

I stare at my best friend, my lips parting in shock.

“Why didn’t you say something? You’ve been letting me go on and on about Capone.”

She cocks her head to the side and arches an eyebrow. “I didn’t say anything because I knew this is how you’d react. He made a fool out of you once, Ta. Don’t be dumb enough to make him do it twice. Mark isn’t your dad, and you’re not your mom. This isn’t a great love story gone wrong. He’s a pig.”

Anger slashes through me. Deep down I know Sadie is just being a good friend, but there is also a part of me that takes serious offense to her words.

“There is nothing wrong with me hearing him out, but thanks for your concern. It’s good to know my best friend thinks I’m a doormat.”

Before she can say another word, I push past her, and make my way to where Mark stands. He hands me my book, and I take it from him, acutely aware that everyone is staring at us.

“So Sadie hates me, huh?” Mark says, cutting through the awkward silence as he falls into step beside me.

“She’s not the only one.”

“I deserve that.”

He deserves a lot worse. I rearrange the books in my arms and shoot him an exasperated look.

“What do you want Mark?”

“Let me take those from you.”

My grip tightens around the books. No way. First it starts with him carrying my books, then him taking my hand. I’m not falling for it.

“Did you have something you wanted to talk to me about or should I go back to pretending you don’t exist?”

“Claudia and I aren’t going to work out,” he blurts.

Wow, he really is predictable.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I...well...your dad said something the other night, and it kind of stuck with me.”

I sigh. When Mark and I first started dating, he was afraid to meet my parents—specifically my dad. Like everyone else in Knightdale, he heard the rumors. But my dad was cool as fuck to Mark and only threatened to maim him if he hurt me. I guess my dad reiterated that threat the other night.

“My dad says a lot of things when he’s mad. Don’t worry, he won’t kill you.”

“No, that’s not it,” Mark says, pausing for a beat. We round the corner of the hallway and stop in front of my classroom. “Look, I know what I did was wrong. I also know that apologizing won’t do me any good. I spoke to some of the guys on the football team, and no one is going to talk shit anymore. I can’t make any promises where Claudia is concerned, though. Her friends can be vile.”

“Yes, I’m aware.” I stare at him for a moment. “I saw you with Claudia this morning. What changed between then and now?”

He shoves his hands into his pockets and diverts his eyes away from me, the apples of his cheeks going bright red as he does so.

“It’s not that sudden. It started last week when I saw you leave with him.”

The sentence catches me so off guard that all I can do is blink. Mark slowly lifts his chin, and his eyes find mine.

“I didn’t like it,” he whispers.

For a fleeting second a sense of gratification fills me. He cheated on me, it's only fair for him to feel jealous when he sees me with another guy.

Then clarity strikes.

There is another plausible reason Mark didn't like seeing me with Capone.

"Because he slashed your tires?"

He shrugs, his eyes darting around the hallway purposely avoiding mine. "Maybe."

"Right, well, Capone and I are friends."

His glaze slides back to me and he arches a brow.

"He's like twenty years older than you, Tara."

"Ten."

He scoffs.

"Like that makes a difference." He pulls his hands from his pockets and crosses his arms against his chest. "He's going to want something you're not willing to give him."

And there it is.

It all comes back to sex.

"Who says I'm not willing to give it him? Maybe I just wasn't willing to give it to you."

He rolls his eyes and takes a step closer just as the bell rings, signaling it's time for me to make my way inside the classroom.

"Don't be that girl."

I narrow my eyes as I stare up at him. The fucking audacity on him. "What girl?"

"The good girl who revenge fucks her virginity away just to get back at her ex-boyfriend. You're better than that, Tara." He reaches out and tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "You're better than every girl in this school."

I swat his hand away from me and square my shoulders back. If he truly believed that then he wouldn't have done what he did. I don't know what game he's trying to play, but I'm not falling for it.

Without another word, I step around him and enter my class.

I really should've just told him to fuck off.

My last class dragged, and my phone kept going off with texts from Sadie. I got in trouble three times, and when the bell rang, I jetted out of school like it was on fire, making a beeline straight for my car. There was no sign of Capone or his bike, but I didn't think anything of it. He has a talent for making himself unseen until he creeps up on me. Things have also been weird with the club. Dad has been spending more and more time at the clubhouse, and my mom spent the weekend doomsday shopping. Maybe Capone's orders have changed and I'm no longer his problem.

I slide behind the wheel and press the engine button. I'm about to reverse out of the spot when I realize there is a sleek, black Suburban blocking me. Pressing my palm firmly against the horn, I wait for the SUV to move out of my way, but it doesn't budge.

Sighing, I pull my hand away from the steering wheel and reach for the door handle, ready to confront the jerk blocking me. That's when my eyes latch onto the sideview mirror, and I see the driver open his door. A little voice sounds in the back of my head, reminding me that the club is on a soft lockdown and even though Capone isn't here, that doesn't mean I'm not a target. My parents raised me to be cautious and alert, and my dad stowed a metal bat under my passenger seat for a reason. I just never thought I'd use it.

I quickly tear my gaze away from the mirror and crawl over the console. With my ass perched in the air and my upper body curled under the passenger seat, I feel around for the bat. A knock sounds on the window, and I jump, my head hitting my head on the glovebox as the driver's door swings open.

I'm about to let Mr. Suburban know I've got a weapon and I'm not afraid to use it when I hear a familiar voice.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

I lift my head from the glove box and peer at Capone. I should be relieved, but his presence annoys me.

"You're Mr. Suburban?"

His dark brows pinch together as he scowls at me, but he doesn't say anything as he leans his upper body inside the cab of the truck and pulls me up by arms, dragging me back over the console so that I'm sitting behind the wheel of my car. I smack his hands away expecting him to retreat, but his fingers wrap around the steering wheel as he continues to invade my space, filling the cab with the scent of his stupid cologne.

Why can't he smell like sweat and gym socks?

“Thought you were rid of me, did you?”

Huffing out a breath, I meet his gaze.

“I was hoping.”

“Liar,” he taunts, inching back only slightly. “You missed me this weekend, admit it.”

“About as much as you missed me,” I retort. It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask him how he made out on Friday night, but I manage to refrain. I really don’t want to know the answer to that question.

He hums thoughtfully. “That much, huh?”

Ignoring the smirk that teases his lips, I cross my arms against my chest. “Are you back to following me around, or do you need another present wrapped? You do know that they offer giftwrapping services at the mall in exchange for a small donation, don’t you? Seems like a better option for you, that way you don’t have to be bothered totting around someone you can’t wait to get rid of. I wouldn’t want to infringe on your precious time.”

He bites the inside of his cheek, then shakes his head.

“Anyone ever tell you you’re a brat?”

“Just you,” I retort cheekily.

He stares at me for a beat before straightening out and leaning against the open door.

“I figured you’d be difficult,” he says, reaching into his vest. He pulls out a jar of

Nutella and hands it to me, like hazelnut spread is some kind of magical peace offering. “There’s more where that came from.”

“Oh, yeah?” I quirk a brow. “You hiding a loaf of bread in your kutte too?”

He rolls his eyes and drops the jar onto my lap. “Everyone knows Nutella is best served with pretzels, unless of course there are zeppoles on hand.”

I don’t know what a zeppole is, but I decide to fuck with him because he’s right about one thing, I am indeed feeling a bit bratty.

“I’m allergic to nuts,” I deadpan.

His face blanches and I have to bite down on my lip to keep from laughing in his face. I mean you would think he’s a five-year-old boy and I just told him there is no Santa.

“Relax, Gianluca, I’m only messing with you.” I lift the jar of Nutella from my lap and examine it. I’ve only ever had it on white bread, and it’s not my favorite, but as much of a brat as I am, I don’t want to break his heart. I honestly don’t think he can take it, he looks a bit off kilter today.

“I need a favor.”

I lift my gaze back to him and sigh.sigh. “What’s the favor?”

He bites the inside of his cheek and looks away. “We promised Sophia we’d watch The Little Mermaid with her, and she called me about fifteen times this weekend to remind me. My sister is dropping her off at my apartment. I subscribed to Disney Plus, there’s a version of The Little Mermaid streaming on there, so I think all bases are covered. I even loaded up on snacks and I’ll order a couple of pizzas too.” He

brings his eyes back to me, an unreadable expression filling his face. “The only thing missing is you.”

I don’t know what I was expecting him to say, but that certainly wasn’t it.

“Don’t look so shocked, princess. You leave an impression.”

“Maybe on a three-year-old, but Friday night you made it seem like you rather poke your eye out with a meat skewer than spend another second with me.”

He shrugs. “You’re not that bad.” He cocks his head to the side as he cups the back of his neck. A conflicted expression flits across his features. “My job is to follow you around and make sure you’re safe. I shouldn’t be hanging out with you. More than that, I shouldn’t fucking want to.”

“Afraid your reputation will be ruined?”

He releases his neck and narrows his eyes.

“Let’s get something straight, princess. I don’t give a fuck what people think about me. But even with that bratty little mouth of yours running, I don’t look at you and see a seventeen-year-old girl, and that is where the problem lies.”

My pulse quickens at his words, and my head spins with all the possibilities of what those words could mean. I lick my lips desperately trying to find a witty comeback for that, but sparring with an older man isn’t exactly one of my talents.

His gaze drops to my mouth, and his jaw clenches visibly.

“What do you see?” I squeak.

As soon as the question leaves my lips, I wish I could take it back. If I'm reading this whole exchange wrong, I'm going to look like a giant fool.

He lifts his eyes back to mine. "Too much. I see too fucking much." He takes a step backward and taps the hood of my car. "Follow me to the clubhouse. We'll drop off your car. I already called Holly and told her the plan."

"I didn't say yes."

He stares at me quietly for a beat, then clucks his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"Oh, but you did, princess. Maybe not so much with words, but rest assured it was written all over your pretty little face." He pauses, his tongue sneaking out to wet his lips. "I told you I see too much when I look at you. Way too fucking much."

Without another word, he leans forward and reaches for my seatbelt, dragging it across my body and securing it into place. My breath hitches at the proximity, and I swear he groans in response. I don't know what's happening between us, but it feels like I'm out of my realm. Like whatever is transpiring is bigger than I'm used to. More complex.

His fingers linger for a moment before he takes the jar of Nutella from my lap and sets it inside the cup holder beside me. Then his eyes slowly lift and lock with mine

"Drive safe, yeah?"

Feeling dumbstruck, all I do is nod. He unfolds himself from the cab of the car and gently closes the door. My gaze follows his form in the sideview mirror as he retreats to the Suburban, involuntarily dropping to his tight ass. Catching myself, I close my eyes.

What the fuck just happened?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CAPONE

You know you've reached an all-time low when you start using your niece and nephews as an excuse to spend time with a girl you should be pretending doesn't exist, but after spending the weekend alone in my apartment, trolling her TikTok videos like a creep, I couldn't seem to help myself.

Monday came and before I could think better of it, I devised a plan to spend more time with Tara by using Sophia as my decoy. I knew she was pissed about how I reacted when I dropped her off on Friday, and I figured that's why Maverick told me to take the weekend off, so I came prepared with a jar of Nutella.

However, I didn't expect her to cave so easily or look at me the way she did.

I'm not an expert at reading people, but I know when a girl looks at a guy the way Tara looked at me, it can be dangerous for everyone involved. There was curiosity in those hazel eyes of hers, and a longing for something she shouldn't want. I know, because if I held a mirror up to my face, I'd see the same things reflected in my own eyes.

Maybe it was the two days I spent apart from her that sent every fuck flying out the window, but I didn't seem to care.

We dropped her car at the clubhouse, and before anyone could question if I lost my mind, I drove my Suburban the fuck out of there. The bike seemed to upset whatever

was going on with her leg, and I couldn't strap Sophia's car seat to the back of my Harley.

We were almost at my apartment when she dropped a bomb on me, revealing that Mark cornered her at school.

"Apparently he and Claudia broke up," she said. "I'm not sure I'm buying it though. They were all over each other during homeroom."

My fingers instantly tightened around the steering wheel. The thought of that little punk cozying up to her ignited something ugly inside of me.

"And he felt the need to inform you of the development?"

The words came out harsher than I intended. It wasn't her fault Mark was such an entitled little cunt. She pulled her lip between her teeth, contemplating her response, and that only fueled my anger more.

"That, and he thought he should tell me that he isn't a fan of me spending time with you." She turned in the passenger seat to stare at me, but I kept my eyes on the road until she opened her mouth again and I swerved onto the shoulder.

"He thinks I'm going to revenge fuck you."

"Jesus Christ, Tara." I growled as I tried to regain control of the truck. She cursed in front of me a lot, and it didn't affect me, but hearing her say the word fuck, in the context of which she said it, sent me over the edge. I tampered down the part of me that felt victorious over Mark's assumption. It wasn't a win. The plan wasn't to make the kid jealous. I was the roadblock. The guy standing in the way from him trying to reclaim Tara. "Did you tell him that's not the case? I mean how long were you with him? Doesn't he know about the lockdowns and shit?"

She laughed. “You should see your face. You look like you’re about to throw up.”

“Tara this isn’t funny,” I hissed.

The smile fell from her face, and she pursed her lips.

“You’re right. It’s never funny when a guy is repulsed by the thought of screwing you.” She crossed her arms against her chest and diverted her attention out the passenger window. “Don’t worry, I won’t let him think it for too long. I just got caught up in how it felt to have him be jealous over the idea of another guy wanting me.”

I couldn’t tell her the only thing repulsive about any of this was the fact I liked the idea of it too. I should’ve let the conversation die, but I’m a stupid motherfucker.

“Look at me,” I demanded, and she slowly slid her gaze toward me. “You could search the whole fucking world, and you wouldn’t find a single man who doesn’t think you’re the most beautiful thing he laid eyes on. If you were a little older, or I was a little younger...” My voice trailed, and I swallowed down the words I knew I couldn’t share.

Until that moment, my thoughts were mostly PG. Sure there were moments when I slipped and stared a little too long at her body, specifically her tits, and that tight, round ass that when perched over her center console sent my dick into disarray.

But I never let it get to the point where I imagined what it would be like to fuck her.

She’d be tight as hell, and it would hurt her at first, but once I got her nice and primed, it would be fucking amazing. I’d teach her everything she needed to know and enjoy every fucking moment of watching her discover what pleased her sexually.

We'd go all night. Her stamina would be fueled on curiosity, and mine would be fueled on the sweet sounds she'd make when she came.

And she'd come.

She'd come hard, fast, and frequent. It'd be messy as fuck, and I'd love every goddamn minute.

"You don't have to lie to me, Capone. Even if my dad wasn't the president of your club, I know you'd never go for a girl like me. I'm an inexperienced virgin, and you're...well, you're you. But Mark doesn't know that."

The more she spoke, the more damage she did. I wanted to shake her and tell her that taking her virginity would be a fucking privilege, and it only made me want her more.

Lucky for me, my sister called just then, informing me that she and Sophia were already at my apartment. All thoughts of Tara's virginity were squashed, and the rest of that afternoon was spent watching *The Little Mermaid* and eating pizza. If Tara was still bothered by our conversation, she didn't show it. When it was time to take Sophia home, things got a little complicated. She didn't want to leave. I wound up bribing her with ice cream and promising her she could come on Thursday when I watched the boys.

Tuesday afternoon I suckered Tara into another trip to Walmart. With the boys coming on Thursday, I needed all the fixings for an epic Nerf gun battle. Two wagons full of guns and a basket of foam bullets would do the trick. What I didn't anticipate is that Tara would grab a third wagon and insist I buy some things for my apartment, like two throw blankets for the bean bag chairs and a candle I will never light.

"You really need a couch," she said when I handed the cashier my credit card. "Pots and pans wouldn't hurt either. Then you could make me homemade pizza."

“Sorry, princess, but pizza isn’t made in a pot, and I don’t have room for a pizza oven.”

“I’m sure a regular oven will work just fine.”

She had me there, and oddly enough, I wanted to cook for her.

“Next week, I’ll make you pizza.”

My chest tightened when she grinned at me, and I took her home before I made any more promises I shouldn’t.

The next day was uneventful until she got out of school, and I spotted Mark trailing behind her like a lost fucking puppy. It took everything in me not to march across the lot and carry her to my bike. I followed her to the clubhouse, where Holly was waiting outside the H & M trailer holding an envelope. She rushed to Tara, and demanded I go inside to get Maverick.

I didn’t know what the urgency was, but I did as I was told, interrupting a heated conversation between Ghost and Maverick. The tension within the club was obvious, but no one felt it was necessary to keep me in the loop, and I didn’t ask any questions. For the first time since I got my patch, I was perfectly okay with being kept in the dark.

I followed Maverick, and we joined Holly and Tara in the common room.

“Go on open it,” Holly encouraged, clasping her hands together as she smiled at Maverick. “It’s our baby’s first college acceptance letter.”

For some reason that shocked me. Don’t get me wrong, I knew she was a senior and that she’d be graduating in a couple of months, but she didn’t talk about her plans for

what happened afterwards.

“Which school?” Maverick asked.

“New York,” Holly responded.

Something I couldn’t quite place twisted inside of me.

“I didn’t know you were planning to go away to college,” I blurted. Everyone’s eyes swung toward me, but mine remained pinned to Tara.

“I applied to a few local colleges, but Staten Island has a great nursing program.”

“It’s her number one choice,” Maverick grunted, crossing his arms against his chest. I tore my eyes away from Tara to look at him. “I already called Wolf, and told him if she decides to go there he better have a spare room ready.”

I swallowed thickly.

“Good idea. Better she stay with people you know than in a dorm.”

Holly laughed.

“The spare room is for us when we visit her. She wants the full dorm experience, don’t you, Tara?”

“Yeah,” Tara agreed, but there was something off about her. She grabbed her side and slowly lowered herself into a chair. Alarm bells rang inside my head, and I turned to Holly and Maverick, waiting for either of them to react, but they both seemed oblivious to it. I wondered if they knew how many times her leg gave out and if she told them about the bump on her hip.

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense. Open it,” Maverick said.

Tara’s eyes found mine once again, and she reached into the back pocket of her jeans for her phone.

“Can you video me opening it? I want to post my blind reaction to TikTok.”

I took the phone from her, but I didn’t rush to open the camera app. I was too concerned with the pain that flashed across her face, but it seemed to vanish as quickly as it appeared. Her parents were staring at me, waiting for me to get my act together, so I started recording. She tore through the envelope, and pulled out the letter, her eyes scanning it for only a second before a grin spread across her face.

“I was accepted!”

Holly threw her arms around Tara instantly, and Maverick stood still as a statue, watching as the mother daughter duo happily embraced. When they finally broke apart, Tara got up and hurried to her father, hugging him tightly. But the man looked completely devastated.

He didn’t want to let her go, and oddly enough, neither did I. New York was like ten hours away from here. That was entirely too far.

But I kept that shit to myself, and when her dad released his hold on her, I offered her my congratulations. To celebrate, the Burnside clan decided to go to Sally’s for dinner, and Maverick invited me to join them. My first instinct was to decline, but one look into Tara’s pleading eyes, and I was sucked in.

So there we were, Maverick, Holly, Tara, the two boys, and me, all gathered around a table like one big happy family. It should’ve been awkward, but it wasn’t. Maverick ordered us a bucket of beer, and the ale loosened me up a bit. At one point I even

draped my arm around the back of Tara's chair. When the dinner was done, Tara went home with her parents, and I went back to the clubhouse where I found Hawk, Wiz, and Mamba playing cards.

"Look who decided to show his face," Wiz taunted. "How is the Gymboree treating you?"

I ignored him and took a seat next to Hawk.

"You want in?" He asked, tipping his chin toward the pile of money in the middle of the table. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a fifty. Mamba dealt me in, and I lost my money within five minutes. It was pathetic.

"Leftie said you went to dinner with Maverick, and the family," Hawk prompted as he collected his winnings from the pot.

"Yeah, Tara got accepted to some college in New York and they were celebrating," I supplied.

"I didn't know she was planning on going away to school."

"That makes two of us," I muttered.

"Maverick mention anything about the club to you?" Wiz asked.

"Nah," I answered. "He was too busy trying to pretend he wasn't miserable at the prospect of Tara moving away." I glanced around the table, trying to decipher the expressions on their faces. "Is something going on that I should know about?"

"Something is definitely going on," Mamba grunted. "But no one seems to know what it is except for Shady and Ghost."

I didn't know what to make of that, but unlike my brothers I had faith that Maverick would clue us all in when he felt it was time. I hung out for a little while longer, then my phone dinged with a notification. It wasn't a text message, or an NFL alert. No, it was TikTok, notifying me that Tara posted a new video. Stupidly, I opened the app and watched the edited video of Tara opening her acceptance letter in front of Hawk.

"You going to continue to deny your attraction toward her?"

"Fuck off," I growled.

He laughed at me, then before he retired for the night he whispered, "The crime isn't in the attraction, it's in the execution."

Again, the words fucking haunted me. Even now, I can't stop hearing them play over in my head.

"Take cover, Uncle G!"

Easier said than done when you're six three and there's nothing but a couple of bean bag chairs to hide behind. I pull my t-shirt over my head, and roll onto my back, waving my shirt like a white flag.

"I surrender," I call back to Vito. "It's over, kid. They won."

I like to think we put up a good fight, but the truth is the little ones killed us, and them pairing up with Sophia and Tara—well, that didn't help us either.

"What happened to whole 'never give up, never back down' speech?" Tara taunts from the other end of the living room where her, Sophia, and Carmine are locked and loaded.

“That was two hours ago,” I sit up, and pull my t-shirt back on. Pushing my arms through the sleeves, I find Tara’s eyes from across the room. “And it wasn’t supposed to be four against two.”

“Does that mean we win?” Sophia asks, pushing the goggles she stole from her brother on top of her messy curls.

Fuck, she’s adorable.

“Yes,” Tara says, lowering her Nerf gun to the floor. “We’re the champs!” She wraps her arms around Sophia, giving her an affectionate hug. “I told you we were going to crush them. They never stood a chance.”

“That’s because girls rule, and boys drool.”

“Hey,” Carmine argues. “If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t have won. The two of you couldn’t shoot Uncle G.”

“Actually, I got a couple of clear shots,” Tara says, and I roll my eyes.

Technically she isn’t lying. The girl shot me in the dick three times and nearly took out my left nut.

Vito tosses his gun on the floor, fixing me with a glare.

“You let them win,” he accuses. “Next time I want to be on Tara’s team. You can have Sophia.” He takes off for the kitchen sulking as he climbs on top of a stool and helps himself to the multitude of snacks I bought.

I turn back to Gianluca, Carmine, and Antonio as they ransack what’s left of my apartment.

“They’re like three tiny tornadoes,” Tara marvels.

My gaze cuts to her, and I stare as she smiles at my nephews who are ten seconds away from putting a hole in one of my walls. After a moment she glances back at me.

“You know what we forgot to get from Walmart?”

“No, but I reckon you’re going to tell me.”

“A broom.” She tucks her hair behind her ears and starts to pick up the little blue bullets that decorate the carpet.

“Leave it,” I say. “I’ll clean up when they leave.”

She ignores me like the brat she is and continues to scamper around the living room collecting little foam bullets. Rather than fight with her, I keep my mouth shut and let her do her thing, giving myself a moment to appreciate the view. I’ve been a fucking boy scout all day, ignoring the way the leggings she’s wearing showcase her toned legs, and because her nipples aren’t playing peekaboo today, I’ve managed to avoid staring at her rack too.

My phone chimes with a text, and I reluctantly tear my gaze away from Tara’s ass to read the message my sister sent.

“Looks like the party is over, kids. Your moms are on their way to pick you hellions up.”

A relieved breath escapes me as I set the phone down on the floor next to me. I love these kids, but, man, I was ready to tap out an hour ago. Two of them wouldn’t have been that bad. Three or more is overachieving and I’m not about that life.

“But we didn’t do the TikTok!” Sophia protests as she hops down from the stool and runs straight for Tara. “You was gonna make me TikTok famous.”

Tara laughs as she fixes Sophia’s ponytail.

“I’m still trying to be TikTok famous myself.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“I’d say your damn near there.”

Her eyes flit to me. “Have you been looking at my TikTok?”

I shrug. “I was bored.”

“Well, I’m glad I could entertain you.”

“You know I may have gotten on your case about your obsession with the phone, but I’m starting to see how much work you put into all those videos.”

“A person can make a full-time job out of it.”

“But not you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I didn’t realize you wanted to be a nurse.”

“Oh,” she murmurs. “Well, it’s an option.”

“So then why apply to a school that is known for their nursing program if it’s only an

option?”

She stops picking up the bullets and sighs. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Go for it.”

“Mark is going to Rutgers. He got a full scholarship to play football.”

“Is that supposed to impress me?”

“No, but him deciding to go to school in New Jersey had a lot to do with me applying to school in Staten Island. I didn’t want to seem like I was following him, so I chose a school forty minutes away.”

“So you don’t want to be a nurse?”

“I don’t know what I want.” She pushes her hair away from her face and tucks it behind her ears. “I have time to figure it out. But even if I decide not to go into nursing, I think going away to college would be good for me. A new beginning where no one knows I’m...what did you call it...biker royalty.”

I suspect it’s normal not to know what you want out of life. After all, I’m twenty-seven, and I still don’t have anything figured out.

She kicks my legs apart and moves to stand between them. Towering over me she crosses her arms under her tits and cocks her head to the side.

“You’re not going to say anything, are you?”

Even with my niece running circles around us, I can’t help but wonder what she’d do if I grabbed her hips and pulled her onto my lap. She’d fit perfectly, there isn’t a

doubt in my mind.

“And risk you telling everyone my mother breastfed me until I was three? Nah.”

She laughs, stepping over my legs to sit on the floor beside me.

“You really need a couch.”

“So pick one out and order it for me. I’ll give you my credit card.”

Her gaze snaps to me as I fold my arms behind my head and lean against the bean bag. “Are you serious?”

Before I can answer, Vito interrupts.

“Uncle G what’s the password for the WiFi, my YouTube isn’t working.”

“Sixty-nine, sixty-nine,” my namesake, Gianluca, reveals as he rushes over to us. He shoots me a toothless grin as he rocks back on his heels. “Uncle G says that’s his favorite number.”

It’s my favorite position too.

I glare at the little terror giving up all my secrets for about a second before turning my attention back to Tara. I won’t pretend that I don’t like the blush that stains her cheeks. I like it a fuck ton actually and my mind starts to run off the rails, entering dangerous territory. I start to wonder just how far Tara’s gone with that little douchebag, Mark. Even if she let him go down on her, I doubt she got the full experience. That fucker probably couldn’t find her clit if it had a neon sign illuminating it for him.

Sophia plops down on my lap, completely breaking my train of thought when she almost crushes my balls.

“Can we do the TikTok now? Pretty please with a cherry on top?”

Tara grabs her phone and inches closer to me, tugging Sophia between us.

“Okay, but only because you added the cherry.” She hands Sophia the phone and shows her how to scroll through the videos. “Which trend do you want to try?”

While the two of them decide on that, I pull out my own phone and open the same app. It doesn’t take me long to navigate it. I click on the tab that reads following and a bunch of Tara’s videos pop up. I watch her do her make up for about ten seconds in one, and dance to some god-awful tune in another.

“What’s this little number next to the triangle?” I ask.

“That’s the number of views the video has,” she says.

I hum at that. Some of them have over a hundred thousand. I click on the one with the most, and my jaw clenches at the sight of her with Mark. The last time I looked at her profile, I didn’t scroll all the way down, so I missed some of these.

Clicking one of the videos I didn’t watch, I grind my teeth when Tara appears on the screen with Mark, each of them holding tortillas in their hand. He takes a drink of water, and she slaps him on the cheek with the tortilla.

I smile.

I like this one.

She takes a sip of water next, and he hits her with the fucking tortilla. I tear my gaze away from the screen and glare at Tara.

“I really thought I had a chance with that one going viral. The tortilla challenge was all the rage for a while.”

“Delete that.”

She scoffs. “Why? It’s got the most views.”

“For one, that prick is in it, and he’s hitting you with a fucking tortilla. Did your father see this?”

A giggle slips past her lips. “Of course he did. If you scroll down a couple of more videos, you’ll find one of him and I doing it too. I beat him.”

I can’t imagine Maverick participating in such a ridiculous thing, much less hitting his daughter with a fucking tortilla, but I scroll and just like Tara said, there’s a video of him and her slapping each other with the tortillas. He breaks first, sputtering water from his mouth and nose after his daughter whacks him.

Ladies and gentlemen, I present our fearless leader.

The president of the Satan’s Knights.

A TikTok sensation.

“Want to give it a go? See if I can get more views with you than I did with Mark or my dad?”

My eyes lift from the screen.

“I’m not hitting you in the face with a tortilla.”

“Can we do it?” Sophia asks.

“No,” I answer. “No one is hitting anyone with tortillas. I don’t even have tortillas.”

“We can Doordash them,” Tara suggests.

Before I can tell her no, the doorbell rings. I toss my phone onto the floor and hoist myself up. Realizing it’s probably my sisters coming to collect their spawn, I hurry to the door. It takes fifteen minutes for them to collect all their belongings and say goodbye six times. Sophia throws a tantrum because we didn’t smack her with tortillas, and I promise to have a Mexican fiesta next week with all the kids. When they finally leave, I throw myself on the floor next to Tara, and hand her my credit card.

“Order a couch.”

“You can’t just order a couch online, Capone. Don’t you want to test it out.”

“I’ll test it out when it gets delivered.” I turn to face her. She looks as tired as I feel.

“You hungry? I can order some real food.”

“Oh, you mean, you’re done feeding me things filled with red dye?”

“Yeah, I’m moving onto processed foods. How do you feel about McDonalds?”

She giggles as she scoots closer to me. “Thanks, but I’m not really hungry.” Stretching her arm across my body, she tugs one of the throws we bought at the store and drapes it across her body.

“Are you cold?”

“A little.”

The right thing to do would be to turn up the heat or offer her a sweatshirt. Maybe even take her home. Do I do any of those things? Absolutely not.

“C’mere,” I say, spreading my arms wide. She stares at me blankly for about a second, then curls into my side and lays her head on top of my chest. My arms wind around her, and I suck in a breath.

Why does she have to fit so perfectly in my arms?

She throws her leg over my thigh, and I bite back a grown.

Way too perfect.

“I should take you home,” I murmur as my throat goes dry, and I pull her even closer.

“Not yet.”

“Tara...”

“I just want to stay like this for a few minutes.”

I don’t argue even though I’m not sure I can handle a few minutes without wanting a thousand more, and when she falls asleep, I close my eyes and fall right along with her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CAPONE

My eyes spring open at the sound of the phone ringing, but I can barely move seeing as there is a five-foot three furnace sprawled across me. In all my twenty-seven years I have never once fallen asleep with my arms wrapped around a girl.

I didn't realize what I was missing.

I could stay like this forever and that thought alone should have me throwing her off my body, but instead, I smooth my hand down Tara's back. The heat radiating her from her body has me lifting my other hand to her forehead, and I start to get alarmed.

The girl feels like she is on fire.

"Tara, babe, you gotta wake up."

She murmurs something I can't quite make out, and the phone starts to ring again. This time I maneuver her to my side to grab it, and my eyes nearly pop out of my head when I see it's ten o'clock.

"Fuck," I hiss, scrambling to sit up. Swiping my thumb across the screen, I accept the call, knowing I'm about to get chewed out by Maverick. "Hey?—"

"Where the fuck are you?"

My brows pinch in confusion at the sound of Hawk's voice, and I pull the phone away from my ear to glance at the screen.

"Hawk? Why are you calling me from Maverick's phone?"

"I'm not dickface, and you should be grateful for that. He's ready to kill you."

Maybe I'm still half asleep but nothing is making sense.

"It literally says Maverick on my phone."

"I don't care if it says Jesus Christ. Mav called church an hour ago, and everyone's been waiting on your ass. Then Holly shows up twenty minutes ago, saying she can't get in touch with Tara, and all hell broke loose. Shady is on his way to your apartment."

"Fuck." I glance back at Tara, who has barely moved since I slid her off my chest. Her cheeks are flushed and she's out cold. Getting her up and out of here before Shady arrives is not happening. I scrub my hand over my face. "The kids knocked us out. We dozed off."

"I don't really give a fuck, but I'm telling you now, you better come up with a different story."

"But that's the truth." I grip the phone tighter. "I think she's sick."

"What?"

"Tara...man, she's burning up."

"Maybe you're not hearing me. You're a dead man. Give the girl the girl some

Tylenol and get your ass over here.”

Right. Tylenol would be helpful if I had some.

He disconnects the call without another word, and I toss the phone onto the floor. Turning to Tara, I give her shoulder a gentle shove. “Tara, you really need to get up. Your uncle is on his way over here.”

She stirs only slightly. I reach for my phone again and quickly pull up Shady’s contact info. He answers on the second ring.

“You better have a good fucking excuse as to why you’re not answering anyone’s calls.”

“I’m sorry. We fell asleep.”

“You fell asleep,” he parrots. As soon as he repeats my words, I realize as innocent as the truth is, it doesn’t sound all that good, especially not to the overprotective uncle.

“Yeah, man. I swear. Look, Hawk told me you’re on your way over here. There’s no reason for that. I’ll get her to the clubhouse, just buy me some time.”

“I’m sorry are you asking me to cover for you.”

Yeah, that didn’t sound too good either.

“No, I’m asking you to trust me. I think I earned that much from you. Tara is safe, but she’s sick, and your efforts would be better suited if you told her mother that news, that way she can take care of her when I bring her to the clubhouse and Maverick can get on with church.”

“Maverick is going to kill you.”

“I’ll deal with Maverick. You deal with Holly, and while you’re at it, make sure we have some Tylenol on hand.”

Before he can say anything else, I end the call.

“Tara, you gotta wake up.” I brush the hair away from her face, and stare at her for a beat. Her eyes flutter open, and it takes a moment for them to focus. “Hey,” I whisper. “You don’t feel good, do you?”

She shakes her head. “I just want to sleep.”

“I know, but I gotta get you back to the clubhouse.” My thumb caresses her cheek. If it were up to me, I’d carry her straight to my bed, and let her sleep off whatever bug she seems to have caught, but my poor parents would have a body to bury if I did that. “You think you can stand, or do you want me to carry you?”

“I can walk.”

Thank fucking God.

“You look awful!” Holly exclaims, rushing straight for her daughter. She presses her palm to her forehead, and her eyes swing to me. “For fuck’s sake, Capone, she’s burning up.”

“Mom, stop. It’s not his fault I’m sick,” Tara says, swatting Holly’s hand away from her forehead. “If anything, he took great care of me.”

I don’t know about that. I didn’t do anything but stop on the way over here to get her a Gatorade and some Tylenol. I figured since I was already dead meat, there wasn’t

really a reason to wait until we got here to get her the meds she needed.

“Capone,” Maverick booms. “I need a fucking word.”

I guess that’s code for come here so I can kill you .

“Dad, before you go off on Capone, you should know it’s my fault we fell asleep. After his sisters picked up the kids, I got really tired. I fell asleep on the floor, and I guess he did too. Neither of us heard our phones.”

“Tara, baby, this isn’t your concern,” Maverick grinds out, his fists curling at his sides as he glares at me.

“It is though,” she argues. “You asked Capone to watch out for me, and he’s been doing that. You think he wants to spend his days hanging out with a me? Cut him some slack.” Her gaze cuts to me and she offers me a weak smile. “I’m sorry I flaked out on you, but I really did have a good time with the kids today. Can we do it again next week?”

Sure, princess. We can play babysitter club whenever you want so long as your daddy doesn’t bury me in the woods somewhere.

“I’m taking you home,” Holly says. “Let’s go.”

“I’m not going anywhere until dad promises not to give Capone the riot act.”

“Tara, baby, you gotta mind your business. This has nothing to do with you and everything to do with the club.” Maverick turns to me. “Chapel. Now.”

I give him a curt nod, before turning to Tara.

“I’ll be fine.”

“You better be,” she says, giving her father a pointed look.

Just like I’ve never fallen asleep with anyone in my arms, I’ve never had a girl go to bat for me either. Tara’s breaking down all my defenses, and it’s taking every ounce of self-control not to fucking kiss her. Right here. Right now. In front of everyone.

Her father.

Her mother.

All my brothers.

I want to feel those lips on mine more than I want my next breath.

Her gaze cuts back to me and I wink at her.

“Go get some rest. I’ll stop by tomorrow with pizza.”

Her eyes light up. “Homemade?”

“Homemade.”

She looks back at her dad. “If you kill him, I’ll never forgive you.”

Her words are meant to be a joke, I think, but they hit me deep in the chest. Holly goes to lead her toward the door, but Mav stops them, calling on one of the prospects to follow them home, and stand guard until he can get there himself. When they finally leave, I start for the chapel but am quickly halted by Mav as he presses a firm hand to my chest.

“From this point forward, you are no longer running interference between Tara and Mark.”

“Come on, Mav?—”

“I’m not finished,” he growls. “I no longer give a fuck if that little prick sniffs around her. He’s irrelevant. We have bigger problems, and Tara’s safety is high on the list of priorities. You stick to her like glue. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

Wait. So I’m not in trouble?

“Yes, sir.”

“If it’s her life or yours, you choose hers.”

Jesus Christ. He’s not playing around.

“Say it,” he roars. “I need to hear you say it.”

I don’t know what the fuck is going on, but I hear him loud and clear, and the words I speak next come freely and with conviction.

“I choose Tara. Whatever the circumstances. However great the threat. I choose her.”

He stares at me for a moment, his fingers curling around my shirt, as he searches my eyes. I don’t know what he’s looking for, maybe it’s sincerity—but whatever he finds seems to satisfy him because he releases his hold on me and pats me on the back.

“Good. That’s real good. Now, get your fucking ass inside that chapel.”

“I know everyone here has been on edge, talking shit and wondering what the fuck is

going on, but I couldn't bring anything to this table without having all the facts," Mav says, pausing to light his cigar. He takes a few puffs before continuing, "The night Tara caught Mark cheating on her, Shady had gotten a call from Parrish up in New York."

Still reeling from the conversation we had before we entered the chapel, I swipe a hand over my face. I don't like where this is head. Nothing ever good comes out of that guy Parrish's mouth. It's how this whole mess started.

A while back the former president of the Satan's Knights New York charter paid Maverick a visit. His club already had beef with the Sinoloa cartel, and their current president, Wolf, was struggling. In an attempt to keep their charter legit, Wolf depleted their gun supply.

If they wanted a fighting chance of staying alive, they needed guns, and they needed them quick. All our weapons were tied up in a deal we had in place with the Corrupt Bastards MC, but that didn't stop Maverick from helping out our brothers in New York.

He shit on the deal with the Bastards, but we're the ones that went up the creek without the paddle when we discovered our former VP, King, was working with both the cartel, and the Corrupt Bastards to pin us against New York.

It's been an uphill battle ever since.

Revenge is funny that way.

"He's got intel that would suggest allies of the Corrupt Bastards are headed here to meet with the cartel," Shady reveals.

Rolling my neck, I try to make sense of what that could mean for us, but before I can,

Ghost chimes in.

“Maverick isn’t buying it.”

Setting his cigar in the ashtray, Maverick leans back in his chair at the head of the table. “We took out some major hitters when we retaliated on them for high jacking our guns and killing Colt. A whole fucking hit squad to be exact, and we obliterated the Boston chapter of the Corrupt Bastards. I think whatever they’re planning is bigger than anything we could anticipate. This business about an ally club...it’s a cover for something. They want us to focus our attention on that so we don’t see them coming.”

“If that’s true, this could be the demise of both our charters,” Shady interjects.

“We knew this was coming,” Ghost adds.

He’s right. We knew they’d eventually come for us; we just didn’t know when. We’ve been biding our time, slowly building our stockpile of guns careful not to catch any heat from the local sheriff who has been watching us since King disappeared. But even with a warehouse full of AK47s, we’re no match for a fucking cartel as big as the one that’s gunning for us.

“Wolf finally got eyes on the club he was concerned about and they’re currently in Virginia hunkering down at another charter’s clubhouse, which buys us a couple of days,” Maverick reveals.

“Do we got a name on this club?” Leftie asks.

“Highway Renegades,” Shady returns.

“Never heard of them,” Leftie says.

“None of us have, but Wolf has it on good authority that they’re looking to make a name for themselves, and what better way to do that then by getting in bed with the Cartel.”

“I get it,” Leftie starts, pausing to scrub a hand over his weathered face. “But why come all the way down here to do it? There are hit squads up north. We might be getting ahead of ourselves for no reason.”

I think we’d all like to believe that, but the man is stuck in a period of time that doesn’t exist no more, one where the good in the world outweighs all the bad. Where peace trumps war and a man’s conscience is held in high regard.

“I’m leaning more to where Maverick’s head is at,” Wiz says.

“If I’m wrong, and this isn’t a distraction, then the Highway Renegades are going to go after our pockets. Which means they’re coming for our guns. If they become the main supplier out here, we’re done. I’m not willing to take that chance and neither is the president of the New York charter. Valeria started this shit, and now I’m done playing by her rules.”

“So this really has jack shit to do with this other club,” Ink says. “You’re ready to move on Valeria’s whole operation.”

“The truth is we should’ve finished this bitch when we took down her hit squad, but we didn’t have the ammunition to do it. Now we can sit wait for her to strike again, or we can cut her off at the knees. I vote for the latter, and so does New York. Wolf, Parrish, and a few others are gonna be headed down here and they’re not leaving until we make our move.”

“When are they due to arrive?” Torque asks.

“While New York is only about an eight-hour drive from here, they need to make arrangements. War doesn’t discriminate and it’s usually the ones we love that become casualties of our mistakes.”

Suddenly Maverick’s words from earlier make sense. The man didn’t lose his shit because we fell asleep in my apartment, and neither of us answered our phones. He was terrified his sins caught up to his only daughter.

“They’re getting their people situated and putting their charter on a soft lockdown until we make our move. They should be here no later than Sunday—the earliest tomorrow, which means we need to get this place in order. Holly has already been working on making sure we’re fully stocked and after she and Birdie are finished working at H it’s written all over his face. But the kid is right we need another option other than the crematory and us owning the land in Poplar Creek means law enforcement can’t act without a warrant.”

“We can relocate Booker & Mann when this over if we have to,” I add.

Bearing we’re all still alive.

Maverick goes silent for a moment, then his eyes lock with mine. “Leftie will cut you a blank check, securing a legit transaction between our LLC and Capizzone’s Landscaping. Take it to your old man and set up the rental.”

I wasn’t expecting him to be so agreeable. I guess that just leaves one thing.

“What about Tara?”

He narrows his eyes.

“We spoke about Tara already. Come Sunday, Tara will be here with everyone else.

Until then, you balance things out. Get this shit squared away with your old man while she's at school tomorrow." He pauses. "If she still isn't feeling well, and doesn't wind up going, I'll make sure Holly brings her here. That will give you even more time to deal with things."

While I'm grateful for the direction, I was more concerned about the plan in place for when all hell breaks loose. I can't be in two places at once, and I won't go against my vow to protect her. I don't share any of those thoughts with him though. The man looks like he's had enough.

"We've got a lot of work to do in the next forty-eight hours," Mav continues before his gaze lands on Ink. "Some of us have important decisions to make too. Tomorrow night I want you to stop whatever the fuck you're doing. I don't care if you're wiring surveillance cameras or loading weapons into crates. You drop whatever it is, and you go be with the people you most want to spend time with because I can't guarantee you'll get any time at all with them after tomorrow. In fact, I can almost guarantee you won't."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CAPONE

I kill the engine on my bike and stare up at the aluminum sign hanging over the entrance of my father's yard. My gaze hones on our family name. I try to picture what my life would be like if I had followed the path my father laid for me. He'd probably be retired, and I'd be the one sitting in the trailer ordering sod. Maybe I'd have a wife and Nonna's wish for an heir might even be granted or at the very least a strong possibility.

Instead, I sit here stalling with a blank check burning a hole through my kutte. I've always been straight with my father. When he offered me partnership in his business, I turned it down, reciting the infamous line from *A Bronx Tale*— the working man is a sucker .

It wasn't meant as an insult to him. He was no sucker. He woke up every day and provided for his family. He never had to worry if he'd be killed doing the Devil's work. I respected the fuck out of my old man, I just didn't want to be him.

I wanted to pave my own way and make my own money.

Live by my rules and leave my own legacy.

And for the most part I did.

My dad didn't have to take a mortgage on the family home to put me through medical

school or work two jobs to give me a down payment on a house. I didn't ask him to dip into his savings to throw me a wedding or haggle him to pave my driveway for free.

I was my own man and I'd die my own man.

But you don't think about your regrets until the clock ticks and times run out. Then you start to wonder if you made the right choices. If I die tomorrow, will my parents be proud of me?

Probably not.

I toe the kickstand down on my bike and dismount, making my way past the rolling gate. My dad's trailer is on the other end of the yard and as my boots crunch down on the gravel I bypass the equipment he has parked to the left—the same equipment I'm going to rent from him to dig the graves of men who want me and my brothers dead.

Men, and probably a few women too.

I shake my head, dismissing the thought. I liked it better when stressing over my attraction toward Tara was the only thing on my mind. Now my head was all over the place.

After I left the clubhouse, I rode up and down the highway, struggling to keep myself in check. On one hand I was preoccupied with thoughts of the impending war, and on the other, I was worried about Tara. I wanted to hear her voice more than anything, but I didn't have her number, and even if I did, calling her in the middle of the night would only shorten my already diminishing lifespan.

Eventually I made it home to my apartment, but the second my head hit the mattress, I closed my eyes and all I could envision was her smile and those fucking freckles.

Those little dots are going to be my undoing, something I realized somewhere between four in the morning and five.

Some men have dirty dreams and wake up fisting their cocks. They jerk themselves off to the memory their subconscious self conjured up. I was one of those men until I woke up sweating, my dick flaccid, the image of me and Tara laying on the floor very much alive in my head.

I waited for shame to fill me.

For disgust to twist inside my gut.

But I felt nothing except a deep sense of longing.

The crime ain't in the attraction, brother. It's in the execution.

One day those words are going to be my saving grace.

Reaching the trailer, I climb the three steps and open the door. Elvis Presley's voice fills the tiny space as the door closes behind me. I spot my dad standing by the filing cabinet. His back faces me as he sings along with the King himself.

My lips quirk slightly as I cross my arms against my chest and lean against the door frame.

“Caught in a trap, I can't walk out,” he sings loudly and out of tune as he taps the sole of his work boots to the beat of the chorus. He slams the filing cabinet shut and lifts his arms over his head, swaying his hips as he continues to croon. “Because I love you too much baby. Why can't you see, what you're doing to me when you don't believe a word I say...”

This goes on until the song ends, then he turns around and his eyes connect with mine. There is no shame in my father's game as he grins at me.

"They don't make music like that anymore."

I push off the door and make my way toward his desk. "No, they don't."

He turns off his radio, which is probably than me, and lowers himself into the chair behind his desk, motioning for me to take the seat across from him.

"You want a cup of coffee? Your sister bought me this single serve thing. You stick some sort of pod in the top, and it brews one cup at a time. If you can figure out how to work the damn thing, help yourself."

I laugh.

"You still haven't figured out how to work your Keurig?"

He waves me off and points to the electric percolator propped on top of the filing cabinet. Now that is one hundred percent older than me. It might even be older than him.

"That works just fine," he says as he reaches for his mug. Lifting it to his lips, he takes a sip. "Delicious."

Again, I laugh. I give my family a lot of flak. They're overbearing, and love to nag me, but I couldn't imagine life without them. My dad especially.

He's a rare breed.

A relic if you will.

“You never visit me,” he says as he sets his mug down on the desk blotter from two years ago. The thing serves more as a coaster than it does a calendar. “What brings you by?”

“I have a business proposition for you.”

Intrigued, he quirks an eyebrow as he leans back in his chair and crosses his arms against his chest. The thick gold chain my mom bought him after they got married hangs low and the crucifix that dangles from it taunts me. Years ago, he had a similar one made for me. It sits in the bottom of the only coffee cup I own.

I tear my gaze away from the cross and stare at my dad.

“The club has some construction going on and we need equipment.”

“What kind of construction?”

“Nothing too crazy. We’re looking to clear some rubbish and move the trailer at Booker & Mann onto a concrete slab. It will give Hawk more room to train the dogs.” I reach into my kutte and pull out the blank check. “I need some excavation machinery and a cement truck. Whatever your rate is, tack on an additional twenty percent,” I say as I push the check across the desk.

He glances at it for a moment, then lifts his eyes back to me.

“I suppose that twenty percent is supposed to buy you no questions.”

My dad may have chosen to make an honest living, but that doesn’t mean he can’t detect a crooked operation from a mile away.

“It will help pay for the wedding.”

“I don’t need help paying for your sister’s wedding.”

“Then consider it found money. You and mom could use a vacation and I know she’s been on your case to take a trip to the mother country.” It’s been my mom’s dream to eat her way through Italy. They keep putting it off because there is always a wedding or a baby on the way. “Twenty percent is a nice chunk of change, pop.”

He nods. “It is. It’s also enough to pay for a decent funeral. What the hell are you doing, Gianluca?”

I shake my head. “You’re reading too much into it.”

“Am I?”

I fucking hate lying to the man, yet it’s something that comes so naturally to me.

“You are. You can give me back the check and I’ll go somewhere else. I just figured?—”

He cuts me off. “One son.”

“What?”

“Four daughters, one son. Love my girls, but you...” His voice trails and he shakes his head. “I hope you know what the fuck you’re doing, Gianluca.”

I force a swallow. “I’m just digging up some dirt and laying some cement.”

He stares at me for a moment, then glances back at the check.

“You know everyone in the family wants you to settle down. We get on your case

about having children of your own, but it has nothing to do with carrying on the family name.” He lifts his head. “I don’t care if you have a boy or ten girls. I just want you to know what it’s like to feel your heart beat outside your chest. Maybe, then you’ll realize how precious life is.” He slides the blank check back to me. “You can take whatever equipment you need, but I don’t want your blood money. When you’re done doing whatever it is you’re doing, take that check to the hospital and donate it to the pediatric cancer wing. Your mother has been volunteering her time since Lucia started working there. Those kids need toys and books, things to occupy them while they fight to live.” He leans back in his chair. “And while you’re there, you should take a good look around.”

The working man ain’t a sucker.

He’s full of heart.

I take the check and shove it back inside my pocket. Holding his gaze, I rise from the chair, and he does the same. We stare at one another quietly for a moment, then I tell him one more lie.

“I will.”

I called Hawk and had him help me remove the equipment from my dad’s yard. We brought it to Booker & Mann, but instead of getting to work on digging out the trench, we spent the whole afternoon relocating the dogs to the compound. The easiest part was loading them into the trucks and bringing them over, getting them situated and finding a place for all the kennels—that was a nightmare, one I happily left Hawk to deal with on his own.

I was on my way back to Poplar Creek, fully prepared to start the excavation process myself when Maverick’s voice popped into my head.

Go be with the people you most want to spend time with because I can't guarantee you'll get any time at all with them after tomorrow.

At the time he said them, I hadn't given his words much thought, but as my Harley tore down the highway, it's all I could think about. I went through the list of people in my life and when I reached my nieces and nephews, I felt my chest tighten. If I died tomorrow there would be no more Nerf gun battles. I'd never fit a tiara to my head and snuggle with my niece as she sang all the songs from *The Little Mermaid*. No one would stick a baby in my arms and call me the baby whisperer.

That didn't sit well with me.

My mind trailed back to yesterday, and I tried to convince myself that it was enough. That I spent enough time with them and made enough memories. Our time together ended on a high note so why did I want more?

And why did I want Tara right beside me?

We promised Sophia and the boys they could come over again next week, but I wasn't so sure if that was a possibility anymore. If Tara and I weren't holed up at the clubhouse, I'd be too busy slaughtering drug dealers and filling graves.

That realization had me pulling off the side of the road, but before I called my sister, Carmela, like I intended, I remembered another promise I made. One that involved homemade pizza and the girl I spent the better part of last night dreaming about.

This morning, before I left for my dad's, Holly called me to let me know Tara's fever had broke, but instead of going to school, she was going to hang around the clubhouse and rest. The kitchen over there wasn't the best, but I decided if it worked for Leftie, I'd make it work for me.

So here I am now, filling a basket at Kroeger with all the ingredients I need to make pizza.

Go be with the people you most want to spend time with because I can't guarantee you'll get any time at all with them after tomorrow.

Those fucking words.

Why did he have to say them?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TARA

Something is wrong with me. I thought it was a bug, especially after my fever went away. But I'm not so sure anymore. I'm exhausted, and every part of my body hurts from the waist down. Maybe it's the flu, or some mysterious illness that will shut down the world—whatever it is is kicking my ass and the only thing I want to do is sleep.

I should go to a doctor, but I'm not a fan of going alone, and I don't want to bother my parents?—

not with everything they have going on. That's why I pretended like everything was fine when my mom woke me up this morning. I must not have been very convincing though because she made me stay home from school, and after we dropped Shep and Theo off, she ushered me into the clubhouse and told me to go rest in one of the rooms.

I'm ninety-nine percent sure she meant my dad's room or maybe one of the spares.

She definitely didn't expect me to crawl into Capone's bed, and honestly, neither did I. But as soon as I started to pass his room, memories of yesterday flooded me.

I really didn't get a chance to think about how it felt to wake up in his arms, or revisit any of the things he said when I told him about what had happened with Mark. But once I opened the door to his room, and crawled under his sheets, it was all I could

dwell on.

My crush was back in full force, only it didn't feel like a crush at all. I had feelings for Capone, feelings I never experienced before and didn't quite understand. Was I attracted to him? Yes. A million times yes. Did he get under my skin and annoy me? The answer was also yes. The guy called me princess and he made me feel like I was a burden half of the time. But the other fifty percent he made me feel like I was the only girl to exist in his world. He looked at me in ways no one ever has, and it gave me butterflies.

Maybe it's all in my head. After all, I don't have the best track record when it comes to guys. I thought Mark was it for me, and now I'm beginning to realize, he was nothing more than a single chapter in a story that a greater force has already written the end on.

I truly believe that, and perhaps that's because my mom is always going on and on about twin flames, and all that. She wholeheartedly believes that she and my dad are dust from the same star, and that our destinies are already written.

The door creaks open, and it takes every ounce of strength I have to turn on my side to see who it is. But it's a waste of effort because I know it's him. I felt his presence before he even opened the door.

"Holly lied," Capone says as he gently closes the door behind him.

I tuck my hands under my head and fight to keep my eyes open. "It's not her fault. I told her I was feeling better so she didn't worry."

"But you're not."

I shake my head. "And now your sheets are contaminated with whatever I have."

“I don’t care about the sheets,” he says as he takes a tentative step closer to the bed and shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “What can I do to help?”

That makes me smile. It also makes me think it’s possible that my head isn’t playing tricks on me. There’s one way to find out for sure, though.

“You really don’t care if I pass whatever this is that’s got me down onto you?”

“You’d be doing me a favor.”

“Then you can lay with me for a little while.”

I may be half out of it but there is no mistaking the way his Adam’s apple bobs at my words.

“Anything but that,” he rasps. Pulling his hand from his pocket he reaches around and pinches the back of his neck. “I bought all the stuff for a pizza. It’s in the kitchen,”

“I don’t want pizza, Capone.”

“Of course you don’t,” he mutters, his eyes darting toward the door. Everything inside me?—

all the hope—it deflates. I’m about to tell him to forget I said anything when he turns back to me, searing me with a gaze so intense it takes my breath away.

“Fuck it,” he grunts.

Taking two steps toward the door, he turns the lock on the knob before making his way toward the bed, but instead of crawling in behind me like I figured he would, he slides his hands underneath me, gently lifting me and repositioning me in the center

of the bed before sliding in next to me.

I inhale sharply. “What are you doing?”

He doesn’t say anything as he makes himself comfortable under the covers, his massive body dwarfing mine. He drags in a deep breath as he winds his arms around me, and his legs tangle with mine.

The nearness sends shockwaves to my core and a throaty moan slips past my lips.

Mark and I cuddled occasionally, but it didn’t feel anything like this. It wasn’t electrically charged, and didn’t leave me wanting more.

This must be what it feels like when someone gets drunk. Their head buzzes, and their body tingles.

Before I even realize what I’m doing, my hips shift restlessly. The need to draw him closer to me is too strong, but he doesn’t let me. A low grumbly noise sounds from the back of his throat and his nose drops to the crown of my head.

“You’re such a brat,” he murmurs against my hair.

I try to recall if I washed it this morning, but my thoughts get derailed when he inches back and those chocolate eyes of his meld into mine.

“I like looking at you,” he says, lifting his hand to the side of my face. “I like counting your freckles.”

My nose scrunches. “I hate my freckles.”

“I love them.”

I don't know how to respond to that, so I don't. We stare at each other silently, and with each second that ticks by, I wonder if he's actually counting my freckles.

"I'm too old for you, Tara," he rasps, a tortured expression flitting across his face. "You got your whole life ahead of you. Years and years to find the right guy." He pauses, threading his fingers through my hair. "I ain't him and holding you like this is wrong."

His actions contradict his words as his hips roll against me.

"Fuck," he rumbles.

I don't know if he's fully hard, but whatever is pressing against my stomach feels thick and heavy. I may be a virgin, but I've made an art of dry fucking and have gotten off with my clothes on more times than I can count. My body knows what it's missing and it knows what it wants. No part of it cares about consequences.

"Then why does it feel right?"

He kisses the top of my head. "I don't know."

My fever must've returned somewhere in between him opening the door and crawling into this bed with me because I suddenly have the courage to take something I know I shouldn't. Something that will undoubtedly change everything. Something he might even reject or worse regret. But if I don't seize the moment, I might never get another one.

It's that thought, and that thought alone that makes me press my lips to his.

He doesn't react at first. I don't even think he takes a breath.

But he doesn't push me away either, and that knowledge sparks something deep inside of me. My eyes open and instantly lock with his. I wait for him to say something—anything, but he remains silent. Then he lowers his eyes to my mouth. Cupping my chin with his free hand, his thumb glides over my lower lip.

“This is wrong,” he repeats, lowering his head another inch. Our foreheads touch and he pinches my lip. “So fucking wrong.”

“Stop saying that,” I demanded, my voice a broken whisper.

His chest rattles with a groan. I brace myself for the rejection, but instead he slams his mouth over mine. The kiss is soft, and slow as we get used to the feel of each other's lips, but then he tilts his head, and his tongue sneaks out and licks into my mouth.

The moan that rises from my throat disappears past his lips as I try my hardest to keep up. He's too skilled, and I'm not experienced enough, so I give up quickly, and follow his lead, taking my cues from him.

He sucks on my lower lip, and my hips roll against him, once again desperate for friction. And boy, do I find it. This time there's no question of whether he's fully hard or not. My head spins and I whimper.

I need more.

He tears his mouth from mine, and my eyes spring open at the loss. Spearling his fingers through my hair, he cradles the back of my head and touches his forehead to mine.

“You're perfect,” he whispers.

“Then why’d you stop?” I ask, winding my arms around his neck. I try to pull his mouth back to mine, but he resists, pressing a kiss to the tip of my nose instead.

“I think your fever is back.”

Probably, but I really don’t give a damn. I’ve gone seventeen years without knowing what it feels like to be completely consumed by another person, and now that I have a taste, it’s the only thing I want to feel.

But my mind and body aren’t on the same page, and I can feel my eyelids begin to droop. He draws me closer, tucking my head under his chin, and I let my eyes fall shut.

“Get some rest, princess. I’ll be here counting your freckles.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CAPONE

Twenty-three. That's the number of freckles that spread across the bridge of Tara's nose. There are a cluster of about ten on her left cheek, and six on her right. I didn't get a definitive count on the sprinkle that decorates her forehead because her hair was in the way, and I didn't want to disturb her while she slept.

That's also the reason I stayed in bed with her for as long as I did, or so I told myself.

Deep down I knew it was lie.

I crossed a line, I shouldn't have crossed, and now I don't know how life is supposed to go on as it did before I fucking kissed her.

The sick thing is, I don't even feel guilty. As far as I'm concerned, the last twenty-seven years of my life have been a giant waste. All the meaningless sex, and the women I ran through—they were temporary highs that, at the time, I thought were what I needed.

What I wanted.

But I never felt anything close to what I felt when I kissed Tara, and now I get it...I get why men turn their lives upside down for one woman. When it's the right one it's not a sacrifice.

“Hey, have you seen Tara?”

Holly’s voice interrupts my thoughts, and I turn my attention away from the oven to meet her gaze.

“She’s in my room sleeping.”

“Why is she in your room?”

I shrug and the lie slips easily from my lips. “I found her in there earlier. She didn’t look too good so I let her be.”

If I keep going this route, I won’t have to worry about the cartel offing me. Maverick and his wife will do the job themselves, and ironically, there’s a fresh trench waiting for my body. I even supplied them with cement.

Holly frowns. “You think her fever is back?”

The timer sounds on the oven, and I grab a dish towel off the counter. Anything to avoid looking at Holly while I lie to her some more.

“I didn’t feel her head or anything, but her cheeks were flushed.”

I kill the timer and open the oven, pulling out the pizza I made for Tara.

“Well, that sucks. I think she might have the flu.” She pauses for a beat. “Did you make that yourself?”

I set the pizza on top of the counter, and glance in Holly’s direction.

“I promised Tara I’d make her a pizza last night.”

She stares at me a little too long and sweat starts to bead on my forehead. “And you’re a man of your word,” she says.

I shrug. “I try to be.”

Another lie.

“Well, I’m going to go check on her. Maverick and I were going to take the kids to Sally’s. A couple of the guys are going too. I guess it’s one last hurrah before we’re all stuck here.”

I wonder if she knows the truth behind the big outing, and how her husband ordered us all to be around the ones we love most. I’m guessing she doesn’t because if she did, she’d know it’s not the last hurrah, but rather the last fucking supper.

“But if she’s not feeling well, we’ll just go home. She probably wants to be in her own bed anyway.”

I’m not so sure about that. I think she’s just fine where she is. She’ll be even better when I join her after the pizza is done cooking.

Just then Maverick appears in the doorway, looking especially haggard. I tear my gaze away from him, and stare at the pizza. I can’t look the man in the eye, not after what I did.

“Holly, baby, you ready? I got the boys in the truck. We just need Tara, and we can be on our way.”

“Change in plans,” Holly says. “Tara isn’t feeling well again.”

“Jesus,” he mutters. “I told you we should’ve taken her to the doctor. At least then

she'd have antibiotics for when we're on lockdown."

"I'm sorry, I was too busy washing sheets and preparing this place for the next disaster. A five-hour trip to urgent care when she seemed to be getting better wasn't high on the list of things I needed to do today."

"You should go," I blurt, instantly wishing I had fucking control of my mouth. I lift my head and look at Maverick. It's definitely not my place to say any of this to him, but tensions are high, and he looks like he can use a break from this place. Holly does too.

"Spend some time together. The boys are going to lose their minds being stuck here, it'll be good for them to get out."

"Thanks," Holly hisses, narrowing her eyes into tiny slits as she glares at me. "But the whole point was to spend time together as a family, and I'm not leaving Tara alone. Bad enough I've been too occupied to take care of her."

"If she wakes up and feels better, I'll take her over there." I pin Maverick with a look. "You told us that we should spend time with the people that matter most. You got a wife and kids. I don't have any of that. All I have are my nieces and nephews, and I was planning on spending time with them. But the boys have a basketball clinic and my niece has ballet. I'm not brave enough to take the baby by myself. You two will probably be back by the time Tara even realizes you're gone, and staying here, looking out for her...it gives me something to do."

Maverick's gaze slices back to Holly, and they exchange a look.

I fucking hate when couples communicate with only their eyes, leaving the rest of us peasants to wonder what the fuck we missed.

I clear my throat, and they both look back at me.

Maverick doesn't say anything for a beat as he crosses his arms against his chest. His dark eyes drill a hole into me, and the sweat that was pebbling at my temples, begins to drip down the sides of my face. I haven't sweated like this since I was thirteen, crushing on my science teacher.

"That doesn't sound like an ask," Maverick says, breaking the silence. "Does it sound like an ask to you Holly?"

Oh, look they're back to loving one another again. How nice.

Elbowing Maverick, Holly sighs. "You promise you'll bring her by if she feels up to it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Holly's brows knit together, and she pokes a finger against my chest.

"Call me ma'am again, and I'll make sure everyone here calls you Gianluca from now on."

I flinch. "I'm guessing you got that from Tara?"

"It may have slipped."

Jesus.

The apple didn't fall far from the tree.

These Burnside women are wicked.

“Sorry. It’s been a long day, and the impending doom is fucking with me.”

Oh God, the lies just keep coming. The only thing fucking with me is the taste of their daughter’s tongue. I swipe my hand over my face. “I’m going to shut up now.”

“Good idea,” Maverick grunts. Then he drapes his arm across Holly’s shoulders. “Let’s go check on her before we go. Is she in my room?”

Holly’s gaze cuts to me. “No, she’s sleeping in Capone’s bed.”

That’s it. I’m toast.

Goodbye world. You’ve been...mediocre.

Five out of ten stars.

I hope hell is better than this.

I check the time on my phone. She’s been sleeping for hours, whimpering on and off. I don’t know if she’s dreaming, or if she’s in pain, but the longer it goes on the more worried I become. I’m kicking myself in the ass for insisting on Maverick and Holly going to dinner. They still haven’t returned and if they don’t soon, I’m going to have to call them.

Taking a seat on the edge of the bed, I touch my hand to Tara’s forehead. She’s cooler than before, but she still feels a bit warm. I’m not good at taking care of people when they’re sick. That’s probably because my mother didn’t baby us whenever we became ill. She loaded us up with Motrin and sent us off to school. She said it would strengthen our immune systems, but looking back on it now, I think she just relied heavily on the break she got when we were in school.

Tara stirs and I drop my hand from her head. Her eyes flutter open, and I feel the corners of my mouth turn upward at the sight. Her smile hooked me, but those eyes have the power to sink me.

“Hey,” I murmur.

She blinks three times. “I had the weirdest dream.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I dreamt we kissed.”

Unable to stop myself, I bend my head, brushing the tip of my nose against hers.

“It wasn’t a dream.”

She smiles softly. “I know. I just wanted to see what you’d say and depending on your response, maybe try to convince you to do it again.”

She ain’t going to have to try too hard.

“I’ll kiss you after you eat something. I made you pizza.”

Her eyes shine brightly, and that devastatingly beautiful smile of hers gets a little bit wider.

“I get homemade pizza and your hot mouth. How did I get so lucky?”

“You’re such a brat.” I kiss her nose. “I take it you’re feeling better?”

“I think so.” She pulls her lip between her teeth and pushes herself into a sitting

position, leaning her back against the wrought iron bed frame. “How long was I out for?”

“A couple of hours. Your parents took your brothers to Sally’s for dinner. I told them I’d feed you then take you over there if you felt up to it.”

She raises an eyebrow. “And they went for that?”

“They did.”

She hums thoughtfully. “Okay, well why don’t you go heat my pizza and we’ll take it from there.”

I slap my hands against my thighs and nod in agreement. I’m about to stand, but something holds me back. Glancing over my shoulder, I stare at her. She looks a little livelier than before, but she’s still very pale and that concerns me. “Are you sure you’re okay? I’d feel better if you were in the kitchen with me and not alone.”

She rolls her eyes. “Capone, go heat my pizza. I have to pee, and I don’t need an escort to do that.”

“Right.” I push up from the bed and head for the door. “I’ll be right back.”

It takes me about five minutes to heat the pizza. I grab her a drink from the fridge and make my way back to my room.

With everyone gone, including the prospects, it’s eerily quiet. A sign that danger is on the rise. I chalk it up to the shit with the cartel, but maybe it’s deeper than that. Being alone with Tara...well, it doesn’t get more dangerous than that, does it?

I enter my bedroom holding the pizza in one hand, and her drink in the other, but

when my eyes land on the bed, it's empty.

“Tara?” I call out as I walk toward the bed and set the pizza on top of the nightstand, along with her drink. “Are you still in the bathroom?” My gaze cuts to the closed door and it lowers to the crack of light that streams out from above the saddle. When she doesn't answer, my gut clenches. Everything the club discussed at church—all that stuff about the Cartel and the Highway Renegades looking to strike—comes flooding back to me and I rush for the bathroom. I test the doorknob only to find it locked from the inside, then I throw my shoulder into it. It takes two attempts before the door busts open, and I find Tara passed out on the floor.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CAPONE

“Answer the phone, Goddamnit! Please just answer the fucking phone.” When I get Holly’s voicemail for the umpteenth time, I throw the phone across the hospital waiting room. I’ve been calling her, and Maverick non-stop since I found Tara on the floor. Hell, I’ve called every member of the fucking club at this point and not one of them has answered the phone.

I spear my fingers through my hair and tug at the ends. Images of Tara lying unconscious on the tile floor, me begging her to wake up and checking her for a pulse only to find a faint one, fill my head. I’ve never been more terrified in my life.

My first call was to Maverick. When he didn’t answer, I immediately called 9-1-1. An ambulance arrived within five minutes, and the paramedics started working on her, but nothing they did seemed to get her vitals back up.

I rode in the ambulance with her, but as soon as we arrived here, they took her into the emergency room, and I haven’t heard a word since. I keep beating myself up because when the paramedics asked me if I was next of kin, I said no. Now, I can’t get in touch with anyone who is, and nobody is telling me anything.

I don’t want to leave her here by herself or I’d go to fucking Sally’s and drag them all out of there by their fucking nose hairs.

I just wish someone would tell me what to do.

Feeling unhinged, I stalk toward the nurse's station. The same nurse who refuses to give me any updates spots me and rolls her eyes before she whispers something to the nurse beside her. It takes everything in me not to pull a John Q on this bitch. The only difference is my gun has more than one bullet.

"Sir, I already told you, there's no update on Miss. Burnside. Now, I'm going to need you to take a seat. There was a mass shooting in town, with multiple casualties and several injuries. This place is about to be bombarded. You should be trying to get in touch with her next of kin while you wait, that way there is someone we can speak to when we have something to report."

Dread churns in my gut. Dismissing her flippant attitude, I lean over the counter separating us and get directly in her face. Her eyes go wide with fear, and for a split second I relish in the satisfaction.

"Where was the shooting?" I grind out.

"I...uh..." Her eyes dart behind me. "Security! This man is harassing me."

"I asked you a fucking question. How is that considered harassment?"

"Sir," the security guard calls from behind me. "Please step away from the counter or I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Glaring at the nurse, I clench my teeth. "I pray to God someone you care about gets sick, and you're greeted with an unhelpful cunt like you."

I pull myself together and comb my fingers through my hair before turning to the guard.

"You're lucky I'm not escorting you out of here," he says. "Another word out of you

and I will.”

“She deserved it,” I argue. “She won’t fucking tell me a goddamn thing about the girl I brought in here.”

“The hospital is about to see an overload in which it hasn’t seen in years. The place is understaffed, and everyone here tonight is about to be overworked.” He shakes his head and presses the power button on the television hanging above his head before he starts flipping through the channels. “You think something like this would be all over the news.” Suddenly he stills, then slowly turns to me, his eyes zeroing in on the patches decorating my kutte. He doesn’t have to say a word, the expression on his face when he lifts his eyes to mine is all the confirmation I need.

“The shooting was at Sally’s BBQ.”

“I’m sorry,” he says as he powers off the television. “That’s your club’s place, isn’t it?”

I don’t respond. I can’t even fucking think. My legs start to give out, and I press a hand against the wall to keep myself from falling. Everything around me moves in slow motion. The sliding doors to the emergency room open, and paramedics race through them, pushing a gurney straight into the triage unit. Sirens blare, but I don’t hear them. All I hear is the ringing in my ears. Another ambulance pulls behind the first, and a second gurney flies past me.

The ringing starts to dull, but my vision begins to blur. The room spins and I hear someone call my name. It takes a minute for me to register the voice belongs to my sister, Lucia.

“Gianluca,” she cries, rushing toward me. She throws her arms around me as soon as she reaches me, but I don’t hug her back. My arms feel like lead. “I’m so sorry it took

me so long.”

I have no idea what she’s referring to. She pulls out of my arms, but takes my hands in hers, squeezing them slightly. It’s then that I realize she’s in her scrubs.

“She’s stable,” she whispers.

I stare at her blankly, unable to speak.

“I saw them bring her in, but I had other patients. Then I overheard the nurses talking about some guy making a scene, and when they described him, I knew it was you.”

“You’re talking about Tara.”

Cocking her head to the side, she squeezes my hands once again. “Who else would I be talking about?”

Something clicks inside my head, and I fight to make sense of it.

“You work in the cancer wing,” I say numbly.

“Yeah, but it’s all hands on deck tonight…” Her voice trails like she wants to reveal more to me, but something stops her. My guess its the Hippocratic oath.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

She sighs, her eyes bouncing around the waiting room before she brings them back to me and whispers, “Are Tara’s parents here?”

I’ve never been one to disclose club business with any member of my family, but there’s no hiding this one. I stare my sister straight in the eye and give her the grim,

ugly truth.

“I don’t even know if Tara’s parents are alive.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That shooting everyone is talking about—it was at Sally’s. Tara’s parents were there with her little brothers. Fuck, my whole club was there, Lucia.” The weight of those words finally gets to me, and my eyes sting with unshed tears. “Everyone except me and Tara. No one is telling me anything. Not about them, and not about her.” My voice cracks. “I don’t know what to do. I feel like I’m fucking drowning.” I pull my hands free from hers and lift them to my head. Tugging at my hair, I bend my knees and pray to a God I wronged.

My sister wraps me up in her arms, and I cry for the first time in years.

I cry for Tara.

I cry for her parents.

I cry for my brothers.

I think I even shed a tear for me.

“Listen to me, okay. I know this is hard, but you have to pull yourself together,” Lucia whispers. “If we can’t find her parents, we need to locate someone else who can make decisions for her.”

That makes me lift my head from her shoulder, and I roughly wipe my eyes. The only person I can imagine Holly and Maverick trusting to make decisions on behalf of any of their children is Shady. I don’t know why I didn’t think to call him. Holly wasn’t

specific when she said everyone was going to Sally's. Shady and Bianca could've been home this whole time, and it never occurred to me that I should call him.

I reach into my pocket for my phone, but then I remember in my fit of rage I threw it across the waiting room. I'm about to fetch it when I pause and turn to my sister.

"You said she was stable. What does that mean?"

She hesitates for a minute. "The doctors are running tests to try and figure out what's wrong with her. Everything has come back clear so far. No strep. No flu." She runs her fingers through her hair. "You told the paramedics she was sick all day and yesterday too. Is that right?"

I don't know where she's going with this, but it's clear my sister knows more than she's letting on. She definitely had to look at Tara's chart or speak with the doctor assigned to her case.

Struggling for patience, I sigh. "Yes, I told them she had a fever, and that it came and went, but she didn't have any cold symptoms. She was weak and slept most of the day. At one point I thought she was in pain, but I figured it was a headache or something like that." I pause, recalling when the paramedics first got to the clubhouse. "They made it seem like she passed out from dehydration, but judging by the look in your eye, it's a lot more than that."

"I could lose my job for this."

"Tell me," I growl.

"I lied to you," she whispers. "I didn't see them bring Tara in."

"Then how did you know she was here?"

“They called for oncology consult.”

Of course that made sense seeing as I knew she worked in the pediatric cancer wing, but it wasn't registering. Tara had a fever; she didn't have fucking cancer.

“Why would a doctor do that?”

“I'm guessing her blood panel flagged something, but if you want my honest opinion, she has symptoms that correlate with Erwing Sarcoma.”

“Lucia, talk to me in English. Not all of us went to fucking medical school.”

“It's a rare type of bone cancer that presents in people around her age.” She takes a step closer and lowers her voice. “The day you brought her to mom's she had that leg pain, remember?”

“She's been having that leg pain.”

“Okay, and you said there was a lump on her hip.”

I don't know the difference between a lump and just a plain old bump, but slight as it was, there was something there. Still, I'm not convinced. Tara's seventeen years old. She's just got a virus or something. Maybe there's an infection somewhere and it traveled from her bloodstream into her bones. I'm not sure that's possible, but it sounds better than cancer.

“Are you telling me those are all symptoms of this...Irving Sar-whatever you said.”

“Erwing Sarcoma, and yeah, those can be prominent symptoms. Most of the time they ignored or misdiagnosed. Then other symptoms start to occur. The doctors are going to do a full workup on her, they already ordered a CT scan and an MRI.”

The security guard appears again, interrupting us.

“Excuse me, the nurse over there said this is yours,” he says, handing me my phone. Thanking him, I take it from him. He nods and walks away, and I turn to my sister.

“Tell me I’m gonna wake up from this, that this is all one big nightmare,” I plead. I can barely recognize the sound of my own voice. It’s like I swallowed a bunch of nails, and they’re constricting my throat.

Lucia cups the side of my face and frowns. “I wish I could.”

I close my eyes and pull in a deep breath. I don’t want to insult my sister, or shit on her education, but she’s just an intern, and a CT scan and an MRI are just tests until they have results. Tara doesn’t have cancer, and her parents aren’t buried in a pile of rubble. This might not be a dream, but I refuse to accept it as reality.

Eyes open, I glance down at the phone in my hand, and I pull up Shady’s number. Hitting send, I press the phone to my ear. It rings, and rings until it goes to voicemail. I call again and he picks up.

“Please tell me you got Tara,” he begs.

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. I realize this is God doing me a favor, that telling Shady Tara is in bad shape will be hard, but not as devastating as it would be if it were Maverick I had to tell.

“Capone,” he shouts through the line. “Is Tara safe?”

“She wasn’t at Sally’s, she was with me, but I had to call an ambulance.”

“What happened?”

“She collapsed. I tried calling Maverick and Holly but...” My voice catches, and I have to force a swallow to continue, but I don’t get a chance to say another word because the phone dies in my hand.

Before my sister went back to her shift, she called our dad. Twenty minutes later he showed up to the hospital, dressed in the same clothes as he was that morning. He didn’t say anything as he sat down beside me, he just put his arm around my shoulders and let me know he was there. It’s been at least an hour since he arrived, and I still haven’t said a word or acknowledged his presence.

I keep glancing at the door, waiting to spot someone I know whether they be on a gurney or in a body bag, but every time those sliding doors open, it’s chaos. I stopped asking the nurse for an update on Tara. Everything Lucia had told me was more than I wanted to know.

So I continue to sit here helplessly with nothing but the memory of her smile to keep me going. I won’t let myself think about the kiss we shared. Recalling the feel of her lips and the way her body responded to mine is too much, and part of me wonders if that’s why we were here.

Is this punishment for taking something I shouldn’t have?

My dad clears his throat beside me. “Are you hungry? Your mother sent me with a sandwich for you, but I ate it on my way over here.”

Normally his antics would make me laugh, but all I do is shake my head.

He lets me be for a moment, then he tears his arms away from my shoulders and leans for his elbows on his knees.

Without looking at me, he says, “We can pray.”

The answer to everything in the Capizzone family.

I swallow hard, struggling to find my voice. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

His eyes slide toward me. “You begin with the Lord’s prayer, son.”

I stare at him quietly as he wills me to believe in a faith he instilled in me years ago, and he almost gets his wish, but I get derailed when I hear the familiar sound. It’s faint at first and muffled by the sound of sirens. But I know those pipes.

Rising from the chair, I leave my father where he sits, and I start for the entrance to the emergency room. An ambulance pulls up, those red and blue lights threatening to temporarily blind me. The paramedics rush out and race to the back doors. My gaze cuts to the truck that parks behind it, and it feels like I take my first full breath since finding Tara on the floor. Maverick rushes out from the driver’s seat and makes his way to the back of the ambulance.

The relief I felt only seconds ago vanishes as the paramedics try to push him out of the way. That familiar sound grows louder, and I divert my attention to the convoy of motorcycles that surround the entrance of the hospital. I try to take inventory, matching the bikes I recognize to their owners, but I get distracted when I see Shady rush for Maverick’s truck, Bianca hot on his heels. They open the back passenger doors. Shepard gets out first, looking completely unscathed, then Shady reaches in and lifts Theo into his arms. The kid is hysterical crying, clinging to his uncle. It’s like I scene from a movie, and I wish I had the power to turn it off.

Six patrol cars speed into the port, and it becomes a sea of men in uniform mixed with men who have made it their mission in life to fuck every law and every rule. My eyes cut back to Maverick, and that’s when Holly comes into my view. He lifts her from the ambulance and brings her to stand in front of him. A bandage is wrapped around her arm, but the injury goes ignored, as she laces her fingers through

Maverick's and they turn to the sliding doors I've been staring at for hours. Together they rush through the doors with Shady, Bianca, and the boys at their backs.

A hand touches my shoulder, and for a fleeting moment, my faith comes back to me, and I think it's the Lord.

My Nonna has this plaque in her room. It's a poem or maybe a prayer called Footsteps In The Sand , and it goes on to tell the story of a man walking on the beach. At first, he sees two sets of footprints in the sand, one is his and the other he attributes to being the Lord's. Toward the end of the man's life, he started to only see one set of footsteps and he questions it. After all, the Lord promised him if he chose to follow him, he'd walk through life with him. So why did he leave him all alone? The Lord responds, telling him the times he only saw one set of footprints in the sand represent all the times he carried him through the trials and tribulations of life.

It's my dad's hand I feel on my shoulder, that I know—but maybe the good Lord put his hand there to remind of something I long forgot.

Maverick and Holly enter the emergency room, but it's Maverick's eyes that meet mine first. For as long as I live, I will never forget the look on his face.

“Where is she?” he rasps.

When I don't answer quick enough, Holly rips her hand out of Maverick's and charges for me. Tears stream down her cheeks as she beats her fists against my chest.

Just like I won't forget the look on her husband's face, I won't forget the shrill sound of her sobs.

“Where's my girl!?”

Maverick steps forward, hooking his arms under hers, and pulls her toward him, her back meets his bloodstained shirt, and they both stare at me expectantly.

“She’s stable, but...”

“But what?” Maverick demands.

I know Lucia told me all those things in confidence, but I can’t keep them to myself. Tara is their whole fucking world. They deserve to know.

“It’s not good, Maverick.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TARA

Before senior year began, Sadie and I raided Hobby Lobby, and made vision boards for ourselves, highlighting all our hopes and dreams and the important things we wanted to achieve before we graduated and got thrown into the real world.

Some of the things were outrageous. For example, I mod podged a photo of Mark and I standing in front of the Eiffel Tower. Neither one of us had passports, and even if I did, my parents would never allow me to visit another country without them.

But most of the things on the vision board were feasible. I wanted to celebrate my eighteenth birthday with a family trip to the Outer Banks. Uncle Shady and Bianca were always raving about it, and I had never been. I figured we could make a family vacation out of it. Maybe Sadie would come too if her dad let her.

Growing my TikTok and finally making money from all the videos I posted was high on the list of things I wanted to accomplish too.

Another hope of mine was to graduate with honors and be accepted to the college of my choice. If that happened, then I'd likely accomplish another goal on the board, which was a weekend in New York City. I wanted to see *The Little Mermaid* on Broadway and visit the Empire State Building. Oh, and I wanted to try authentic Chinese food from China town, none of that General Tso's crap from Panda Express.

It never occurred to me that I would get diagnosed with cancer. For if it had, my

vision board would look totally different. For starters there would only be one thing on it.

A single word.

Live.

It's been days since I collapsed in the bathroom, and twenty-four hours since I learned what Erwing Sarcoma is. I've been sent for tests more times than I can count, and every few hours a nurse hooks up another bag of fluids to my IV. I don't even know what's in there. Words like surgery, chemo, and radiation play on a constant loop inside my head. I look forward to the pain meds because they knock me out, and when I'm sleeping, I can pretend I'm not the cancer girl.

Sweet dreams invade me, and I'm transcended back to Capone's room. Between the fever that wouldn't go away and the pain that shot from my hip to my leg, I felt like garbage, but I'd give anything to live those moments again. To lay in that bed and feel him next to me. To have him look at me the way he did and kiss me like I was the only girl he wanted to kiss for the rest of his life.

Then I wake to the sound of my mother crying, and I stare at the fluorescent lights above me. She dries her eyes as soon as she realizes I'm no longer sleeping, and suffocates me with love, but I know she's falling apart.

My dad is too.

He can barely look at me, which is kind of sad because I still look like me. What's he going to do when I don't? When the chemo starts, and I lose my hair—I won't look like his little girl anymore.

I think my mom has caught on to his diversion toward me. She called my uncle to

come and get him from the hospital, and he hasn't been back since. I know there is trouble with the club. On top of waking up and learning I have cancer, I also discovered my mother was shot that same night. Luckily the bullet only grazed her skin. My nurse keeps an eye on her flesh wound because she will only leave my side to go to the bathroom. I think if someone offered her a bed pan, she would take it that way she didn't have to leave me at all.

I love her, but I need a break. All this I'm pretending I'm strong, so she doesn't fall apart is exhausting.

I need to cry and grieve. Then maybe I can accept it.

A knock sounds on the door, and my mom quickly stands from the chair next to my bed, ready to greet whatever physician is here to poke and prod at me.

My dad walks in instead, my brother Shepard at his side. I fix the mask to my face the moment my eyes land on my little brother, and I spot the tears streaming down his cheeks.

Be strong.

Don't cry.

"Don't look at me like that, Holly. He wanted to see his sister."

When my parents got divorced, I did my best to shield Shepard from a lot of things. Being the oldest, I had all kinds of memories of our parents. I saw them happy and in love and miserable and apart. I didn't want Shep to only remember our parents mad at one another, not when they loved each other so much.

Sensing they're on the brink of arguing; I do what I do best. "Mom. Dad. Can you not

do this right now? And if you must, can you do it out in the hallway so I can spend some time with my brother?"

That shuts them up and my dad actually braves a glance in my direction. What he doesn't say with words, he says with his eyes. I don't know if he even realizes it.

Forcing a weak smile, I mouth the words I love you too .

He presses his hand to his chest before turning to my mother. "Come on, Holly. Let's give these two some time alone."

Clenching her fists at her side, she glares at my dad for a minute. Then she kisses Shep's cheek, and rounds the bed to give me one too.

"I will be right outside the door." Her voice cracks, but she continues, "You yell if you need me."

"I'll be fine. The only way I'd be better is if you and dad went down to the cafeteria and got me some snacks. A bag of Doritos and Sour Patch Kids if they have them."

The thought of food actually makes me want to vomit, but if I send her on a wild goose chase, then maybe I can stop wearing this stupid mask.

"If they don't have it, I'll send Capone to get you whatever you want," Dad says, ushering my mother toward the door.

At the mention of Capone, I perk up. His sister Lucia works in the hospital, and she's been checking on me regularly, but she keeps things professional, and never mentions her brother. I've been tempted to ask her if she knows why he hasn't visited me, but my mother is always hanging around, and the less she knows the better.

“Wait,” I call out to them. “Capone is here?”

My dad glances at me from over his shoulder. “Baby, he’s been here since day one. Never leaves.”

Right. I almost forgot that I’m his job. How silly of me.

“Well, he can’t ward off the invisible enemy that is cancer, so you can take him off Tara duty.”

“He’s not here following orders, Tara. I ordered him to go home the night you were brought in, and he won’t leave.” He brings his eyes to my mom, and I notice her shoulders stiffen. Before I can ask any more questions, they walk out of the hospital room.

“Mom isn’t letting anyone come see you,” Shep reveals once the door closes behind our parents.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Dad thinks its because she wants you to herself.” He looks down and shuffles his feet. “I think she’s being selfish.” His voice cracks on that last word, but he lifts his chin to stare me straight in the eye. “Are you going to die?”

When you hear the word cancer, you automatically assume the worst. It becomes a death sentence to whoever it is that’s been diagnosed.

“The survival rate for the type of cancer I have is pretty high, especially if its detected early.”

A tear slips down his cheek.

“I don’t want you to die, Tara.”

Hearing my brother say those words to me is just about undoing, but I won’t break in front of him. Just like I need to be strong for my parents, I need to be strong for him and Theo.

“And leave you?” I rasp, plastering a smile to my face. “Never.”

He wipes his eyes, but more tears continue to fall. “Can I hug you?”

“Of course you can hug me.” He closes the distance between us and I open my arms for him. Normally he’d rush into me and knock the wind out of me before doing something gross like sticking his wet finger in my ear. This hug is nothing like that, though. It’s almost as if he’s afraid he’ll break me, that’s why I squeeze him with all my might.

“I’m so happy you’re okay,” I whisper. “I don’t know all the details of what happened at Sally’s, but I know it was ugly, and I wish you didn’t have to see any of that.”

“It was awful, Tara. I saw the bullet fly past mom and hit Birdie’s cousin, Emmy,” he says as he cries into my shoulder. “Ink tried to stop the bleeding, but he couldn’t. She died in his arms, and all I kept thinking is that could’ve been mom. Then we found out about you, and I don’t know...it just feels like our family is on this crazy rollercoaster and no matter how many times we beg and plead for someone to let us off the ride, they don’t.”

His arms tighten slightly around me, and I press my lips to crown of his head.

“I’m so sorry, Shep.”

Sniffing, he pulls out of my arms. “Me too. I overheard Dad talking to Uncle Shady, and I’m scared for what happens next.”

I want to tell him he doesn’t have to be scared, that our dad will figure things out, but his feelings are valid. When you grow up like we did, you never know what’s going to happen next. There is always someone or something waiting to wreak havoc on us and all we can do is sit and wait for the next blow.

This time feels a little different though, and maybe that’s because our family is battling two things, and we have control over none of them.

“I promised dad I wouldn’t upset you, and I feel like I’m doing a crappy job at that. But I know how to make it up to you.” He offers me a crooked grin, one that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Spell panda using only two letters.”

Word puzzles and riddles have always been mine and Shep’s thing, and that’s how we spend the next few minutes. Our parents return and they don’t appear to be fighting anymore.

“They didn’t have Sour Patch Kids,” Dad says, shoving his hands into his pockets as mom opens the bag of Doritos for me.

Great, now I have to eat them.

“Thanks, I’m starving.”

“Your dad is making me go home to shower,” Mom reveals as I take a bite of a chip. “He’s going to stay with you, and I’ll be back in about an hour.” Her eyes cut to my dad. “You’ll call me if the oncologist comes in or if there are any other developments?”

He sighs. “The nurse already told us not to expect to see the doctor until later this afternoon when the rest of the oncology team comes in.”

She bites the inside of her cheek. “Fine. I’ll go.” Turning her attention to me, she leans over and kisses my cheek. “I love you.”

“Love you too, mom.”

Shep comes and gives me a kiss too before he follows our mom out of the room. Alone with just my dad, I continue to eat the chips while he paces in front of me.

This is new for us. We’re not the type of father and daughter that don’t know how to act around one another. We joke, and tease each other, and we’re always straight with one another. I’ve never been afraid to say what’s on my mind, and he’s never dismissed me. But he’s hurting, and I know for the first time in his life, he’s scared, and I don’t know how to comfort him.

Someone knocks on the door, and my dad stops pacing. Dragging in a deep breath, he braces his hands on his hips and turns his attention toward me.

“You feel like company?”

I don’t. I’m tired, and faking it for him is one thing, but faking it in front of other people—well, I just don’t have it in me. Still, I force a smile figuring it’s probably my uncle. He always finds a way to make things better whenever I’m feeling down, usually it’s a trip to Sephora.

“Sure, I’d love to see someone who isn’t mom.”

I hoped that would get a laugh out of him, I’d even settle for a smile, but all he does is nod before making his way to the door.

Pausing in front of it, he turns back to me. “I’m going to get a cup of coffee. Don’t tell your mom, I left you alone, and while you’re at it, don’t tell her I let anyone else in to see you. She thinks if she keeps you in a bubble, this will all go away, and I don’t have the heart to tell her she’s wrong.” He stares at me for another beat, his eyes glossing over. “I would tear this whole world apart for you, sweetheart, and it’s killing me that I can’t fix this for you.”

Be strong.

Don’t cry.

“I know that daddy, and I love you for it.”

He releases a shaky breath before turning back to the door and when he opens it, the dam breaks because Capone is standing there, holding a box of Sour Patch Kids.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CAPONE

To the world Tara Burnside is just a name. But to Holly and Maverick, she's the best thing they ever made. To her brothers, she's a hero. And to Mark, she'll always be the one that got away. Looking at her now, so small in that hospital bed and hooked up to all sorts of machines, she looks like everything to me.

All the things I thought I didn't want.

Things I suddenly don't want to live without.

I don't care if it's wrong. If these feelings I'm feeling are a crime, then sentence me to life because there is no walking away.

Not from her.

I'll sit outside her hospital room every day if Holly insists. I've had some good practice being a creep, and I'm the guy for the job. But I would rather sit beside her that way I can count the freckles on her pretty little face.

"You're such a brat," I whisper hoarsely. "Scaring me like that."

She wipes her eyes. "Thought I was dead, did you?"

"Yes," I admit. She had a pulse when they wheeled her away from me, but before I

saw my sister, I really didn't know what to think.

"Not yet."

Hearing her say those two words causes my fist to crush the box of sour candy I'm holding. I close the distance between us. "Hey, you don't get to say that."

I toss the candy on top of the tray, and slide the whole thing away from her, giving me room to access her. She turns her head slightly, using the hospital neckline of her gown to wipe under nose. I cup her chin, turning her head and forcing her eyes back to me.

"You're going to be okay."

She has to be.

"You don't know that." Lifting her hand, her fingers circle my wrist. "Can I talk to you?"

My brows pinch together. Mav mentioned they were giving her pain meds, maybe her confusion is a side effect of them. "Isn't that what we're doing?"

"No, I mean freely," she whispers. "I have all these thoughts in my head, and I can't say them out loud because hearing me say them will break my parents' hearts."

I'm not so sure whatever she needs to say won't break mine, but I'll deal with my feelings later. Lowering my hand from her face, I take a seat on the edge of her bed.

"Go for it."

Her lower lip quivers and she nods, relief radiating from those sad eyes of hers.

“I have cancer, Gianluca. It’s in my bones. The doctors say it’s stage two, and that I should be grateful I caught it before it metastasized. How can anyone say that to another person? I mean, is it supposed to make me feel better? Like, Oh, hey, your seventeen and you have cancer, but here’s a consolation prize.” She shakes her head. “It’s not fair.”

No it’s not. Nothing about this is fucking fair. But I don’t think that’s what she wants to hear. I honestly don’t think she wants to hear anything. She asked me to listen, and that’s what I’m going to do, even if it shatters my heart into a million pieces.

“This is supposed to be the best year of my life. That’s what everyone said, and it’s been nothing but a shit show. My boyfriend cheated on me, and I thought that was the worst thing that could happen to me, but now I’m cancer girl. Do you know they told me I probably won’t be able to go back to school? They gave my mother all kinds of information on homeschooling me through my treatment. If I’m lucky, and my body responds well to all the poison, I might make it to graduation. I hate most of the people in my school, but I really want to walk down that aisle and throw my cap up in the air with my best friend at my side.”

My hand finds hers, and I lace our fingers together. Her wishes aren’t anything out of the ordinary.

“There are so many things I haven’t experienced, and I might not get the chance. I wanted to travel. I don’t even have a passport because I’ve never left the fucking state, but I figured I had time to get one. That’s the least of it, though. What if I never know what it’s like to be loved the way my dad loves my mom? I was only just beginning to realize that what Mark and I had was nothing close to what my parents have. I want that crazy, can’t control it love that consumes every part of your body, mind, and soul. I want to find my twin flame, and I really don’t want to die a fucking virgin.”

Jesus Christ.

“I want to get married.”

As soon as she says those words, an image fills my head. I can see it so clearly. Tara in a simple white dress, a brilliant smile playing across her pretty little mouth.

“I want my dad to walk me down the aisle.” She sobs. “He can’t even look at me. It’s breaking my heart because it’s only going to get worse. I’m going to get chemo, and I’m going to lose my hair. I won’t look like me, and then he really won’t be able to look at me.”

He can’t look at her because he can’t save her, and it’s killing him. He can’t even blame himself for what’s happening to her, and that’s devastating to a self-loathing man.

“And I think my mom is on the verge of a breakdown. She’s so scared of losing me, she doesn’t leave my side. She doesn’t even sleep.” She pauses, and lifts her free hand, using the back of it to wipe the never-ending stream of tears streaking down her cheeks. I reach for the box of tissues on the tray, plucking a few from the box. She takes them and blows her nose, releasing my hand in the process.

“I can’t fault her for it,” she continues, crumbling the tissue. “I think if it were my child diagnosed with cancer, I’d do the same.” The tissue falls from her hand, and she bows her head. Her shoulders start to shake and an anguished cry rips past her lips. “That’s another thing...” She lifts her eyes back to me. “I wanted to be a mom one day. I wanted a whole bunch of babies and cancer is robbing me of that because even if I beat this, they’re going to pump my body with so much shit, I may never be able to have children.” She throws her head back against the pillow and stares at the ceiling. “It’s not fucking fair.”

I swallow thickly and lay my hand on her thigh over the blanket covering her. When she goes silent, I clear my throat.

“Can I talk now?”

Her eyes swing from the ceiling to me. I find the remote on the side of the bed and press the button that lifts the back of the bed so that she’s sitting upright. Dropping the remote, I inch forward and take her face between my hands. Her freckles distract me for a minute, but I pull myself together.

“You’re going to beat this, Tara.”

“You don’t know that. Even if the cancer doesn’t kill me, people die during surgery all the time.”

I guess that’s true, but I’m choosing to believe otherwise. I’m choosing faith, and I know how fucking ironic that is. How can a man who proclaims to be one with the Devil, put his trust in God? But sitting in this hospital for three days, I’ve done a lot of thinking. God doesn’t give you beautiful things just to rip them away from you. He gives them to you, hoping you’ll find his way back to him.

Until he proves me wrong, I’m going to believe he put Tara in my life for a reason, and that he isn’t cruel enough to take her away from me.

“I don’t want to die,” she whispers. Closing her eyes, she holds my wrists and touches her forehead to mine. “I want to drive you crazy, and watch you do silly things like have Nerf gun battles with your nephews. I want to make TikToks with Sophia. I want you to take me for rides on the back of your motorcycle, and I don’t want them to be out of duty. I want you to make me homemade pizza, and I really want you to kiss me again.”

I can give her all of those things, and I will. I'll give her whatever the fuck she wants so long as she fights this thing and wins.

But I can give her that last one now.

Without giving myself a chance to change my mind, I tip her chin and lower my mouth to hers, kissing her with a desperation I didn't know existed until this moment. Her lips taste like salt from her tears, and just as sinful as they did when I first tasted them. When they part for me, I waste no time accepting the invitation. My tongue slides into her mouth, dueling with hers as her hands drop to my shoulders. Her fingers curl into my shirt and the sweetest moan escapes the back of her throat.

The monitor next to her bed beeps, and I start to pull away, fearful I've gone too far, but her grip on me tightens.

"Don't stop," she pleads.

I pull her lower lip between my teeth, and glance at the monitor. The numbers climb as the red heart next to them flashes.

Fuck.

"Please," Tara whispers.

I release her lip, and let my mouth trail to her jaw, down to her neck. The scruff of my beard brushes against her delicate skin undoubtedly leaving marks. But it isn't enough. I don't know when I'll get the chance to see her again with Holly acting the way she is. I suck and lick, my teeth nipping away.

"Oh, God, more..." She whispers, arching her back. "Give me more."

Give her everything if I could, but that beeping monitor keeps me in check. My tongue takes one long strong at the spot where I've marked her before I pull away. I stare at her neck, all red, and starting to bruise, and I wait for the shame to wash over me. It never does and when I lift my gaze to her pouty lips, all swollen and wet from my kisses, I smile.

"Your father's going to kill me."

She licks her lips. Her eyes are bloodshot from all the crying, but they aren't full of tears anymore. They're full of something dangerous. Something I should ignore.

"It can be our little secret," she whispers, reaching for me again. I let her reel me in for one more quick kiss.

"You're such a brat," I say against her mouth.

Leaving Tara's room was the hardest thing I ever had to do, but I didn't want to overstay my welcome and risk any chance of Maverick letting me see her again. Although, I might've done that when I marked her neck. She promised she'd hide the bite with her hair, but I don't know how she planned to hide her swollen lips, or the rash my beard left around her mouth. Maybe it was a good thing Maverick couldn't look at her. However, I'm sure Holly would notice. Nothing got past that woman. She'd take one look at her daughter and know she was thoroughly kissed.

Tara would likely deny it, but if anyone asked me, I wouldn't.

Not the way I was feeling.

I made my way back to the waiting room and sat there for hours. Lucia came to see me on her break and informed me that the oncology team was in Tara's room, speaking to her, Maverick, and Holly about treatment options. A little while later,

Shady showed up to the hospital.

Since the night of the shooting and Tara collapsing, he came and went a lot, and I attributed that to a couple of things.

One, he wanted to stay updated on Tara, and like me, he hoped for a chance to see her with his own eyes. He never got one though, and that made me feel guilty.

Two, he was running the show where the club was concerned, a job that normally would be Ghost's seeing as he's the vice president. But Ghost had his hands full with Birdie losing her cousin so tragically, which left Shady holding the bag.

I was lost and out of touch with club business when Maverick initially ordered me to tail Tara, and it bothered me. This time, I didn't give a fuck.

So when Shady finished speaking with Maverick, and took a seat next to me in the waiting room, I didn't ask any questions. I didn't say a fucking word.

"Are you planning on coming back to the clubhouse anytime soon?" He questioned.

I wasn't leaving this hospital until Tara did, but I also didn't know how well that news would be received by her uncle so I kept my mouth shut.

"The club is in ruins, Capone. We have no fucking leader, and the cops are all over us. We're burying Emmy tomorrow, and the last thing I need to worry about is you."

"I'm fine." I said and kept my gaze pinned to the linoleum floor.

He didn't say anything for a second, then sighed.

"You're not fucking fine. She's seventeen, Capone. She's not even legal to buy a

pack of cigarettes, and I don't care that she's turning eighteen in a few weeks. She's sick, and in for the fight of her life. You're the last thing she needs. Not to mention, you're cut from the same cloth as the rest of us and she deserves better."

Deep down I knew he would always be the one that figured me out first.

When I don't respond, he slaps his hands against his thighs. "Damn it, Capone. The least you can do is deny what I'm insinuating is true."

I had no response for him and that only angered him more. He stood, stepped right in front of me, and that forced my eyes to meet his.

"They're discharging her in an hour. Maverick and Holly are taking her to New York for a second opinion. He's called church for six o'clock. Make sure your ass is there, and after that it would be good if you got your father's equipment off Booker and Mann's lot before the cops seize everything."

He left after that, and I continued to sit in the waiting room, until I caught a glimpse of Holly wheeling Tara out of the hospital in a wheelchair.

I glance at the clock on the wall. It's ten after six and Maverick's still not here. Everyone else is though, and I feel like they're all staring at me. Everyone except Ink, but to be fair, the man seems to be in a world of his own.

The door opens, and Maverick enters the chapel. He apologizes for keeping everyone waiting as he makes his way to his seat at the head of the table. He doesn't reach for the gavel, and that's telling.

"The last time I sat at this table, I thought I had a clear plan as to where we were headed, and I warned each and every one of you that there would be bloodshed." He stares at Ink. "I'm sorry, brother. I'm sorry it was hers that spilled out."

Ink bows his head, his jaw clenching visibly.

“I don’t know where we go from here,” Maverick admits. “I know you want revenge, and my God, do I want to give it to you, brother. But I can’t. Not now.”

“The cops are all over us,” Shady chimes in. “They want to do this by the book.”

“Fuck that,” Ink hisses, lifting his chin. “The people who shot at Holly, and took Emmy’s life don’t get off that easy.”

I want to ask if they know who they’re gunning for, if this was the work of the cartel or the Highway Renegades, but I keep my mouth shut. I’m only here because I can’t be where I want to be.

“I agree,” Maverick says. “But my daughter has to come first. I can’t give this the attention it deserves because all my attention has gotta go to Tara, and if there is anything left, it’s gotta go to Holly, and the boys.” He drops his head into his hands and the sob he tries to muffle is a sound I will never forget. “She’s our whole world, and she’s sick.”

He tears his hands away from his face and openly cries. There’s no hiding his pain. He wears it like a badge of honor.

“I missed all the signs. I didn’t know she was in pain. Holly didn’t either.”

I did. I knew and I didn’t do a fucking thing about it. I should’ve told them the first time her leg gave out, even if it didn’t change the outcome.

“We’re going to New York to meet with a specialist at Sloan. Wolf got us in. Apparently, his wife had a battle with cancer, and he’s got some pull. I don’t know what the plan is from there. The doctors here want to do surgery to remove part of her

acetabulum where the tumor is.”

My neck snaps, and I stare at him.

“Her what?”

“It’s the socket of the hip joint. That’s where the tumor is.”

My brain tries to make sense of what he’s saying. Taking part bone from her joint seems harsh to me. How is she supposed to ever walk again?

“The plan is to replace the bone with a graft created from her femur. The recovery will be extensive, and she’ll have to do chemo and radiation too. She has a long road ahead of her, and we just want to make sure she has the best care possible.”

He pulls in a breath.

“I will avenge this attack on our club, and when I do, I’ll wear the blood of the people who did this proudly. It’ll be slow and torturous. We’ll bite off piece by piece, until there is nothing else. Everyone from here to Venezuela will know who the fuck we are, and they’ll think twice before they ever come after us again.”

His gaze flits around the table.

“I give you my word.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CAPONE

With Tara in New York, I didn't know what to do with myself. I considered flying to the Big Apple and sitting in the waiting room of the hospital there, but I talked myself out of that. If I got caught what would I say— hey, guys, I was in the neighborhood?

I didn't want to be at the clubhouse, and the thought of going home to my bare apartment was just fucking depressing, so I called Hawk, and had him meet me at Booker & Mann to remove the equipment from the lot. Between the two of us, it took a couple of trips back and forth. On the last trip, I spotted my dad's beat up truck parked in front of his trailer. I cut Hawk loose, and I've been sitting out here ever since.

I don't even know why. I'm not avoiding anyone in my family like I'm trying to avoid the club. Everyone from my parents to my sisters' husbands, have all been supportive. Even Nonna called to tell me she was praying for Tara.

My phone rings and I tear my gaze away from the trailer to answer it.

“Dad?”

“Is there a reason you're sitting outside there?”

My gaze shoots toward the trailer, and I spot him peering at me through the mini blinds covering the window.

“I brought back the equipment I borrowed.”

“Yeah, I saw. You finished unloading it an hour ago, though. Why don’t you come in? The coffee is percolating, and your mother is on her way with lunch.”

I scrub my hand over my face, scratching at the scruff. I haven’t shaved since before Tara got sick, so these days it’s more like a short beard. I’m sure my mom will have something to say about it. But that doesn’t stop my stomach from growling. I’ve been living off cafeteria food from the hospital. The promise of my good food is enough to drag my ass out of my truck.

As soon as I enter the trailer, my dad pushes a cup of coffee into my hand.

“You look like crap.”

Bringing the cup to my lips, I hold it there. “Thank you. It’s great to see you too, Pops.”

I take a sip of the coffee. It’s good. Really fucking good. That percolator of his is no joke.

“You need to shave, and a haircut wouldn’t be a terrible idea either.”

Lowering myself into the chair in front of his desk, I set the cup down and fold my hands behind my head.

“Anything else?”

“You’re not going to be any use to that girl if you don’t take care of yourself.”

“I’m no use to that girl anyway.”

He crosses his arms over his chest and cocks his head to the side. “How’s that, now? Lucia tells us you’re at the hospital day and night.”

“Yeah, and since I brought her in all I do is sit in the waiting room. I only got to see her once, and I don’t think I was very helpful. I just listened as she cried and told me all the things she’s too afraid to tell her parents.”

And I fucking kissed her. Again.

That’s the extent of what I did for Tara, and now, I don’t know when I’ll be able to see her again. It’s driving me nuts.

“Lucia told your mother and I that her parents took her to New York.”

I nod. “They want to get a second opinion.”

“Smart.”

“Yeah, and they took her to the best hospital, which I’m thankful for. But I don’t know what happens if they decide that’s where she’s going to get her treatment. I can’t be here while she’s there, and if I follow her, I’ll be asked questions that I don’t have answers for.” I glance up at my dad. “I think I’m in over my head.”

“No, son, you’re not. You’re just in love.”

I blanch at that. “You’re out of your mind.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Am I?”

It would be stupid of me to deny I have feelings for Tara, but to say I’m in love—well, that just seems crazy. Until a couple of weeks ago, I barely

acknowledged her existence. It doesn't happen that quickly, does it?

"You've dropped everything in your life to sit vigil in a hospital just so you can be close to her." He pauses, uncrossing his arm. "Let me ask you something, son. When you look at Tara, what do you see? Do you see a sick girl?"

"She is a sick girl. She has fucking cancer. She's seventeen and she has fucking cancer."

I can say it a hundred times and it still doesn't feel real.

"But is that all you see when you look at her." He sighs. "When you brought her to the house for Sophia's birthday, everyone assumed she was your girlfriend, and you kept saying she's your boss' daughter."

"Well, she is."

If Maverick hadn't ordered me to follow her, I wouldn't have had any interaction with her. I wouldn't have put her on the back of my bike, and I never would know how amazing it is to kiss her.

"So when you look at Tara all you see is cancer and obligation. That's what you're telling me?"

"I didn't say that." I sigh, spearing my fingers through my overgrown hair. "I look at Tara and I see everything a man like me could want but is too afraid to have." I fix him with a look, one full of regret. "I'm not like you, Pop. I didn't make decisions based on a family because I never thought I'd want one. I can't be the guy who drags her down, but at the same time I can't be the one who walks away from her either. It doesn't matter how wrong it is for me to want her, I do, and I can't turn it off. I got all these feelings, and I don't know what to do with them. I keep telling myself God put

her in my path for a reason and he isn't cruel enough to take her away from me, but she isn't even mine."

"So make her yours."

I scoff. Does he really believe it's that simple?

"I'm ten years older than her. You're not supposed to encourage me."

He shrugs. "I don't know Gianluca. I have daughters, and if a man loved any one of them enough to sit in a hospital for days on end just to be in the same building as her while she was facing the fight of her life, I'd be okay with it. Life is short, and things like this have a way of opening minds. I'm not saying you should go ask for her father's hand in marriage. But have a conversation with him. Let him know your intentions."

"I don't know what my intentions are. I've never had a fucking relationship in my life. It's always been about sex, and oddly enough, that's the farthest thing from my mind when it comes to Tara."

Make no mistake, I want her. I've been struggling with that since the night she caught Mark cheating on her. The attraction I feel toward her is fucking palpable. But this is deeper than that. So much deeper than that.

"Well, figure them out, and talk to Maverick. But I gotta tell you, son, he probably already has you beat in that department."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"A father knows which guy takes his daughter's hand long before the guy knows himself. It's a terrifying thing at first. To look another man in the eye and know he's

going to be the one that takes your daughter from you. But then you start to make peace with it as he proves himself, and you feel nothing but gratitude toward him, because your little girl is going to be loved, and cared for when you're no longer here to do it yourself." His voice cracks slightly. "And that, son, is a remarkable thing. It's probably even more remarkable when your daughter is sick, and the future she once saw so brightly is a bit dimmer now."

I wound up sleeping at the clubhouse that night. I figured it was the best place to get information regarding Tara's consultation with the other doctor. Maverick and Holly weren't going to call me with any updates, but they might call Shady or Leftie.

However, Shady never showed his face at the clubhouse and Leftie was too busy making sure Ink didn't give himself alcohol poisoning.

While I was having a heart to heart with my dad, the club had been laying Emmy to rest. I offered Ink my condolences and apologized for not being there, but my words fell on deaf ears.

I didn't fault him for it. How could I?

I excused myself and disappeared into my room. Sleep didn't come easily, not with my sheets smelling like Tara. As soon as the sun began to rise, I took a shower and went for a ride. Drove up and down the highway until my legs went numb. On the way back to the clubhouse, I passed by Maverick and Holly's house.

Holly's car was in the driveway, and Leftie's trike was parked behind it, signaling they had returned from New York. There was no sign of Maverick's bike, and I knew the only way to get to Tara was through him.

Peeling the helmet from my head, I dismount and tuck it under my arm. I swore I'd never wear the thing after Tara wore it, but wearing it somehow makes me feel closer

to her, and I like that the scent of her shampoo still lingers inside of it.

I enter the clubhouse, immediately zeroing in on Maverick as he sits at the bar with Mamba and Ghost. It's barely noon, and he's already drinking.

Not a good sign.

"Mind if I join you guys?" I ask, making my way toward the bar. I set the helmet on top of it and Ghost pushes an empty glass my way. Mav, on the other hand, doesn't even glance in my direction.

"Maverick was just filling us in on what happened in New York," Mamba supplies.

He may not want to acknowledge my presence, but he's not getting rid of me. I take the bottle of whiskey and fill my glass before topping off Maverick's. It's not tequila, but I don't give a fuck. I'll drink poison if that's what it takes.

"Can I get in on that update?" I ask.

He lifts his chin, turning his head a fraction, and his beady eyes meet mine.

"You asking as my brother?"

That sounds like a trick question to me, and my mind drifts back to the conversation I had with my father. I'm starting to think he was on to something when he said Maverick has me figured out.

"Sure," I reply.

As soon as the word leaves my lips, I realize it was the wrong answer. Foaming at the mouth, he turns fully toward me, and in one swift move, he's got my kutte fisted in

his hands.

“Get the fuck out of my face, Capone.”

“Mav—”

He tightens his hold, yanking me forward.

“That’s an order!”

Releasing me, his glare hardens. I get he’s hurting, but so am I. I guess that’s a me problem, though. Ghost catches my eye and motions for me to let it go by slicing his hand through the air in front of his neck.

My jaw clenches and I stand, abandoning my drink, and my fucking pride as I stride away from them, and make my way back down the hall. I get to the mouth of the hallway, but then I freeze in my tracks.

I’m so fucking tired of everyone dismissing me like I’m some piece of shit. I’ve done everything that’s been asked of me since the day I became a prospect. I earned my patch, and I deserve the same fucking respect as every other member of this club. So maybe Maverick has an inkling that things aren’t all that innocent where his daughter is concerned, but that’s on him. He put me in this position. If anyone knows the power Tara has over someone, it’s him.

Ready to confront him, I turn around.

“Go easy on the kid, Mav,” Mamba says. “He’s been a mess over Tara too.”

“He’s not a kid, he’s a grown fucking man,” Maveric roars.

“Eh,” Ghost says. “Why don’t we all agree that he’s somewhere in between.”

“Yeah,” Mamba agrees. “He’s a manchild.”

These motherfuckers.

“Call him whatever you want, but I can’t look at him.” He goes silent for a beat, and I take a step forward, pausing again when he continues to speak. “After the doctors discussed the details of Tara’s surgery, they suggested she freeze her eggs before she starts treatment.”

I guess that explains the bad mood. I just don’t get what it has to do with me. Why couldn’t he explain this to me like he is them?

“Is that safe?” Ghost questions. “I mean it will delay treatment, won’t it?”

“Only by two weeks or so. They’ll shoot her up with hormones and extract her eggs. Ideally it would be better if she had embryos to freeze. They can be preserved for longer and have a higher success rate when implanted. The concern is that with her being so young, she may not want to have children for another ten years or so. By the time she’s ready to be a mother, the eggs will have less of a chance of surviving implantation. Something about the thawing process...I don’t know. I kind of tuned everything out after that.”

“Sounds like embryos are the way to go then,” Mamba says.

“That’s where things get tricky. Embryos are only option if she has a donor.”

“A donor,” Mamba parrots. “Like a sperm donor?”

Maverick taps his knuckles against the bar and reaches for his glass. “That’s the one.”

He knocks back his whiskey, slamming the empty glass on top of the bar when he's done.

My body goes completely still as I absorb that information.

“You know it's one thing to hear them tell you your daughter has cancer, that she's going to need chemotherapy, and a surgery that requires them to remove part of her femur so they can reconstruct the joint where the tumor is invading. That's a lot to take in, especially when you look at your kid and you see she's trying like hell to put on a brave face because she knows you and your wife are fucking falling apart. But then they tell her that the drugs she needs to take to save her life could kill the chances of ever being a mother...” His voice cracks. It takes a second for him to regain his composure, and when he speaks again the words come out choppy. “She tried her best to play it off, but when they explained everything in New York, she broke.”

My fists ball at my sides as I imagine what that must've been like.

“I can't do this. I can't watch her suffer and not be able to do a fucking thing about it.”

Yeah, that makes fucking two of us.

My mind wanders back to the talk we had in her hospital room, and the way she expressed her desire to be mother. Then I think about her with my nieces and nephews, and how fucking natural she looked when she was holding the baby or watching *The Little Mermaid* with Sophia. She even handled the boys like a pro.

I feel like I've been had. All this time I've been telling myself that God gives you these beautiful things—these little glimpses of what can be—to teach you a lesson. To encourage you to be better. To be grateful. But it's all a crock of shit.

The anger I was experiencing for Maverick vanishes, and it twists into something uglier and transfers to a higher power. I've been a fucking fool to think God was on my side.

I think about the final line in the Lord's prayer.

Lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil.

It's what we say when we call on him to help us because we can't resist the Devil merely on our own strength. I spent eight years taking catechism classes as a kid and received all my sacraments. I recited that prayer every fucking day. But instead of becoming one with God, I grew to be a man who proudly wears the Devil on his back.

His plan was never to guide me back to him.

And it wasn't Maverick who put me in Tara's path.

God saw my wicked ways and he led me straight to temptation.

He dangled that forbidden fruit right in front of my face.

Stripped me of my strength and made me a weak man.

Took this depraved sinner and robbed me of all my defenses.

Made me fucking helpless.

Unable to listen to another word, I turn back to the hallway and make my way to my room. I need to be alone. I need to fucking hit something. My gaze darts all around the room in search of something to destroy before landing on the bed. I flex my

fingers as memories of her and I tangled between those sheets flash before me.

All the death and destruction.

Every crime I committed.

It was all child's play.

Kissing Tara in that bed was my first true taste of sin, and God laughed.

It was his gotcha moment.

I stalk toward the bed, heaving the mattress and throwing it against the wall.

It's not enough.

I grab the lamp on my nightstand and fling it across the room. The shade topples off and the bulb shatters into a million tiny pieces. I flip the nightstand next. High on adrenaline, fueled by rage, I slam my fist against the wall. The sheetrock caves as I repeat the action over and over until blood drips from my knuckles.

"Capone!"

My fist pauses against the broken wall as I pant, unable to catch my breath.

"Jesus, man, pull yourself together," Hawk says, his voice clearer than when he first called my name. Still, I ignore him. There's no pulling anything together.

I touch my forehead to the wall above the hole and close my eyes as I concentrate on breathing.

In through my nose.

Out through the mouth.

Hawk closes in from behind, laying a hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I hiss.

He lowers his hand immediately.

“Brother, you need to calm down. None of this is going to help her, and if you keep it up, Maverick is going to start questioning why the fuck you’re tearing your room apart.”

I’m done giving a damn about what Maverick thinks. I don’t give a fuck what anyone thinks anymore.

“Get out of my way, Hawk,” I growl.

The motherfucker doesn’t move an inch. He just clucks his tongue against the roof of his mouth and crosses his arms against his chest. Like everyone else, he underestimates me. He doesn’t realize I’m five seconds away from reaching for my glock.

“I ain’t letting you go out there when you’re like this.”

“I’m not your fucking problem.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. You became my problem the day you acquired your patch. It’s what brotherhood is all about. I got your back, and you got mine. I can’t in good conscience let you go out there. Not in the state you’re in.”

He uncrosses his arms, dropping them to his sides as he takes a step forward.

“I know you’re hurting but this is not how you let the man who gives you your orders know that you’ve grown an attachment to his sick daughter.” He pauses, cocking his head to the side. “Don’t know how many times I gotta tell you, but I’ll keep sayin’ it. The crime isn’t in the attraction, Capone. It’s in the execution.”

“Stop saying that,” I roar. I don’t care what the crime is. Not no more.

“No,” he returns. “You only get one shot at this, and I’m telling you, if you go out there acting like this, you’re gonna blow it.”

Diverting my gaze away from Hawk, I focus on my bloody knuckles and bite the inside of my cheek. There is nothing to blow and even if there was, I’m ready to take my chances.

Let everyone and everything do their worst.

I can’t save Tara or trade places with her. I can’t develop a cure for cancer. I can’t do a fucking thing.

Maverick’s words sound in my head like a fucking siren.

Ideally it would be better if she had embryos to freeze. They can be preserved for longer and have a higher success rate when implanted. The concern is that with her being so young, she may not want to have children for another ten years or so. By the time she’s ready to be a mother, the eggs will have less of a chance of surviving...

It hits me like a ton of bricks. Maybe this was the plan all along.

“I know how to help her,” I rasp, turning back to Hawk.

“What are you talking about?”

I shoulder check him and charge out of my room. My long legs eat up the length of the hallway, and before I know it, I’m standing in the same exact spot I was when I overheard Maverick share the latest news on Tara’s situation with Mamba, and Ghost. The only difference now is Shady has joined them, and the bottle of whiskey they were nursing is completely empty.

I clear my throat, making my presence known, and all eyes swing toward me, but my gaze remains locked with Maverick’s.

Swallowing hard against the lump in my throat, I blurt, “I’ll do it.”

Mav’s bloodshot eyes narrow suspiciously.

“You’ll do what?”

“You dismissed me before, but I heard what you said,” I explain. “About Tara’s chances of one day becoming a mom.”

The room goes eerily silent, and I feel beads of sweat start to form at my brows. The words I’m about to say will ultimately change my life forever. That should scare me, and it doesn’t.

“What does that have to do with you?” Shady questions.

My gaze bounces from him then back to Maverick. I probably should’ve pulled the man aside instead of speaking in front of an audience, but here goes nothing...

“I’ll give Tara what she needs.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

MAVERICK

Present Day

I didn't know who it would be, or what he'd look like, but I knew this day would come. I just didn't think it'd come so soon, or that it would be him . But I guess it all checks out. Holly was the same age as Tara when I got my claws into her, and karma has always been a twisted bitch where I'm concerned.

"You'll give Tara what she needs," Shady parrots, rounding the bar. "Tara doesn't need anything from you."

To Capone's credit, he ignores my brother, his gaze remaining locked on me.

"You said she could freeze her eggs before treatment begins, but her chances are greater if she has a donor."

Tara's face flashes before me, and I try to pull myself together. Every part of me wants to reject him. This isn't any of his business. She's my little girl, and it's always been my job to protect her, and give her what she needs. But my hands are tied. The things she needs now, are things I can't give her.

"That's right," I say hoarsely. "Considering her age, and the fact that she might not want to become a mother for another ten years or so, the doctor said she'd have a higher success rate at becoming pregnant one day if she implanted a fertilized

embryo.”

Hawk appears behind Capone, but I keep my eyes pinned to the man sweating as he squares his shoulders. Capone has never claimed a woman in his life, and the way he’s looking at me feels a lot like that’s what this is.

But Tara isn’t someone that be claimed... she’s the little girl Holly put pink dresses on. It didn’t matter the style, some of them had glitter and bows, others were plain, but they all were paired with a leather jacket.

I still remember when she asked me how come her jacket didn’t have a patch like mine. She couldn’t have been more than five years old at the time, but even then, my little girl was so fucking perceptive.

The next day I took her jacket to the tailor and had them sew a patch to the front of the tiny jacket, one that read princess .

She jumped into my arms and hugged me so tightly. Cherished that thing until her mother and I divorced. Then it got shoved in a box with the rest of the childhood things Holly thought Tara would want to one day pass to her own daughter.

“In a game of numbers, I’m willing to help increase her odds. I’ll give Tara what she needs. Just tell me where to go and what to do.” He pauses, flinching slightly. “That didn’t come out right. “I mean, I know what I need to do... just set it up.”

I didn’t make a habit of thinking about my daughter becoming a mother. Holly did though?—

hence the box in the attic. But I think even she thought it would come in more traditional way. Not like this. Not where the guy who has an aversion to settling down suddenly has a change of heart and offers to be the father of my daughter’s

future children.

“Why?” I ask, gritting my teeth. I know I’m just torturing myself by asking him that because I already know the answer. I knew it the other day when I let him into her hospital room.

“You know why,” he rasps.

My lip curls as I push off the stool and on wobbly legs rush for him, my eyes narrowing into tiny slits as they meet his gaze. He’s got two inches on me and uses them to stand tall and proud, making it clear that he’s taking a stance.

He’s not talking to me as a brother.

I’m not his president in this moment.

The patch that binds us is meaningless.

We’re two men who share a lot more in common than the club they swore they’d would die for.

We’re the two men that would tear our limbs from our bodies if it meant we could save the same girl.

Only I loved her first, and he’s still got to prove that he deserves to be the man who loves her last.

“This isn’t some way to shut your grandmother up,” I growl, poking a finger against his chest. “We’re talking about my daughter’s future, here. If Tara survives this, she is going to rely on those embryos to become a mother one day.”

I try to picture it in my head, but the whiskey swimming through me makes it difficult, and all I can see is the little with the pink dress, wheeling her little baby carriage into my chapel, asking me to watch her doll while she went to school.

Capone smacks my hand away from his chest, pulling me away from those thoughts.

“I know I’m a fucking joke around here, but I take serious offense to you thinking my offer is anything but sincere. It’s not every day a guy offers to jerk off in a cup so the girl he cares about can one day hold a baby of her own in her arms.”

I lose my cool and before I can stop myself, I rear my fist back and send it colliding into his jaw.

“You son of a bitch,” I roar. I go to hit him again but he’s younger...quicker. His reflexes a lot better. He steps to the left and I stumble forward.

“Fuck,” he mutters, reaching out his hand to help me balance myself. “I’m sorry, Mav?—”

My fist collides with cheek.

“I trusted you,” I slur. He was only supposed to be the roadblock I couldn’t be. He was supposed to buy me more time, not steal it away.

Rubbing his jaw, he meets my glare with one of my own. “Yeah, you did, and you should probably ask yourself why.”

It was a blatant error on my behalf. I’m not fucking blind. Tara is Holly’s twin. There was no way Capone could spend all that time with her and not fucking being attracted to her. But he’s ten years older than her, and he runs through women like he changes his fucking underwear.

Suddenly we're surrounded by Mamba, Ghost, and Hawk, all of them ready to break up whatever this is. That doesn't deter me though, and I go to swing again, but Capone's hand wrap around my wrist.

"Would you fucking stop and just hear me out? It's not what you think. I didn't take advantage of Tara. The night she collapsed... that was the first time I kissed her. That's all that happened and that's all it's going to be for a while."

My eyes blow wide. "You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't really care what you believe, I care that you're missing the point. You want to be mad at me for kissing her, fine, but save it for another time. Tara has cancer, and whether we like it or not, that changes things. Let me do this for her, Maverick."

He has no idea what he's asking of me. He won't know until he has a child of his own. That's why I feel the need to make things perfectly clear. Give him another perspective in case he one day wakes up and regrets everything he's offering to do.

"What happens when she goes to use the embryos, Capone? Have you thought about that? What happens when her future husband decides he isn't okay with his wife having another man's baby? Sure, there's always the chance he won't mind at all. She might find a standup guy who is so in love with her—so committed to starting a family that he doesn't care how it happens, so long as it does."

After we divorced, Holly moved on and married Colt. He didn't care that her ex-husband was still in love with her. He didn't care that she had two kids. He loved her anyway, and he found a way to insert himself into her life. The man fell in love with my children, and he and Holly grew our family, by adding Theo to the mix. Colt is gone, and Theo is just as much my son as Shep is, but it killed me at first.

"You going to be okay with that? Can you tolerate watching another man raise your

kid? Because at the end of the day, Tara's child will have your DNA. Your fucking blood."

He clenches his fists. "Are you baiting me? Is that what this is?"

"I'm just trying to give you a clear picture of all the possibilities. After all, we're not talking about a piece of your fucking liver, here."

"Bullshit, you're baiting me, but I'll take it." He widens his stance, crossing his arms against his chest. "I would never offer to be a donor if I didn't care for Tara. Now, you can take that however you like. I'm not going to tell you I love her, because I'm still working that out, and when I do, she deserves to hear those words before anyone else. However, I will say this, if Tara agrees to this, if she accepts me and what I'm offering, there won't be another man raising her child. Tara's future husband, and the father of her children is standing right in front of you."

"Holy fuck," Ghost mutters behind me.

"I'm not asking for your blessing Maverick. I'm not even asking you to understand, but I think deep down you do. I think you remember a time when you were just as tortured as I am now, trying to figure out how something so wrong can feel so right."

"Capone, you might want to quit talking," Shady advises.

"No," he says defiantly, his eyes locked with mine. "I might not be who you ever wanted her to wind up with, but if you give me a shot, I might surprise you. I give you my word that I will stick by her side through this whole ordeal. I will never stand in her way or hold her back because I'm older than her. I will do nothing but support her in any way she needs. I will love her. And when she is ready to settle down, I'll take her hand. Give her my name. I'll make every fucking dream of hers come true." He pulls in a ragged breath. "I can't make the cancer go away. I can't snap my fingers

and make the pain disappear. I can't do much of anything and that's fucking killing me, Maverick. And the only other man who knows how that feels is you."

I break our stare, my gaze falling to the Timberland boots on my feet.

When a man has a son, he automatically has a best friend. But when a man has a daughter, he holds his heart in his hands, knowing one day someone's going to take it from him.

"You had to know she'd get under my skin and wedge her way into my soul. You knew it, and you still gave the order."

My eyes flit back to him, my voice cracking as I say, "She's everything to me."

He nods. "I know."

My vision blurs slightly and I'm hit with another memory, recalling the day she took her first steps. Holly held her little hands and guided her, then Tara's eyes locked with mine, and she flashed that smile of hers.

I held my arms open wide and that's all it took for her to release her mom's hands. She took one wobbly step, then another until she walked right into my arms. I held her and swore I'd never let go.

I blink, bringing Capone into focus.

I didn't know who it would be or what he'd look like, but now I do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

TARA

I set my phone on the tripod and hit record. “Hi guys, it’s been a while since I posted any content, and at first that was because of my breakup with Mark. A lot of you made it clear that you were only here for him—ugh.”

I tap the screen to stop recording and delete the video.

There I go again making Mark relevant. He’s the last thing on my mind, but I’m torn. While in New York, I decided to move forward with my content creation. I’m going to use my platform as a diary to document my journey as I go through treatment. I think it will be a good outlet for me.

The problem is, I’ve neglected my social media since I broke up with Mark. Now, I don’t know if I should acknowledge that we’re no longer together. If I do that one of two things will happen, either I’ll feed the trolls more ammo, or the trash will see itself out. One can only hope for the latter.

Another option is to delete all the videos of us and just start fresh. Maybe the algorithm will find a new audience. Things can get lonely when you’re sick. People avoid you because they don’t know what to say to you, and the ones that don’t get shunted by your mother.

I miss Capone.

I wish he would've been with me in New York. At one point I almost asked my dad to call him, but I stopped myself. It's crazy to think we've spent so much time together and never exchanged numbers. I thought about sending him a private message on TikTok, but the odds of him reading it were slim to none. If he didn't delete the app, he probably never opened it, and he sure as hell didn't know you could send someone a private message.

The alarm on my watch goes off, interrupting my thoughts and signaling it's time for me to take my shot. I grab my phone and fold the tripod, tucking it under my arm. As I make my way out of my bedroom, and head down the stairs, my anxiety starts to flare.

I've never been a fan of needles, and it's not like a trained professional is poking me. It's my mom. I'm not worried about her hurting me, I'm worried she'll do it wrong. Let's be honest, I don't have the best luck these days, and this might be my only shot of ever having a baby one day. The odds are already stacked against me.

I get halfway down the stairs when I see my mother standing at the door, my dad across from her. He hasn't been home since we returned from New York, and it looks like they're fighting again.

"What is this, Maverick?"

"Holly let us in."

"No, I'm not doing this with you. I need to give Tara her shot. Whatever bullshit is going on with your club is going to have to take a back seat."

"It's not about the club, Holly."

I don't know what makes me move but before I realize it, I'm standing behind my

mom, my gaze pinned to the man standing behind my dad. He lifts his head, combing his fingers through his overgrown hair, and our eyes lock.

My heart instantly begins to thump erratically. I wonder if my parents would care if I push them out of the way and rush into his arms. He'd catch me. I'm sure.

"Hey, princess," Capone rasps.

I hated that nickname because I thought it was an insult, and maybe that's what it was meant to be initially, but I don't get that vibe anymore. Like my mom is dad's queen, I'm Capone's princess.

My dad clears his throat, diverting my attention back to him. I expect to find him looking at my mom, or his boots—anywhere but me. That's not the case.

"Tara, baby, I'm taking your mom, and the boys out for a little while. Capone's going to stay here with you. That okay?"

"No, it's not okay," Mom seethes. "We have to do the shot."

"I can give her the shot," Capone returns, causing my mother to scoff.

"No offense, Capone, but I don't trust you. If it's not done correctly, it won't be effective... do you even know what the shot is for?"

"Holly, in two seconds I'm going to throw you over my shoulder and toss you in the trunk of my car. Baby, I promise you, it's okay. I'll explain everything in the car. Now get the boys and let's go."

"I'm not leaving Tara," Mom says, her voice as stern as her emotions will allow it to be.

“Mom, I’ll be fine. If we run into any issues Capone can call his sister.” I glance back at Capone. “Right?”

“Sure,” he says before stepping around my father and entering the house. My mom tries to block him, but he sidesteps her. Once he clears the threshold, and comes to stand beside me, he looks back at my mom. “I got her, Holly.”

My dad inches closer, tagging my mother’s hand and in one quick move, he tugs her toward him, wrapping his arms around her. He presses a kiss to the top of her head, and I watch her shoulders deflate as a sob escapes her lips.

Capone’s pinky wraps around mine, pulling my attention back to him. I don’t know what the hell is going on, but whatever it is feels monumental. I lift my gaze to his and his lips twitch slightly.

“Don’t look so shocked, princess.” I don’t know how he expects me to be anything but shocked. I haven’t seen him in days, and now he sweeps in like everything is perfectly fine.

He takes the tripod from under my arm. “What’s this for?”

“I... um...I thought I’d film everything. I’m going to start a series on battling cancer, and—” He presses his finger to my lips.

“Say less. Just tell me where to set it up.”

I blink. “The kitchen is good.”

He takes my hand in his and glances at my parents. “Enjoy your time together. I’ll call you if we need you. If she’s up to it, I’m going to take her to get something to eat afterward.”

It's not an ask. He's actually telling my dad how things are going to play out and all my dad does in response is nod and say, "Be aware of your surroundings."

"Always."

Those are the last words exchanged before Capone leads me into the kitchen. The door swings close behind us and he sets the tripod on the counter. Turning to me, he leans his back against the kitchen island and beckons me by crooking his finger.

"C'mere," he murmurs.

I have so many questions, but they all seem to flee me. I limp into his arms, the pain in my leg slowing me down. His arms instantly engulf me, and he bends his head, burying his nose in the crook of my neck.

It's probably wildly inappropriate for me to want him to kiss me there again. For him to mark me like he did in the hospital, but I do. I want it so bad. I want to feel those butterflies...and just be a normal girl. Full of raging hormones and curiosity.

"I fucking hated being apart from you," he growls against my skin. The vibration causes goosebumps to break across my arms and I tip my chin back, giving him more access to my neck. His lips graze the spot behind my ear, and he whispers against my skin, "No more."

I hope he doesn't mean no more kisses.

I need more.

I need to feel his lips everywhere.

He slowly pulls back, lifting his hands to my cheeks. Then he lowers his forehead to

mine. “I’ll sleep out on the driveway if Holly doesn’t let me crash on the couch, but I’m never going to be far from you.”

That gives me pause.

“My mom might have a problem with that, but don’t doubt my dad won’t too.”

He shrugs. “Maverick doesn’t like it, but he gets it.”

I feel very naïve because I’m not understanding what exactly he’s referring to, but before I can ask him to explain better the alarm on my watch sounds again.

“I need my shot,” I say pulling out of his arms. Realizing he probably thinks this is part of my treatment plan, I feel the need to explain. “I... don’t know what my dad told you but before they start chemo, I have to take hormone shots. They’re going to extract my eggs.”

“That’s another reason I’m here.” He takes my hands in his again, and widens his legs, pulling me between them. “Maverick said the doctors suggested you freeze your eggs, but it would be better if you had frozen embryos.”

My cheeks flush with embarrassment. I never thought about infertility, and I suppose that’s because of my age. But my eyes have been opened this week, and I genuinely feel for every woman struggling to have a baby. There are so many emotions that come with hearing that you might not be able to carry a baby—even if babies are the last thing on your mind at the time.

If I didn’t have cancer, I probably wouldn’t be doing this, but that doesn’t make it any easier. I still feel...less. I can do all this, and it still might not work, and I’ll be the reason me and my future husband aren’t able to have children. I should find comfort in the fact that I’ll be alive, but I don’t. It still feels like something is being taken

from me.

I meet Capone's gaze.

"Yes, well, that isn't an option."

"It is if you want it to be." He cocks his head to the side, his thumbs gently caressing my cheeks. "I'll be your donor."

I laugh. "You want to donate your sperm to me."

He smiles. "It wouldn't be the first time I got myself off." He scrubs a hand over his face. "Never tried to catch it in a cup before, but my aim is pretty good. Never miss a target."

I shouldn't laugh considering how serious this conversation is. I just can't seem to help myself, though.

"Oh my God, Capone."

He winks at me, his arms winding around my waist.

"Sorry," he says, pressing his lips to the tip of my nose. "What do you think? My genetics are good. You've seen my nieces and nephews. They're the cutest kids on the planet."

When the doctors first mentioned freezing embryos, they asked if I had a boyfriend. Both my parents and I gawked at them. I tried to picture myself asking Mark to donate his sperm if we were still together, and I couldn't. I quickly realized I would never have asked him, and that's not just because we are too young for a commitment like that. It's because I couldn't see it anymore. I couldn't see him in my future.

But that isn't the case now as a reel flashes before my eyes.

My mom always said my soul would recognize the man I'm supposed to end up with before my heart ever did. She didn't say it would happen simultaneously.

"C'mon, can't you see it? A little olive skin baby, with big brown eyes, and freckles. Lots and lots of freckles."

I can and that's what scares me.

"Say something, Tara."

Trying to gather my thoughts, I say the first logical thing that makes any of this sensible.

"Did my dad ask you to do this?"

He shakes his head. "No, he hates the idea. But that's only because he realizes how serious I am. I want to do this with you, Tara. I want to be the guy who stands by your side, not only in good times, but in extra hard times too. I want to be the shoulder you lean on during all of this, and when it's over, when you're whole again, I want to be the guy with front row seats to watching all your dreams come true."

"I can't ask you to do that...what if you change your mind?"

"I won't."

"You don't know that. I'm... me, and you're you... we don't make sense." But we do. We make perfect sense in my heart. My head just needs to catch up.

"Tara, look at me." My eyes flit to his handsome face. "Maybe we don't make sense

now but we will in time.”

“Gianluca, I don’t think you understand. Once they’re frozen, they’ll be out of sight and out of mind. Until they’re not.”

Until I get better and start living again.

Until I want to be a mom.

“I know that, Tara. I know what I’m suggesting, and I need you to know that I wouldn’t be doing it if I didn’t think you were my end game.”

My eyes widen.

“We haven’t even been on a date.”

The corners of his mouth lift and he steps closer to me. “Then let’s get this shot done so I can take you on a date.”

It can’t be that simple. Can it?

“I don’t understand... why me?”

“Why not you?”

“I’m sick, Capone, and...we’ve only kissed.”

I want to believe he’s being sincere, but let’s call a spade a spade. Capone has always been a player. He’s prided himself on being the Knight least likely to settle down, and now, he’s suddenly had a change of heart after a couple of stolen kisses.

I couldn't hold on to Mark, and I gave him a lot more. Capone will be bored by the time I'm done with my first round of chemo, and if he's not, it still doesn't seem fair.

My future is unknown. It's fragile.

I can distract myself with preserving my fertility, but there are so many variables involved. The next couple of months are going to be hell, and the chemo isn't even the worse of it. The surgery is complex and the recovery from that—well, I don't even want to think about it. They'll be more chemo afterward, and radiation. Why would he take any of that on? What if we go through all of this, and five years from now, I relapse? Is that really the life he wants for himself?

“Kissing you is the single best thing that's happened to me, and when you're ready for more, I'm sure that will be just as fucking earth shattering.” He steps closer to me, lifting his hands to cup the sides of my face. “I'm going to wreck you, Tara. In all the best ways. But this isn't about sex. It's about you and me moving forward. It's about seeing you through something tragic and building something beautiful when it's over.”

I swallow hard. When life feels so uncertain, you struggle to find something bright to hang onto. It should feel foolish, like I'm kidding myself, but for the first time since I woke up in the hospital and learned I am sick, I don't feel so hopeless.

“C'mon, say yes.”

“To the date or you being my baby daddy?”

His lips quirk. “All of it.”

“Okay, but there's one condition...”

“Name it.”

“If you change your mind at any point... I want you to tell me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CAPONE

“You ready?” I murmur, flicking the tip of the needle. I’m not a pro by any means, but I’ve gotten a lot better since Tara’s first shot, and I can thank my sister for that. She’s been a godsend in all of this. Any time I have a question, she’s there, patiently guiding me.

“Ready,” Tara says, holding her shirt under her boobs.

I pull the waistband of her leggings down another inch and find the spot on her pale skin I need to hit with the tip of the needle.

“Hold still, and count to three.”

She sucks in a breath, and I know that’s my cue. I jab her as gently as one could and slowly release the drugs into her body. When the syringe is empty, I slowly remove the needle, and Tara takes a deep breath.

“That wasn’t so bad.”

Reaching for an alcohol pad, I swab the area, frowning at the bruising across her lower belly. Sadie enters the kitchen just as I finish up, and her eyes nearly pop out of her head when she spots Tara’s belly.

“Holy shit, Ta, you look pregnant.”

I don't know what happened between Maverick and Holly the day he took her and the boys out, but she's been loosening the strings somewhat, allowing Tara to receive as many visitors as she can handle.

Tara and I both trade glances before lowering our eyes to her belly. Over the last few days there's been some swelling there, but Lucia says that's totally normal. All the drugs are enlarging her ovaries in preparation for the egg retrieval.

But it's wild to see, because Sadie is right. If one didn't know what was going on, they could easily assume Tara has a little baby bump.

I inch forward, pressing my lips to her injection site.

One day it won't be a mirage. One day they'll be a baby in there and it'll be mine. A thought that once terrified me, somehow soothes me and gives Tara and I something to look forward to.

"So do you like live here now?" Shep asks as he plops down on the couch next to me. The same couch that has been acting as my bed for the last week and a half. I wasn't kidding when I said I wasn't letting Tara out of my sight.

That first day, after I took Tara on our first date, which consisted of a trip to Waffle House, we came back to the Burnside house and watched a movie on the couch. Tara fell asleep halfway through it, and I carried her upstairs to her bed. She woke for just a moment, insisting I lay with her, and I didn't have the heart to deny her. I was learning there wasn't a thing on this green earth that I wouldn't do for her, but that's beside the point. When Maverick and Holly returned with the boys, I peeled myself away from Tara. I had thrown a lot at them in a short period of time, and I didn't want to overwhelm them anymore than they already were, but I felt the need to make it clear that I wasn't going far—the days of me sitting in a waiting room were done.

Maverick wasn't opposed to me staying at the house considering everything that was going on with the club. There were too many unknowns, and no plan to move ahead with revenge. He and Holly even decided to take the boys out of school, opting to home school them instead. So, I was handed a blanket and a couple of pillows and told to make myself at home on the couch, and I haven't left since.

Well, that's not entirely true. I left to get some clothes.

Scratching the side of my face, I turn back to Shep.

"I guess I do, huh?"

"Yeah, I'd say so." He smacks me on the shoulder and stands. "I cleaned out a drawer in my dresser. You can put your stuff in there."

I raise an eyebrow. "Did someone tell you to do that?"

"No, I did it on my own." He shrugs. "It's not a big deal. You're making Tara happy, and I just thought that earned you a drawer. I'm not giving up my closet space though."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Tara asks.

It was cute the first time she asked, but now it's getting old. My nerves are shot, and I just want to sleep. Tomorrow I have to get up early, and head to the clinic to give my sample. I would prefer to be firing on all cylinders that way I produce my best work, although I hear a man's best work usually comes when he hasn't. If that's the case, we're fucking golden because I can't remember the last time I came.

"C'mere," I urge as I sit up on the couch. She limps over to me, worrying that bottom lip between her teeth. Over the last few days her pain has gotten worse, but the girl

doesn't complain.

Carefully, I pull her onto my lap. She winds her arms around my neck and goes in for a kiss. My lips curve slightly before her mouth finds mine. There might not be much of anything else going on, but there sure as fuck has been a lot of kissing.

I thread my fingers into her hair. Tugging the ends, I angle her head before taking charge of the kiss, nipping and sucking at her lips. We've made an art of it, and every time she gives me her mouth, it tastes even better.

Her tongue sneaks out and I capture it, sucking on that too.

I'm so fucking wound up.

So goddamn hard.

One wrong move and I'm going to come just from kissing her.

I pull away slowly, touching my forehead to hers.

"Why'd you stop?" She whispers. "Everyone is asleep."

"I'm more concerned that if we keep going, I'm going to come in my pants, and that would not be helpful."

"Oh," she says, her cheeks flaming.

It doesn't deter her though, and she goes in for another kiss. I let her take what she wants, but then I lower my mouth to her neck. Not that kissing her neck is any safer. My gaze drops to her chest, and I groan. Her choice of pajamas is worse than the crop tops she loves to wear, and to no surprise there is never a bra. Her nipples are forever

hard, and with all the hormone shots she's been taking, her tits are bigger too.

The strap from her tank slides off her shoulder, almost completely unveiling one of her breasts to me. The amount of restraint I've shown until now is staggering, but it fucking ends as soon as Tara takes my hand and lifts it to her breast.

"Touch me," she begs, rocking her hips over my impossibly hard cock. I try to think of a reason not to, but my mind goes blank as she arches her back, pressing her pebbled nipple against the palm of my hand. I squeeze her breast like I'm fucking fifteen and it's my first time feeling up a girl. "Yes," she whispers. "More."

Fuck.

I lick down the column of her neck, squeezing her tit, getting used to the feel of it in my hand. "Tara, baby, you're killing me." My lips trail a little lower, peppering kisses over the swell of her breast, then I reach her nipple, and before I can think better of it, I flick my tongue over it.

That's all it takes to set her off and she picks up the pace, rocking back and forth over my cock. I suck her nipple into my mouth, groaning around it as her fingers dig into my shoulders.

"I'm going to come," she whispers, panting against my ear. Not trusting her to be quiet, I release her nipple and cover her mouth with the palm of my hand. She thrusts her hips one more time, and falls apart, moaning against my hand. My cock jerks at the sight of her—eyes wide, cheeks flushed—and grows even harder.

So painfully hard.

It's going to be so fucking messy when I finally fuck her.

Still catching her breath, she flashes me a smile.

“That wasn’t my first orgasm, but it was my best.” She leans into me, pressing her lips to mine. It’s a quick peck, and I’m fine with it. I don’t think I can handle much more. That’s why I lift her tank straps back onto her shoulders, tucking her breasts away.

“Now, you have something to think about when you give your sample tomorrow.”

I grab my cock through my sweatpants, biting back a groan. “You’re such a brat.”

“But I’m your brat.”

That she is.

We got so distracted with the embryo situation, that we weren’t prepared for what happened afterward. The day they put Tara’s port in was easily one of the worst days of my life. Or at least it was until she got her first dose of chemo. She was fine for a little while, then it was like a switch had been flipped. The three days that followed her treatment were horrible. She was in so much pain and couldn’t sleep. Everything she ate, she threw up. We spent half the time on the bathroom floor, her on her knees and me on mine behind her, holding her hair as she hugged the toilet bowl.

This morning she woke up feeling slightly better, which has been a huge relief.

“Coffee?” Maverick offers when I enter the kitchen.

“Sure,” I say as I make my way to the kitchen island to set up the tripod. “Tara’s feeling better. Holly’s helping her get showered and dressed for the day, then she’s going to record one of her videos.”

Maverick hums, pouring me a cup of coffee. “She rope you into one of them yet?”

“No,” I reply. “I cross the line there.”

He laughs, sliding me the mug. “You’re only kidding yourself,” he says. “She’ll get you sooner or later.”

I wanted to argue, but he had a point. I couldn’t say no to her.

“I have to head out. The insurance adjusters are headed over to Sally’s today.” He takes a long sip of his coffee. “You got everything over here handled?”

I nod. In the time that I’ve been sleeping on his couch, we’ve hardly discussed club business. He doesn’t offer much, and I never think to ask. It’s like I’ve taken a sabbatical or something.

He drops his cup in the sink, then shrugs his kutte onto his shoulders.

“What’s the plan for Sally’s?”

“Well, we’ll know more after the adjuster makes his decision, but if we want to stay on board, we’re probably going to have to buy her out. She doesn’t want to do business with us anymore, and I can’t really blame her.”

“Do we have the funds to do that?”

“I don’t know. I have to sit down with Leftie and go over the numbers. I don’t have a lot of liquid cash on deck, and even if I did, I wouldn’t touch it. Not with Tara’s health the way that it is. Her surgery is going to put me in the red.”

Collectively it was decided that Tara would do her chemo here in North Carolina, but

the surgery was going to be in New York. In the best hospital, with the best doctors. The only bad thing was the recovery afterward. No one knew what that looked like, or how long she'd be there.

It was going to cost a fortune.

"I've got money, Mav," I say, tapping my fingers against the counter. "I know she's your daughter, and maybe that sounds like I'm overstepping, but I can help." I lift my eyes to his. "I want to help."

"You're worried about overstepping?" He laughs, shaking head. "Think we're beyond that, Capone."

I suppose he's right. Overstepping happened the day I told him I wanted to fertilize his daughter's eggs.

"You just keep putting a smile on Tara's face, and I'll worry about how I'm going to pay her hospital bills. That's literally the only reason I'm letting you sleep on my couch."

"Don't lie. I'm starting to grow on you."

"Hey guys, in case you're new here, my name is Tara, and I'm currently battling Ewing Sarcoma. Today, is a good day, not only am I feeling better, but it's also my birthday." She tears her eyes away from the camera and sends me a cheeky grin. "And someone is making me homemade pizza. Do you want to say hi? I'm on live."

"No," I say as I dip the ladle into the marinara sauce I made from scratch. I spread it around the dough as she goes back to talking to her followers.

I'm all for Tara using her platform as a diary or whatever it is she's doing. It keeps

her mind off things. However, me and the internet are not one.

“He’s camera shy, which is a shame because he’s really hot. If my mom’s Aunt Fern were still alive she’d call him a tall drink of water on a hot summer day.”

I roll my eyes, my lips quirking slightly as her laughter fills my ears.

“They want to know if you are my boyfriend.” That gets my attention, and I lift my head, only to find her still staring at her phone. “No, he’s just my future baby daddy. If you’ve been following me for the last couple of weeks, you know that before I started chemotherapy, I had my fertility preserved.” She goes on to tell her followers the story, but I tune her out, still stuck on her so easily dismissing me as her boyfriend. If I’m not her boyfriend, what the fuck am I?

“Stop lying to the people,” I say, my tone gruff.

She pauses midsentence, turning her attention to me.

“What? I’m not lying, even Sadie said I looked preg?—”

I slick my tongue across my teeth and set the ladle down on the counter. “I’m not your boyfriend?”

“Well, I mean I didn’t want to assume.”

“Pause the video, Tara.”

“I can’t it’s live.” She smiles at the screen. “TikTok isn’t his thing.”

This isn’t really a conversation I want to be having in front of a bunch of faceless strangers but fuck it. I step around the kitchen island, and make my way toward her,

flipping my baseball hat backward.

“What are you doing?”

“Making things clear,” I say simply as I bring both hands to her face. Cradling her cheeks in my hand, I bend my head and capture her lips with my own. She gasps, and I take the opportunity to lick into her mouth, my tongue circling hers.

Pride surges deep in the pit of my gut when she kisses me back, her tongue lazily sweeping around my mouth as she winds her arms around my neck and pulls me between her legs. After a few more moments, I slowly pull away, sucking her bottom lip one last time.

Her pretty eyes fly open, and I smile at her.

“Message received?”

“Yes, sir.”

Fuck. I like the sound of that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

TARA

“Make a wish.”

I peer at my mom from over the candles on the cake. We all know what I’m wishing for this year, and collectively, we’re all praying it comes true as I blow out the candles.

Dad flicks the lights on, and I turn to Capone. After my live video which received the most engagement ever, I got off line. My parents had returned from getting my cake, and Uncle Shady, Bianca, and Leftie all dropped by to sample Capone’s pizza. We’ve barely had any time alone, and there is something I’ve been meaning to ask him since I woke up this morning.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asks, plucking a chocolate covered strawberry from the birthday cake. He holds the strawberry to my lips, encouraging me to take a bite.

“You promised if I was feeling better we’d go for a ride on your bike.” I inch forward, biting into the strawberry. “I’m holding you to it.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” my mom interrupts. “Your surgery is in a few days, and you really can’t risk getting sick.”

I get the concern but what she doesn’t understand is my side of things. The last round

of chemo destroyed me. I could barely move from the bathroom floor, much less the house. I've been cooped up here ever since, and with my surgery approaching, I'm going stir crazy. The doctors have already warned me that I'm going to be out of commission after surgery, and that it could be weeks before I'm even discharged. Never mind I'm still having severe anxiety about going under the knife, but we won't go there.

The point is, I don't have too many days where I feel like a human, and I don't think it's that irresponsible of me to want to make the most of them.

I just want to feel normal.

I just want to live.

"I'm not going to get sick." I glance at Capone, noting the conflicted expression on his face. "Please? We won't even go far. I just need a change of scenery, and time to feel like me again." I pull my lower lip between my teeth. "We don't have to go for a long ride. Maybe we can just go to your apartment. I want to take pictures of the living room anyway."

We've been trying to make plans for when I'm bedbound and have nothing to do. There are only so many TikTok's one can make, and I'm not even sure I'll be up to that. One of the things Capone suggested I do to keep busy is decorate his apartment. What started out as a quest for a couch has become a full-blown operation, and by the time I'm done, his apartment will be ready to host his entire family for Sunday dinner.

Francesca Cappizzone is going to love me forever.

However, decorating his apartment has nothing to do with him and I getting out of this house for a while.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Dad says, surprising both Capone, and I. My mom, not so much. “Nothing better than a little wind therapy.” He winds his arms around mom’s waist and whispers something in her ear. Whatever he says seems to work in my favor because she turns to Capone and tells him to be careful with me.

A grin stretches across my face, and I throw my arms around Capone’s neck. “Best birthday ever.”

He kisses the top of my head before inching back.

“Well, if we’re going for a ride, I should probably give you your birthday present now.”

He disappears into the living room, only to return a moment later carrying a big pink box, perfectly wrapped—giant bow and all.

“You said the best part of receiving a present, is tearing the paper.” He sets the gift on the counter in front of me. “Have at it, princess. I even splurged for the card.”

I smile at him. “Who helped you?”

“Lucia.”

I meant it when I said the best part of opening a present is unwrapping it, but that was before I received a card from Capone. His handwriting isn’t the best, but the words above his name were legible.

I love you.

It’s not something we’ve said to one another, which is crazy when you think about it. I don’t think either one of us question how the other feels for them. It’s obvious in

every action. It's the way we look at one another. It's him holding my hair when I'm hunched over the bowl. It's me creeping out of my bed every night to sleep with him on the couch. It's all the little things, and the big things too.

Winking at me, he tips his chin toward the present.

"Open it, princess."

His command acts as a reminder that we're surrounded by my family, and as much as I want to tell him I love him too, those words are better spoken without an audience. I carefully place the card back inside the envelope and focus my attention on the present, enthusiastically ripping the pretty pink paper.

"You got me my own helmet?" I boast, removing it from the box. I'm about to fit it to my head, when I spot a photograph peeking through the tissue paper. Setting the helmet on the counter, I examine the photo, trying to guess what it is. But the only thing I can make out is the word throne.

"It's a custom seat for the back of my bike. When we get back from New York, I'm having it installed," he explains.

I grin so hard as I slide off the stool and rush for him, throwing my arms around his neck. I don't care who is in the room, I can't hold back another second.

"You love me big," I whisper against his ear.

His arms wrap around me, squeezing me as he presses a kiss to the top of my head. "So fucking big, Princess."

My dad was right, there is nothing quite like a little wind therapy. Capone pulls his bike in front of his apartment complex and kills the engine. Dropping down the

kickstand, he removes the helmet from his head and turns his gaze to the sideview mirror, waiting expectantly for me to do the same.

I stall for a beat, not quite ready for our ride to be over. Then I remind myself, I've got big plans for when we go inside his apartment, and I make quick work of unfastening the chin strap. But as soon as I remove the helmet, and my eyes catch sight of the clump of hair inside of it, my heart drops.

Instinctively, I lift my hand to my hair, horror streaked across my face, as my gaze flits to Capone. I knew this would happen, and mentally I tried to prepare. But when it didn't happen during the chemo treatment, I thought I was in the clear until after surgery. I even canceled the appointment mom made for me to get a custom wig.

Capone quickly dismounts and turns to me, taking the helmet from my hands.

"It's only hair, baby. It'll grow back."

Frantically, I pat my head, searching for bald spots. Tears fill my eyes, and it feels like I've been punched in the gut. Why me? Why now?

"It's not only hair. It's everything."

The dam breaks and the tears fall freely. Capone speaks to me, but I don't hear a word he says. I'm too lost in my grief to make sense of anything else. The next thing I know is that I'm being lifted off the bike and carried to his apartment. He sets me down on the counter, pushing my legs apart so he can step between them. I blink, bringing his handsome face into focus. He lifts his hands to my head, smoothing them down my hair. My first reaction is to swat his hands away, but his fingers wrap around my wrists, and he bends his head, sweeping his lips across mine.

"It's only hair," he repeats over and over in between kisses. The more he says it, the

more I start to believe it, and when he wraps the fragile strands around his fingers, I don't flinch.

It's only hair.

His tongue sneaks out, tracing the seam of my mouth. My lips part and he slides in, his tongue lavishly sweeping through my mouth, tangling with mine. I get lost in his kiss... in his touch, and I wind my arms around his neck, scooting closer to the edge of the counter.

If we could just stay like this forever.

If I could just forget cancer ever darkened my doorstep.

If I could just feel anything but devastation.

He angles my head, deepening the kiss, and a moan escapes me. The sound only entices him more, and soon his teeth are scraping against my lips. He plucks and plunders, his mouth completely owning me, making me a breathless puddle of raw emotions.

His lips leave mine, and his mouth starts moving from my jaw to my neck. He sucks and licks, his coarse beard only adding more friction. I wind my legs around my waist and arch against him, the need to be close, to feel all his hardness against my softness is too much.

He pistons his hips, and I feel the hard ridge of his cock press against me.

Yes. I need more of that.

Frantically, I fist his t-shirt, sliding it up his abs. I want to feel his skin on me. He

tears his mouth away from my neck and draws out a ragged breath.

“We have to stop.”

Panic surges deep inside of me.

“No, please...” I beg. “I don’t want to stop, Gianluca. I need this. I need this more than fucking air right now.”

I don’t think words can convey how badly I need him.

“Tara, you’re upset...and... well, I don’t want to hurt you.”

Still fisting his shirt, I yank him closer to me. He drops his forehead to mine.

“You’ll never hurt me,” I assure him. “Please don’t turn me down.” Then a thought crosses my mind, and I quickly release him, inching backward. All this time I’ve been thinking he’s holding back because of my age, but maybe it’s not that at all. “Unless...of course you don’t want to. I mean I get it, I’m sick. We spend more time on the bathroom floor and in hospitals than we do anywhere else. I can’t imagine you find that attractive, and now I’m losing hair, so there go my looks. You usually go for women like Wendy, and I’m the inexperienced virgin you’re afraid to touch.”

I unwind my legs from his waist and am about to push him out of my way when he takes my hand and lowers it to the bulge straining against his fly.

“Does that feel like I don’t find you attractive?”

I pull my lower lip between my teeth, my hand instinctively closing around his hardened cock.

“I’m going to let you feel sorry for yourself for a minute, then I’m going to rip your pants off, and bury my head between your legs. Your pussy is going to be mine, Tara, and I don’t think you realize how much of a privilege I consider that.”

He shrugs his kutte from his shoulders, and reaches behind him, pulling his t-shirt over his head in one fluid motion. My eyes rake over his chiseled chest, zeroing in on the dusting of dark hair that trails from his belly button. Then I take in the tattoos that decorate his skin, and I release my lip. My tongue sneaks out of my mouth, and I wet my lips as something foreign begins to flutter in the pit of my gut.

“Am I afraid to touch you? Yeah, sometimes, but that’s only because I don’t know how to fuck gentle, and like it or not, you are fucking fragile. So fucking fragile, and so goddamn precious. But I’ll do my best. Give you all I fucking got if that’s what you want.”

He pauses, brushing my hand away from his cock as he undoes his belt and pops the button on his jeans.

“I’ve been struggling with my fucking attraction to you since I saw you that night in the woods. And, yeah, you’re a virgin, but that only makes me more feral for you. There’s a sick fascination in knowing I’m going to be the guy that worships your body for the first time and introduces it to all the pleasure it can possibly receive.”

Lowering his zipper, he kicks off his boots and pushes his jeans down his legs. They drop to the floor, and he steps out of them, leaving him in nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs, his massive cock straining against them.

“I don’t deserve what I’m about to take, but I’m not going to deny you or I any longer, and when we’re done, they’ll never be a question of how much I want you. You can lose your hair. We can spend every fucking day in the hospital. None of that will ever change how I feel about you. Now, if you’re sure, I’d really like to get you

naked. I'm fucking starving, and the only thing I want is your sweet little cunt on my tongue."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CAPONE

I've pictured this moment at least a thousand times, and every time it played out differently. But it always ended before I got to truly claim Tara. I don't know if that was my conscience doing me a favor or what. No greater force is going to stop me today, though.

I slowly remove her jacket, throwing it on the floor with the rest of my clothes. Then I lift her hands over her head. Reaching for the hem of her t-shirt, I carefully draw it up and over her head. The sight of her chemo port makes me swallow hard, but it doesn't deter me. The sight is proof this girl is a fucking fighter and only cements how fucking lucky I am to call her mine. I get to see her through these hard times. I get to love her through them. It also serves as a reminder that life is short.

It's fragile.

I run my fingers over the clear bandage that covers it before bending my head to press my lips over it.

"Ignore it," she whispers. "Please, Capone, just once. Let's pretend."

One doesn't have to be a rocket scientist to know what she's asking. She wants to pretend she doesn't have cancer. She wants to be seen and treated like a woman.

Lifting my head, I drink her in. Lips swollen, eyes wide and hungry. I take her cheeks

in my hands and lower my mouth to hers. It doesn't matter how many times I've kissed her, every time is better than the last.

As I lick into her mouth, I pull down her bra straps. The perky little tits that have been fucking taunting me for months spring free, but I don't allow myself to enjoy them just yet. Instead, I continue kissing her and snake one hand around her back, expertly unfastening her bra.

I tear my mouth away from hers as the bra falls away from her body.

Until now, I always favored big tits. The bigger the better. But Tara's blow them all away. No more than a handful, with pink nipples that are taut and begging for my mouth.

"Fuck, you've got the prettiest tits, princess," I grunt, taking them in my palms. They fit perfectly just as I knew they would. My thumb brushes over the tiny buds and she inhales sharply. "Dreamed of sucking on these for far too long. Gonna do that now, though, okay?"

"Yes," she whispers.

I grin, squeezing both tits. "Such a good girl," Then I lower my mouth to her nipple. I start by licking it, flicking my tongue back and forth before I draw it between my lips and suck.

"Oh, God," she murmurs, threading her fingers through my hair. "That feels so good, Capone."

My teeth graze her nipple, pulling it tight.

"Walked around for weeks with a hard on because every time I looked at you, your

nipples were hard and poking through your shirt. Fucking drove me crazy,” I growl, moving my mouth to take her other nipple into my mouth. I could fucking suck on her tits all day and night, and I’d never get enough.

My fingers find the waistband of her leggings, but I make no attempt to remove them. Whether she likes it or not, I do have to be gentle with her. She’s still suffering from the pain in her leg, and even though it comes and goes, the last thing I want to do is aggravate anything. All I want is for Tara to feel pleasure and to know she’s fucking desired.

I want to make it so fucking good for her that she loses herself to everything but the feel of my cock as it fucking stretches and claims her sweet little cunt.

Releasing her nipple, I bring my hands to her ass and lift her off the counter. She winds her legs around my waist and lowers her mouth to my neck. The feel of her hot mouth sucking on my Adam’s apple drives me insane, and it takes every ounce of control to hold her steady in my arms as I carry her to my bedroom and gently deposit her on the air mattress. Not the best, but it will do.

I drop to my knees in front of the mattress and make quick work of her boots. Then with skilled and steady hands, I remove her pants. My eyes zero in on the red thong she’s wearing, and I lick my lips in anticipation. She hooks her thumbs under the thin waistband of her thong, and slowly lifts her head, masking any discomfort as she shimmies them down her legs.

“Spread your legs for me. Let me see how fucking wet you are.”

Her cheeks flame. It dawns on me that she probably isn’t too familiar with dirty talk, and I should probably dial it down.

“I speak my mind when I fuck, Tara. It’s not everyone’s thing, and if you don’t like

it?—”

She cuts me off. “I like it. I’m not the fucking prude you think I am, Capone. I’ve sucked cock, and I’ve been fingered. I’ve even watched porn. I’ve gotten myself off more times than you think. I want you to fuck me like you’d fuck anyone else. I want you to be as filthy and vulgar as you like. I want the full experience.”

Jesus fuck.

She props her feet flat against the mattress and spreads her legs as wide as she can, revealing the wet spot on the scrap of cotton. She brings her hand between her legs, moving the material to give me a prime view of her pink little cunt, and while it glistens with arousal, it’s not enough.

“Are you going to give me what I want, Capone? Or am I going to have take care of myself, again ?

There’s that fire that hooked me. It’s been contained since her diagnosis, but all it takes is one rogue ember and the blaze is back.

“You ever have your pussy eaten, princess?”

She shakes her head as I pull her panties down her legs. Kissing the inside of her thigh, I hook my arms under her knees and spread her wide. The scent of her arousal hits me, and I growl. I slide my fingers between her lips, flicking her clit. Then I plunge one finger deep inside of her. Her hips lift from the mattress, and she yelps. My eyes fly up to hers. As much as I want to make this as normal as possible, I can’t forget that our situation is complex. Her flexibility might be compromised.

“Why’d you stop?” she whimpers.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’re not.” She lifts her back from the bed and pushes her fingers through my hair. “I’ll tell you if something hurts, but I’m serious, Capone. I want you to treat me the way you would anyone else. I don’t know when we’ll be able to do this again once I have the surgery.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, slowly withdrawing my finger. This time when I push it back in, I do it much slower. Her pussy contracts as my thumb works her clit. Soon I feel her stretch for me, and I add another finger, moving them in and out of her tight, wet heat. It doesn’t take much for her pussy to become a wet mess, and that’s when I remove my fingers entirely, and lower my face, licking through her cunt, lapping up every drop.

Nothing, and I do mean nothing, has ever tasted sweeter to me.

Her hips buck, and she wildly thrusts against upward, riding my face. I suck and lap at her clit, pushing my fingers in and out of her as she chases her orgasm. When she finally finds it, her thighs close around my head, and she fists my hair, all while crying out my name. It’s fucking incredible.

So is the taste of her.

My tongue lazily strokes her clit, sending little aftershocks through her body, and she falls against the mattress, still fisting my hair.

“Sadie wasn’t kidding. That...oh my God...that was fucking amazing.” She loosens her hold on me, and I turn my head, biting the inside of her thigh as I continue to finger her. Lifting her head, she grins at me. “Can we do that again?”

“As much as you want, princess. Your pretty little pussy is my new favorite thing to

eat.”

I pull my fingers out of her and lift them to my mouth, sucking them dry.

So fucking sweet.

That smile of hers goes soft, and my chest tightens. She had the power to knock me on my ass before, but seeing her like this, happy and sated—excited about something—it fucking splits me wide open. I’ll do whatever I can to see her like this for the rest of my life.

“Better than Nutella?” she murmurs.

I chuckle. “Ten times better than Nutella. Could eat you morning, noon, and night, baby.”

As soon as the words leave my lips, I decide that’s the long-term goal. When Tara is well, and in remission, her cunt is going to be on the menu at least three times a day. Might be hard when she goes off to college and eventually gets a job. But I’ve perfected being a creep, and I’ll follow her around just for a taste.

“That looks painful,” she says, pulling me away from my thoughts. I follow her gaze, taking in my erection that’s straining against my boxer briefs. The poor thing is weeping.

I stand and free my cock, kicking away my briefs. My fist wraps around the shaft, and I squeeze it, but it doesn’t relieve the ache. I need to come.

Watching her lick her lips as she eyes my cock doesn’t help the situation. The girl is fucking killing me.

“Can we try something?” she asks, lifting her gaze to mine as she sits up.

I’m almost afraid to ask. Swallowing, I swipe at the bead of pre come on the head of my cock. “What do you want to try?”

“I wasn’t kidding when I asked if we could do that again, but this time I want to suck your cock.” She stands and closes the little distance between us. “And I want to be on top.”

Christ .

She’s a fucking dream come true. Her eyes drift to my cock, and she smiles.

“Oh, you like that idea too.” Lifting her gaze, she presses her palms flat against my chest and pushes me down on the mattress. “Tell me what to do.”

“Just climb on top of me.” She places one knee on the mattress, and swings her other leg over my body, giving me a prime view of her round ass. Planting her hands on my knees, she glances over her shoulder, a coy smile playing on her pretty lips.

“Like this?”

I shake my head. “You have to scoot down and sit on my face.”

She does as I instruct, lifting her ass and wiggling slightly until her perfectly pink pussy is hovering over me.

“That’s a good girl,” I praise, spreading her lips apart. Her clit is swollen, and pulled tight, begging for attention. I lean forward, flicking my tongue over it. “You like that?” I growl against her.

“Yes,” she pants. Her dainty little hand fists my cock. Her touch lights me up, and I attack her pussy, licking, and sucking, my teeth grazing all her most sensitive spots. Her arousal drips from my chin and she squeezes my cock, a feral moan rips from the back of her throat. Or maybe it’s me who moans—I’m so far gone; I can’t be sure.

“That’s it, princess, ride my face just like that.”

She picks up the pace, using every part of my face from the tip of my nose to my tongue. Then her head lowers, and I feel her lips close around the head of my cock.

“Fuck,” I growl, my fingers digging into her ass. Her tongue slides down my shaft before she brings me fully into her mouth, taking one inch at a time. I lose all sense of control, and thrust up, forcing her to take my cock all the way down her throat. She gags, but she doesn’t lift off.

“So good,” I grunt. “So fucking good.”

Her hands move to my calves, and she holds on tight as her head bops up and down. I continue to eat her pussy when she starts to play with my balls, it’s over. I tear my mouth away from her cunt and slap her ass.

“I’m going to come. Get off before I blow down your throat,” I warn, reaching for my cock. I pull it out of her mouth and close my hand around the shaft, pumping wildly. She scrambles off me, wide eyes glued to my cock as ribbons of come shoot across my stomach. When there’s nothing left, and I feel fucking boneless, I drop my head back against the air mattress and try to catch my breath.

“Fuck,” I pant. In all my years I have never come that hard. Tara comes into view, and I watch as she swipes her finger through the mess on my stomach.

“That was hot,” she whispers.

Not as hot as it is when she lifts her finger and sucks the come from it, those curious eyes shimmering with a glint of mischief as she licks it clean.

And just like that...my fucking cock starts to swell again.

I lean forward, cupping the back of her neck, and bring her mouth to mine. My tongue sweeps past her lips, and tangles with hers.

“You’re going to be the death of me, aren’t you?”

She grins, those perky tits of her bouncing as she straddles my thighs. Then she takes my hand and brings it between her legs.

“It’s not a bad way to go,” she murmurs, and I pinch her clit.

No, I reckon it isn’t.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

TARA

Capone pins my arms over my head, his fingers intertwining with mine as he settles between my legs. After he cleaned himself off, he delivered on his promise to give me another orgasm. It didn't take long seeing as I was all riled up from watching him get off. It was the hottest thing I ever witnessed, and I found power in knowing that I drove him to lose control like that.

"You sure you're okay?" He asks, his gaze searching mine.

My legs are tingling, and I'm exhausted, but there is nothing that's going to stand in my way from taking what I want, especially when I don't know when I'll be able to do it again.

I inch forward, kissing him slowly.

"I'm fine. Don't bail on me now."

"I'm not bailing," he argues. "I just want to make sure you tell me if it becomes too much." He releases one of my hands and cups the side of my face. "You look tired."

"Gee just what a girl wants to hear when she's naked, and her legs are spread wide."

"You know what I'm saying." His fingers slowly trail down my cheek. "If you need to tap out, we'll rest and try again later."

As much as I've made it clear I don't want him to treat me any differently than he would if I was not riddled with cancer, he doesn't seem to get the point. I should be grateful that he's so considerate, and a part of me is, but I know if we don't do it now, we probably won't.

I mask my discomfort by burying my face in the crook of his neck, and wind my legs around his waist. His heavy cock, fully sheathed, hangs between us, and as much as my body aches, I want more. That's why I promise to let him know if it becomes too much.

His mouth finds mine, and he lowers his other hand, guiding the fat head of his cock to my opening.

"Take a deep breath for me, baby. It's only going to hurt for a few minutes until you stretch around me."

I grip his shoulders as he notches his cock inside me and do as I'm told, dragging in a deep breath and holding it while he slowly pushes himself deeper. He braces his hands on either side of my head, and lowers his gaze to where his cock slowly disappears inside of me.

"Fuck, Tara...breath."

My mouth falls open on a gasp, and he feeds me another inch. It burns something awful, and I feel tears sting my eyes.

"Almost there," he grinds out.

With every inch he gives me, my hips shift restlessly. Is it normal to feel this much? To be so entirely full, and still crave more?

Keeping one hand firm against the mattress, he hooks his other arm behind my knee and presses my leg against his hip. The angle gives him more room to maneuver, and this time when he hips rock forward, he doesn't hold back. I cry out, my nails piercing his shoulders, as he bottoms out.

"That's it, baby," he praises. "You took it all. Every fucking inch."

He raises his hand and cups his palm before spitting into it. Then he lowers his fingers to my clit. I'm so overly sensitive that I forget the pain and focus on the pleasure.

Fucking incredible.

My hips arch and something in him snaps. Suddenly, he takes hold of my legs, and spreads them wide, his hips bucking as he thrusts in and out of me, stretching me in the most carnal way.

I get lost in the sensation of it all. My orgasm starts to build. Every snap of his hips, all the filthy sounds our bodies make as they slap together...it all adds to the pleasure swirling in the pit of my stomach.

"Come for me, Tara. Let me see you fall apart. Let me fucking feel that pussy milk my cock for every drop."

I throw my head back and sob his name, my release taking over my entire body. I'm so consumed by the feel of him, and the pleasure rocketing through my body that it takes me a minute to realize he's coming too. He shouts my name, and fucks me harder, thrusting deeper as he fills the condom. Mesmerized by his facial expressions, and the way he loses control, all I can do is watch in awe.

He's so fucking beautiful when he let's go, and he's all mine.

I must've fallen asleep, because when I wake it's dark outside, and there is no sign of Capone. For a moment I fear that I dreamt everything. Then I lift the throw blanket from my body and see all the marks Capone's beard left behind.

"You're awake."

My head snaps at the sound of his voice, and I find him standing in the doorway of his bedroom, dressed in a pair of sweatpants and nothing else. Pushing off the door frame, he makes his way toward the air mattress.

"I called Holly and Maverick. Told them we were gonna spend the night here, and be back early in the morning," he reveals, taking a seat next to me. His hand snakes out and he gently drags his knuckles down my cheek. "How do you feel?"

I turn my head, pressing a kiss to his hand. "I feel like a million bucks." Meeting his gaze, I smile. "Sore, but in all the best ways possible."

"I'm going to draw you a bath, but that wasn't what I was asking, and you know it."

Sighing, I pull his hand away from my face. I guess we're done pretending I'm normal.

"I'm tired, Capone, but I don't regret anything we did." I stare at his handsome face, hating the way he looks so worried. "I needed it. If for no other reason than to feel like a normal woman."

He nods, seeming to understand, then slaps his hands against his thighs and blows out a breath. "So how about that bath?"

"Sounds great."

He stands and holds out his hands, helping me off the mattress, but as soon as my feet touch the floor, my knees threaten to buckle. Capone is quick to wrap his arms around my waist, and instead of falling backwards, I fall against his chest.

“Fuck,” he hisses.

“I’m fine,” I grind out, but my voice gives it away that I’m not. My legs feel as if someone is taking a knife through the back of them, cutting through the nerves.

“You’re not fucking fine,” Capone growls as he lifts me into his arms, and carries me into the bathroom. He sets me down on top of the vanity and disappears. A minute later he returns with his kutte draped over his forearm and a bottle of water. He pushes the water into my hands and reaches inside his pocket, pulling out a prescription bottle with my pain meds. After he expertly opens the bottle, he shakes two pills into my palm, and I knock them back.

“It was too much on your body,” he says, combing his fingers through his hair. He looks like he wants to punch something.

“Please don’t do that,” I murmur, forcing his gaze back to me. “I’m going to be laid up in the hospital for weeks. Maybe even months. I have no idea what my life is going to look like—I don’t know when I’ll be able to walk again, and sex is definitely off the table. Stop beating yourself up, Capone.”

He licks his tongue over his teeth but remains quiet.

“Are you going to draw me that bath?”

That seems to snap him out of his trance, and he nods, turning to bathtub. With his back to me, I let the mask fall from my face, and silently will the pain meds to kick in. My eye catches sight of my reflection in the mirror, and gasp flies past my lips.

My complexion is paler than usual, and my eyes have dark circles beneath them, but that's the least of it. I lift my hand to my hair and gently push my fingers through it. When my fingers reach the ends, I glance down at my palm and stare hopelessly at the clump of hair. My stomach drops at the sight.

A million emotions run through me just as they did when I removed the helmet and first noticed I was losing hair. Sex was a good distraction. It took my mind off my situation and let me remain in the moment. But it doesn't change a person's fate.

Capone turns back to me, his eyes finding mine in the mirror. I lift my hand to show him, expecting him to once again tell me it's only hair, but he doesn't. Instead, he closes the distance between us, and wraps his arms around me from behind, kissing my shoulder. I realize then, he didn't touch my hair once when we were having sex, and I wonder if that's because he was afraid it would fall out.

"There's probably clumps on the air mattress," I say, flicking the hair onto the vanity. Turning my head, I lift my hand to his cheek. "I'm ready for that bath now."

"Okay, princess." He lifts me off the vanity and carries me to the bathtub, gently lowering me into the warm water. Then he strips himself of his sweats and climbs in behind me. His arms wrap around my small frame, and he pulls me against his chest, peppering my head with kisses.

"I love you, Tara," he rasps.

I cover his hands with mine as a tear slips down my cheek.

"I love you too."

We sit like that for a couple of minutes, and the pain in my legs starts to subside. Capone takes a washcloth, and soaps it up. As he washes my body with care, I think

about the whirlwind life has been and everything that's happened. Me and Mark breaking up, Capone reluctantly becoming my shadow and us going from enemies to friends...and now, well, lovers. My cancer diagnosis, and him offering to help preserve my chances of having a baby one day. If someone would've told me this was how my life would play out, I wouldn't have believed them. I mean, of all the people in all the world, I never imagined it would be Capone who stands beside me and sees me through my darkest days.

But maybe that was always the plan. My soul knew I needed him. I wanted to find my twin flame, just like my mom found hers, and I think I have. I think in another life, Capone and I were together. I think the story was a little different—there was no cancer or crazy shootings. There was just us, and a beautiful life. We had our ups and downs, but our love was so strong it prevailed every time.

“Do you believe in twin flames?” I ask.

“I'm not familiar with the term,” he replies as he washes my back.

“A twin flame is when one person is deeply connected to another person. Some people believe that twin flames are dust from the same star, and no matter how many lives we live, our souls always come in search for their mate. Sometimes they find them, sometimes they don't.”

“So like a soul mate?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“I didn't used to.”

That makes me smile. “But you do now?”

He moves my hair over my shoulder and runs the washcloth down my arm. “I interpret it a little differently than you, but yeah.”

“How do you interpret it?”

“Well, I have a love hate relationship with religion, especially lately. But my Pops, he’s a devote Catholic. You know the story of Adam and Eve, right?”

“Vaguely. Didn’t eat the forbidden fruit?” He chuckles slightly and I glance over my shoulder at him. “If this is the part where you tell me I’m the forbidden fruit?—”

He cuts me off, pressing his lips to mine.

“That’s not where I was going with it,” he assures me. “Although...” I slap his thigh, and he just winks at me. Then he goes on to tell the story of Adam and Eve. “Adam wasn’t created for Eve; she was created for him. She’s his missing rib. A man can search high and low, go through women like its sole purpose in life, but none of them will ever stick until one girl walks into his life and everything suddenly clicks into place. He might resist at first, but that’s just because life has done a number on him, and he’s lost his faith. Every part of his body still knows she’s his missing piece, and when he finds it... when he finds her... he’s whole.”

He smooths his hands down my arms, dropping his chin to rest on top of my shoulder.

“Do you think I’m your missing rib?”

“I don’t think, baby, I know.”

CAPONE

After the bath, Tara stared at herself in the mirror again. I knew losing her hair was a hard pill to swallow. I also knew that me telling her it was just hair didn't make things better, so I remained silent. Until she turned to me and asked me to cut her hair. I was already feeling like a piece of shit for taking her virginity during a moment of vulnerability, there was no way I was cutting her hair too.

But she wouldn't relent.

"Please," she begged. "It's only hair, right? It doesn't define me. I'm sick and this is part of the journey. You'll still love me no matter what."

"Of course I will."

"I know," she said, flashing me a weak smile. "That's why it wasn't a question. It's only going to keep falling out, and it will look worse than if I just cut it all off."

I could say no to Tara, but never for long. She was and will always be my greatest weakness. So I cut her hair. I expected her to cry when it was over, but she didn't, and maybe that's because she was all cried out.

But even the next day when we went back to Holly and Maverick's and they caught sight of her shaved head, she still didn't cry.

To their credit, neither did they.

They didn't even threaten to kill me for cutting it myself.

Holly hugged her, and Maverick made a joke about them matching.

"Well, you always looked like your mother," he said. "This might be the one time when I get to say you look like me."

Surgery day rolled around, and that's when things got really heavy. Kissing Tara goodbye before they brought her into the operating room, not knowing when I'd be able to see her next, broke me in ways I wasn't prepared to deal with. I wanted to be strong for Holly and Maverick, but it was the opposite. They rallied around me, assuring me our girl would make it through.

Hours ticked by, and that fucking clock became my enemy.

"It was supposed to be over by now," I said to no one in particular.

As much as I tried to block it from my mind, I kept recalling that conversation Tara and I had when she was first diagnosed. She was always more concerned about surgery than anything else. She didn't want to go under anesthesia, and obsessed over all the possible things that could go wrong. I, on the other hand, remained positive. I told myself surgery was her best option at removing all the cancer, and I focused on the success rates. But sitting in that waiting room, watching the minutes tick by on the clock had me spiraling.

Two hours later we finally got word that the surgery was successful, and she was in recovery. Only one person was allowed to see her, and Maverick and I both agreed that person should be Holly. When I did finally get to see her, she was totally out of it.

The next day she woke up in excruciating pain, which was expected. They had removed the cancerous part of the hip bone and used a portion of her femur to

reconstruct the missing joint, leaving her with two incision sites, and a cast. By the second week of her hospital stay, she fell into a depression. She'd barely talk to anyone, including me.

I tried to encourage her to make videos and do the content stuff. I bought her a new tripod, and some fancy light that clipped to her phone—I even offered to be in the videos. But her heart just wasn't in it anymore.

The following week, Holly surprised her by making for Sadie to fly to New York for a visit. We were sure that would lift her spirits, and it would've had Sadie not mentioned prom or plans for graduation. She wasn't intentionally trying to rub it in Tara's face, and when she realized her mistake, she quickly tried to backtrack.

But the damage was already done.

In the weeks since the surgery, Tara fell behind on her home school assignments. We didn't know when she'd graduate, and that led to the realization that she'd have to delay her first semester of college too. Not that she had fully decided on where she was going—but she did hope that by the time the fall rolled around, she'd be on her way to making a full recovery and finding some normalcy.

We all did.

But it was one blow after another. The worst of it came when they removed her cast from her leg, and she saw her scar for the first time. I'm not going to lie, it was brutal. Looked like a piece of her leg had been bitten off. I had seen her cry a whole lot, but I never saw her sob like that.

Broke my fucking heart.

It was Maverick who put things into perspective for everyone.

“You’re a Burnside, baby. We bend but we never break. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and realize how fucking blessed you are. There are people who have the same cancer you have and are missing limbs because of it. They don’t care though, they’re just happy to be alive.”

At first I thought his words were too harsh, and we actually fought about it. But the next day, Tara’s mood shifted.

“I couldn’t go to the Outer Banks this year, but I want to go next summer, and I want to wear a bright red bikini. When people ask me about my scars, I’m going to tell them I was attacked by a shark.” She turned to me, and I swear I saw the slightest hint of a smile.

“Well, that’s one way to clear the beach.”

“Right?”

Then the most beautiful sound escaped her lips, and she laughed for what felt like the first time in months.

Things slowly started to get better after that. Tara was determined to finish her homeschool work and spent the mornings doing her assignments. Her appetite came back too, and we sampled some of the best food New York City had to offer.

One day while we were eating takeout from Katz deli, Tara asked me to do a video with her. I couldn’t deny her, so there I sat next to her on the hospital bed, and we did what she called a couple’s challenge.

There was a voiceover, and we had to point either to ourselves or our partner in response to the question.

Who noticed who first?

I jutted my thumb toward my chest, and Tara pointed to herself.

“No way you noticed me first,” I argued. “That night we picked you up from the woods, was the first time I really saw you as a woman, and not an extension of Maverick. I wasn’t even on your radar.”

“Wrong.” She smiled. “Before Mark and I even started dating, I had a crush on you.”

This went on for about five questions, and two hours later our little video went viral. In the last weeks of Tara’s hospital stay we became a TikTok sensation much to my dismay, and she became a paid creator.

The day finally came, and she was released from the hospital in a wheelchair. The plan was to go back to North Carolina and have her do her rehab there. So that’s what we did. We took her home, but since Holly and Maverick’s house wasn’t wheelchair accessible, we stayed at the clubhouse. Everything was on one level there, and she and her physical therapist had plenty of free range to get her out of the chair and walking.

And in time, that’s exactly what happened. She finished her final round of chemo eight weeks ago. She stood from her chair and walked on her own to ring that fucking bell, and I’ve never been more proud of another person in my life.

But today... today we find out the results of her scans and I’ve never been more nervous. It feels like someone is holding my head under water, and I’m just waiting for them to let me breathe again.

A knock sounds on the door, and we turn to greet the doctor. The days of me sitting out in a waiting room and relying on others are long gone. Holly and Maverick crowd behind us as I take Tara’s hand in mine and give it a squeeze. I don’t know if the gesture is meant to comfort her or me.

“Alright, Doc, lay it on me...” Tara says, blowing out a ragged breath.

“Congratulations, there is no evidence of disease.”

I don't hear a word he says after that. Releasing Tara's hand, I turn to her and take her face between my hands. My mouth crashes over hers, and I kiss her with everything I've got.

Dear God,

Thank you for delivering us from evil.

THE END... for now .