



Ghost's Angel (Shadow Reapers MC #1)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: In Ghost's world of chaos and violence, there's no room for mercy—and he's as lethal as they come. But one glimpse into the haunted eyes of the late-shift diner waitress and his possessive instincts roar to life faster than a V-twin engine. He may be sixteen years her senior, but the pure, untouched angel is the missing piece of his dark and tainted soul.

Mira has never gotten a single break. Aged out of the system, stalked by ex-foster parents who want to use her one last time, battling a failing heart—and mounting medical bills—life is beating the crap out of her. The huge, tattooed, scary-as-hell Prez of an outlaw MC is everything she should fear. His massive frame, scarred knuckles, and ice-cold stare make grown men quake. But for the first time in her life, Mira has someone on her side—someone who will torch the world and place the ashes at her feet.

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Chapter 1

Mira

Rain pelts the diner window, a nagging reminder that I should have put my belongings up high before leaving for work in case my basement apartment floods. Again.

Not that there's much there worth saving. Threadbare clothes. Furniture gleaned from a dumpster. A few dog-eared paperbacks I scrounged from the church donation bin. That's pretty much the sum total of my worldly possessions.

"Order up!" Jimmy's voice booms from the kitchen, making me jump and dragging my attention from the nasty weather outside. At least the storm seems to be subsiding. Maybe there's still hope for a dry apartment.

I press my palm against my sternum, trying to will away the uncomfortable squeeze as I make my way to the pickup window.

Skillfully balancing three plates of greasy meals that are mediocre in every way along my arm, I do my best to ignore the mounting pressure in my chest. I can't afford weakness. Literally, I can't afford it.

Forcing myself to breathe slowly—counting to four on the inhale and four on the exhale, like the last ER doctor taught me—I weave between the tables, past Mrs. Henry, who leaves me her newspaper coupons as a tip. Past the window booth where local college students camp out for hours nursing cups of coffee and sharing plates of

fries. Past his booth—still empty, but it's only eight pm.

"Finally!" The businessman at table six barely looks up from his phone as I set his plate down carefully, plastering on a fake smile. "This better be hot."

"Can I get you anything else, sir?"

He waves me off, already shoveling a heaping forkful of meatloaf special into his greedy mouth. At least he's not like the jerk at table four who keeps accidentally brushing my hip every time I pass.

The bell over the door chimes, and my heart rate kicks up as he walks in. His presence fills the room and makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up in a way that's not entirely unpleasant.

Tall, dangerous-looking, with dark gray eyes that seem to see everything. My big, tattooed, rough, tough, and gruff leather-clad biker.

My?

No, he's not mine. Not in real life, anyway, only in my late-night fantasies.

He never says much, just orders black coffee and whatever's on special. Tips way too much.

Tonight he has another biker with him, but I can hardly focus on anyone else when he's in the room. Our eyes meet for a brief but profound moment before I look away, my pulse jumping erratically.

Calm. Stay calm. You're not fully medicated.

I busy myself refilling sugar dispensers, very aware of the two enormous bikers settling into the usual booth. From the corner of my eye, I watch him. His cut—I've learned from Sons of Anarchy that that's what they call those leather vests—has a patch that tells me he's not only in a motorcycle club called Shadow Reapers, he's the president.

"Coffee?" I manage to keep my voice steady as I approach his table, pot in hand.

He nods once, pushing his cup forward.

It's our usual dance—I pretend I don't notice how he watches me, he pretends he's just here for the crappy diner food.

In the harsh overhead lighting, the scars on his knuckles stand out starkly against tanned and weathered skin. I wonder, not for the first time, what kind of stories those scars could tell.

"The special tonight is meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and peas," I recite automatically, though he probably knows our daily special rotation as well as I do by now.

"That'll work." His voice is low, gravelly. As usual, it sends deliciously warm tingles through my lower belly and straight to my core.

He cocks a brow at the biker beside him who nods. "Make that two."

I'm turning away when my heart does that thing again—that sickening flutter-stop-flutter. The room spins. I reach out a hand to steady myself, but my suddenly numb fingers miss the table entirely and I stumble. Before I can fall, his large, scarred, calloused hand shoots out catching my elbow.

His touch is electric. Warm. Strong. For a single moment, I let myself lean into it,

imagining what it would be like to have someone like this man—powerful, fierce, ruggedly handsome—to lean on.

What would it feel like to have anyone to lean on?

I almost laugh at my ridiculous self. I'm a hot mess of a diner waitress who can barely afford to feed and clothe herself, and he's... Dominant. Commanding. Fearsome. So ripped his muscles have muscles. He's way out of my league.

"Thank you," I whisper, carefully extracting myself from his grip. Is it my imagination, or do his fingers linger just a fraction longer than necessary?

I top off cups of coffee and wipe down tables, very aware of him when a soft, wobbly voice catches my attention.

"Dear, I think I might be a bit short tonight." Mrs. Henry is sorting through the pile of nickels and dimes with her arthritic fingers. I move to assist her, grateful for the distraction from the intense stare that I can actually feel on my skin.

"Let me help you count that, Mrs. Henry." She's a sweet, grandmotherly type. The kind of grandmother I longed for as a child.

"Oh dear, I think I'm fifty cents short." Her voice quavers with embarrassment. "Perhaps I could come back tomorrow?—"

"No, no, you have the exact amount," I interrupt, covertly slipping two quarters from my tip pocket and adding them to the cluster of coins. "See? Perfect amount."

Her weathered face breaks into a relieved smile, and for a moment, the crushing weight of my own problems lightens. Small kindnesses are all I have to give, but sometimes they're enough to add a little sunshine to dark days and dreary nights.

Grateful, Mrs. Henry presses a thirty five cents off coupon for laundry booster and a twenty five cents off coupon for sugar pops cereal into my hand as though she's gracing me with a thousand dollar tip before securing her rain hat over her helmet of blue-grey hair.

I risk a glance at his booth. He's deep in conversation with his companion, his powerful fist wrapped around a coffee mug that looks small and delicate in his massive grip. As if sensing my attention, he looks up, catching me staring. Heat floods my cheeks, but I can't look away. There's hunger in his gaze, raw and primal, and something else—something that looks almost like concern.

My heart leaps in my chest. No one has ever drawn these feelings from me like he does. Never this sizzling awareness that's like electricity shooting through my veins.

"Order up!" Jimmy hollers.

As I pass it, my reflection in the chrome coffee machine shows dark circles under my eyes that no amount of concealer can hide.

My pulse quickens as I approach his table. There's something magnetic about him, something that draws me in despite—or maybe because of—the threatening air of danger emanating from him. I've never seen him smile, not once, but his eyes follow my movements with an intensity that makes heat bloom across my skin.

I slide the plates of tonight's special in front of the hulking bikers.

"C-can I g-get you anything else?" I ask, mortified by my sudden stutter.

He shakes his head, his penetrating eyes never leaving my face. Cheeks burning, I hurry away before I can embarrass myself further.

The rain has let up but there are huge puddles flooding the cement sidewalks and asphalt roads. My apartment will definitely be soggy. But I can't think about that. I have exactly four and a half minutes until my shift ends. Then I have to change in the bathroom, and make it ten blocks through the rain-drenched streets to empty trash cans, scrub toilets, and vacuum carpets. I have to focus on the here and now—one thing at a time. Survival skills 101.

"Mira." Dave, my manager, beckons from behind the counter. His smile is unpleasant. "Need to see you in my office after your shift."

My stomach drops. Last time he wanted to see me in his office, he spent twenty minutes explaining how understanding he could be about my schedule if I was more understanding about his needs. I'd rather work double shifts for the rest of my life than be understanding about Dave's needs.

"Actually, sir, I can't stay late tonight. I have to leave right after?—"

His eyes drag down my body lasciviously. "Don't make me write you up for insubordination." His tone carries an ugly edge that makes me shrink into myself. "It wasn't a request."

Crap.

The thought of being alone with Dave makes my stomach turn, but I need this job. At least until I can build up some savings from my new night cleaning position.

A shadow falls across the counter, and the temperature in the diner seems to drop ten degrees. I look up to find him standing there. I hadn't even heard him move. His broad shoulders and muscled arms are covered in intricate tattoos that disappear beneath his leather, and his massive frame radiates barely contained violence as he stares down my manager.

Dave takes an involuntary step backward. "Is there something you need?"

The biker's presence alone fills the space with menace. "Her shift is over. She's leaving. Now." His low growl leaves no room for argument.

Even so, Dave—never the sharpest tool in the shed—opens and closes his mouth several times as though he wants to say something, but thinks better of it. He looks like a fish. Finally, after a long moment, his face turns beet red and he mutters something about checking inventory before practically running to the storeroom.

This man, this stranger, exudes danger from every pore. I should be frightened. Instead, my treacherous heart flutters, and my crush on him deepens.

When his gaze shifts to me, there's something in those storm-gray eyes that makes me feel...seen. Protected. Wanted.

It's terrifying how much I crave that feeling.

So much so that I wonder if I'm imagining it. Seeing only what I want to see. Am I?

But I don't need to be thinking about that right now. Don't need to be thinking about the way his brief but memorable touch both soothed and aroused me simultaneously. Or how for that short-lived moment, I felt...safe.

He returns to his booth without a word, leaving me trembling for entirely new reasons.

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Chapter 2

Ghost

My fingers tighten around my coffee cup as I watch Mira, my sweet, innocent angel, move among the fluorescent-lit mediocrity of this shithole.

She presses a hand to her chest and pastes on that radiant smile of hers. The one that makes me want to murder every dickhead who's ever looked cross-eyed at her.

"Never seen you moon over a woman like that before." Blade's eyes gleam with amusement.

I shoot him a glower that would make most men piss themselves, but my VP just grins. Fucker knows me too well after all these years.

"Fuck off," I growl, but there's no real heat behind it. He's right—I've been watching her for weeks now, unable to stay away. Every night I tell myself it's the last time, that tomorrow I'll send a couple of the prospects to keep an eye on her instead. But every night, I'm back in this booth, drinking coffee that tastes like tar, watching my angel as she handles endless waves of assholery from customers with a dignity and grace that's too good for this world.

She helps an elderly customer count out change for her meal and when the old lady comes up short, Mira subtly slips two quarters from her own tips into the pile.

Yeah, she's too fucking good for this world. And way, WAY too good for my world.

She stumbles slightly as she passes our table, her hand pressing against her chest in that way that makes my gut clench. I noticed weeks ago that she sometimes has difficulty catching her breath. And sometimes she'll pause and steady herself when she thinks no one's watching.

But I'm always watching.

"Prez." Blade's voice is serious now. "Damn, brother, you've got it bad."

Again, I don't bother denying it. "Just looking out for her."

"That what we're calling it?" Blade asks. "Because from where I'm sitting, looks more like you're ready to gut any fucker who looks at her sideways."

"She don't belong in this shithole," I say finally, but Blade's not wrong. I've been coming here every night for weeks, telling myself I'm just making sure she's safe. Lying to myself that I can keep my distance, protect her from afar. But lately when that sleazebag manager says anything to her and I see exhaustion dim the light in those gorgeous eyes, my control slips a little more.

"I think she got herself a second job," I say quietly, watching Mira hurry past our table, her ugly polyester uniform hanging loosely on her too-thin frame. "Night cleaning at some law office."

Blade's eyebrows shoot up. "You're tailing her? Jesus Christ, Ghost. Just fuck her and be done with it already if you're that into her."

Fuck her? I'd like nothing more. If only it were that simple. A woman like Mira deserves better than a scarred, blood-soaked monster like me.

I shake my head at Blade. "Look at her—she's fucking perfect." She is, too. Clean

and pure as fresh fallen snow yet strong in all the ways that matter. "Our world would destroy an angel like her."

"So...you're what? Planning to lurk in the shadows and watch her forever? 'Cause that's not creepy at all." Blade's voice drips sarcasm.

He has a point. This has to stop. I have to stop. I'm acting like a lovesick teenager instead of the feared president of an outlaw biker club. There's just something about Mira that gets under my skin, makes me forget who and what I am.

"Fuck." I drain my coffee, needing something stronger. "I know I should stay away from her."

"But since when do you do what you should?" Blade asks. His attention shifts to something behind me. "Heads up. Manager's making a move."

I turn just enough to see that slimy rat bastard cornering Mira by the register, saying something about a "meeting" in his office. My grip tightens until the ceramic mug in my hand cracks. The wariness in her eyes makes my trigger finger itch.

"Easy, brother," Blade murmurs. "Can't kill him in front of witnesses."

He's right, but that doesn't stop me from standing, letting my size and reputation do the talking.

Sure enough, a couple words from me and the manager—pussy that he is—scurries away like a cockroach. Relief shows on Mira's face but it's quickly replaced by worry as she glances at the clock.

She's heading out and the thought of her walking alone in this rain, tired and vulnerable, plays on every primal protective instinct I possess. She makes me want to

do something I've never done with any other woman—put her on the back of my bike. But I know that if she rides behind me even once, I'll never be able to let her go, so I bite my tongue and watch her rush out into the rain.

"You following her?" Blade asks as I throw cash on the table.

"Someone has to." I don't wait for his response, just head to where my bike waits in the shadows.

The rain has mostly stopped, but the streets are slick as I trail her from a distance. She's on foot, of course. I know she doesn't have a car. Probably can't afford one. Each block she walks feeds the rage building in my chest—rage at a world in which a living angel has to walk alone through dangerous streets at night just to survive.

When she finally reaches her destination, I pull my bike into a shadowed alcove across the street, hidden from view but with a clear line of sight to the building's entrance.

My decision to keep my distance, to protect her by staying away, crumbles like ash as I watch a skeezy fucker in an expensive suit let her in.

Everything about him sets off warning bells in my head—the way her posture changes. It's subtle, but I notice the way she shrinks into herself. The lascivious smile he gives her as she passes. The way his eyes linger too long on her ass.

For weeks I've told myself she's better off without the darkness I'd bring to her life. That someone as pure as her has no place in my world of violence and power plays. But watching her walk into a predator's den—I'm done pretending I can stay away.

She's mine. Has been since the first time I saw her—saw the light she carries inside that shines brighter than the noontime sun.

The security camera catches my eye. State-of-the-art system, probably installed to protect whatever shady shit this bastard's hiding. Not that it matters. I earned my road name because just like a ghost, I can disappear and reappear as if from out of nowhere. And as an encore, I make others disappear.

I'd bet my Harley this fuckface is planning to corner my angel and then make his move.

Quick as a flash, a vision of his broken bones and pleas for mercy flits through my mind.

Not tonight, motherfucker. My grin is feral in the dim streetlight. If this guy remains breathing after tonight, if by chance I allow it, it'll be through a tube.

I swing my leg over my bike, decision made. The time for watching from the shadows is over.

No one touches what's mine.

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Chapter 3

Ghost

The back door's electronic lock is child's play. Twenty years of breaking and entering—both for the Corps and the club—have taught me that the most sophisticated security systems are only as good as their weakest point. In this case, that's the emergency exit's wiring.

Two minutes later, I'm inside, moving as silently as the Grim Reaper through the darkened hallways. The cleaning cart near the entrance tells me where Mira started her work. But the sound of raised voices from deeper in the building has my hackles rising and my hand instinctively reaching for the blade at my hip.

"Come on, sweetheart. I'm offering you a much better deal than minimum wage." The lawyer's oily voice drifts from his office. "All you have to do is be...friendly."

My angel's response is too quiet to decipher, but the tremor in it lights a fuse in my brain that leads straight to a powder keg of rage.

I round the corner just as the bastard has her backed against his desk, one hand reaching for her face while the other blocks her escape route. The fear in her beautiful eyes makes my vision go red.

"Get. Your fucking. Hands. Off her." My voice is laced with a tone that makes hardened criminals fall to their knees.

The lawyer spins around, his face going from lecherous to terrified in the space of a heartbeat. Smart man.

"Who the hell—" he starts, but I'm already moving.

One moment I'm in the doorway, the next I've materialized beside him like my name implies. My hand closes around his throat, lifting him clear off his Italian leather loafers.

"You?" Mira's surprised whisper barely registers through the blood pounding in my ears.

The lawyer claws at my grip, his face turning a deep shade of purple. It would be so easy to squeeze just a little harder, to feel that satisfying crunch beneath my fingers. But Mira's watching, and I won't traumatize her by killing this piece of shit in front of her.

I'll be back for him later.

I lean in close, my voice pitched for his ears alone. "Touch her again—even look in her direction—and they'll never find all the pieces of you." I squeeze just enough to make my point before releasing him. He crumples to the floor, gasping and retching.

"What..." Mira speaks again, stronger this time. "What are you doing here?"

I turn to her, drinking in the sight of her. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. "Making sure you're safe, angel."

"But how? How did you?—"

"You're done here," I cut her off, my tone brooking no argument. "You don't work

here anymore."

Her shoulders slump slightly. "No, I suppose after this, he won't want?—"

"Fuck what he wants." I gesture at the lawyer still puking on the floor. "You deserve better than this shit."

The expression on her face is beyond sad. She wears a look of dejection, and I realize she's worried about losing the second income. My sweet, responsible, hardworking angel. She doesn't realize yet that she'll never have to worry about money again. That I'll lay the fucking world at her feet if she'll let me.

"Come on." I hold out my hand. "I'm taking you home."

She hesitates for just a moment before placing her delicate hand in mine. The contrast of her soft skin against my scarred, calloused mitts is stark.

I lead her out of the building, hyperaware of every point where her body brushes against mine. When we reach my bike, I pull out my helmet and place it on her head. I'll have to buy her one of her own.

"I...um...I can walk," she protests weakly, but I can see the exhaustion written in every line of her body.

"Not happening, angel." The thought of her walking home alone, especially after what she just endured, makes my jaw clench.

I mount my bike before nodding to her. "Get on."

She bites her lower lip, considering, and all I can think about is how much I want to soothe that plump bottom lip with my tongue.

After what feels like an eternity, she carefully slides her leg over the seat. I help her settle behind me, showing her where to put her feet. When her arms tentatively circle my waist, every nerve ending in my body catches fire. She feels so right pressed to my back, like she was made to be there.

I rev the engine, enjoying the way she startles and tightens her grip. "Hold on tight, angel."

As we pull away from the curb, I'm already planning the painful lesson I'll be teaching that lawyer later. But for now, all I can focus on is the feel of my woman pressed against me where she belongs. Finally.

The familiar rumble of my bike beneath us takes on a different meaning with Mira's soft curves molded to my back. Her thighs press against mine as we take a corner, and I have to forcibly redirect my thoughts before my body betrays just how much I'm enjoying this.

There's a reason no woman has ever ridden on the back of my bike. It's an unspoken rule—that space is reserved for one special woman—an ol' lady. And having Mira there right now feels right in a way I can't explain. It just confirms what I've known all along. That she's the one.

At a stoplight, I rest one hand over hers where it's clutching my leather. Her fingers are ice cold. Carefully, I guide her hands under my cut, pressing them against the warmth of my abs. She makes a small sound of surprise that goes straight to my groin.

Yeah, this woman is dangerous to my self-control in ways no one—no bitch, no enemy, no brother has ever been.

The city lights blur past us as I take the long way to her apartment, selfishly

prolonging the feeling of her wrapped around me. Each time we stop, she holds a little tighter, like she's getting more comfortable. More trusting.

Trust is not something that comes easily in my world. But somehow this slip of a girl has worked her way past every defense I've built over the years, making me want things I have no business wanting.

Making me want her.

The thought should terrify me. Instead, it settles in my chest like a foregone conclusion. Like maybe I've just been waiting for her all along.

I feel her shiver against my back and realize she's probably freezing. Time to get my angel somewhere warm and safe. Somewhere I can watch over her properly.

Somewhere she'll never have to worry about creeps like that soon-to-be-dead fucking lawyer again.

Because what she's got now—whether she knows it yet or not—is someone to watch her six. Someone to protect her and care for her and give her everything she desires.

God help anyone who tries to stop me.

Chapter 4

Mira

I've never been on a motorcycle before. The rumble of the engine vibrates through my entire body as we cruise through the rain-slicked streets. My arms are wrapped around him—my mysterious biker. I can feel the solid wall of muscle under my palms. When we stop at a light, he guides my frozen hands beneath his leather cut to press against the warmth of his hard abs, and my breath catches in my throat.

I should be terrified. Should be questioning my sanity for blindly trusting a man I barely know—a dangerous man who just materialized out of nowhere to threaten my would-be attacker. Instead, I feel...protected. Safe. Safer than I have in a long time. The irony isn't lost on me that I feel safe with someone who radiates danger from every pore.

His muscles flex beneath my fingers as he accelerates, and heat floods my cheeks as my body responds. I've never been this physically aware of anyone before. Never felt this stimulating combination of attraction and security.

But reality has a way of intruding on even the most perfect moments. My thoughts drift to my lost cleaning job, and my stomach knots with worry. I'd been counting on that second income to help me stay afloat. To help me afford my living expenses without having to choose between medication, food, or keeping a roof over my head. My finances are already stretched as thin as they can stretch.

I could ask for more hours at the diner, but the thought of spending more time

dodging creepy Dave's advances makes my skin crawl. After tonight's scene with the lawyer, I'm starting to wonder if there's anywhere safe for someone like me. I hate that I'm always one missed paycheck away from living on the streets. I hate feeling small and scared and vulnerable, but I don't know how to get out of this endless cycle.

The bike slows as we approach my neighborhood, and I realize with a start that I never gave him my address. How does he know where I live? Come to think of it, I don't even know his name. I only know by the patches on his cut that he's the president and that the Shadow Reapers are one percenters—which, according to Wikipedia, means they're an outlaw club.

We turn onto my street, and my heart sinks at the sight of water pooling at the base of the steps leading down to the door of my basement apartment.

What is it they say—when it rains it pours?

He kills the engine, and the sudden silence feels deafening. "Your place is down there?" His voice is reproachful, judgmental.

"Yes." I slide off the bike on shaky legs, trying to smile through the crushing weight of his disapproval. "I...it...when it rains, sometimes... I should check the damage."

The door sticks when I try to open it—already swelling from the water. He reaches past me, muscles bunching as he forces it open with one easy shove.

Water sloshes around our feet as we enter. The dim overhead bulb reveals the extent of the flooding—at least two inches of murky water covering my entire floor. My secondhand furniture is ruined. Again.

"This happen often?" His voice is carefully controlled, but I can hear anger

simmering beneath the surface.

"No." I shrug. "Well, yeah. Sometimes. Only when it rains hard, though." As I move through the space, gathering what few possessions I can salvage into my slightly soggy duffel bag, I try hard to keep a positive attitude. Mindset is everything, after all. But I'm just so tired. Tonight..today...this whole week... Nothing has been going my way. Well, except one thing. I glance over at the huge man who seems to be taking up over half the space in my closet apartment. "I'm sorry, I don't even know your name."

"Ghost."

The name suits him—the way he appeared tonight like a phantom, moving as silently as a shadow. I want to ask if it's his real name, but something tells me that wouldn't be a polite thing to ask at this juncture.

"I'm Mira," I offer, though he probably already knows from my diner uniform name tag.

"I know." His eyes track my movements as I continue gathering my meager belongings. I try not to feel ashamed of my poverty, of the water-damaged furniture and bare walls. Of the life I've cobbled together from scraps and desperate determination.

"Would you...would you mind dropping me at the 24-hour diner on Fifth? I can hang out there until morning." I hate asking him for another favor, but I'm exhausted down to my bones. "I can walk, but I'm so tired and?—"

"No." He spits the single word out like a curse and I flinch. His eyes are narrowed and a muscle in his jaw is ticking. He's angry. Oh, god, I've made him angry by asking too much.

“Of course. I’ve already bothered you enough. I’ll walk. No big deal.”

"You're coming with me to the clubhouse." It's not a question or a suggestion. It's a statement of fact.

Clubhouse? I open my mouth to protest, but I honestly don't have the energy to challenge the angry look in his eyes. Besides, what other options do I really have? My apartment is flooded. I have no family, no friends close enough to impose on at this hour. And the thought of spending the night in a diner booth makes my already worn out body want to protest.

"Just until I figure something out," I agree reluctantly.

Something flashes in his eyes—satisfaction maybe?—before he takes my bag from my trembling fingers. "Temporary, sure," he agrees, but there's an odd note in his voice I can't quite decipher.

As we walk back to his bike, I square my shoulders and lift my chin. I won't cry. Won't complain about the unfairness of it all. Life has taught me that tears don't solve anything, and self-pity is a luxury I can't afford.

Still, when his large hand squeezes my shoulder briefly, the gentle pressure nearly breaks my carefully maintained composure. It's been so long since anyone has offered me comfort, even in such a small way.

He swings onto the bike and helps me settle behind him again. This time when I wrap my arms around his waist, it feels different. More intimate somehow. Like crossing a threshold I can't uncross.

As we pull away from my flooded apartment, I press my cheek against his leather-clad back and close my eyes. I should be worried about where this night is leading,

about climbing onto a motorcycle with a man called Ghost, about going to a biker clubhouse of all places.

Instead, all I can think about is how right it feels to hold onto him. How his solid presence seems to seep inside me and fill all the empty, hollow spaces that I've tried so hard to ignore.

The rational part of my brain knows this is crazy. Knows I should be cautious, and probably afraid. But for the first time in longer than I can remember, I'm not alone.

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Chapter 5

Mira

I'm not sure what to expect as far as a biker clubhouse, but when we arrive, loud music and laughter spill from within. It sounds like there's quite a party going on in there.

Ghost doesn't take me in through the front door, though. Instead, he guides me around back and up a staircase, his large hand clasped around mine, gently and firmly pulling me along. The worn wooden steps creak beneath his heavy boots, but he moves with surprising grace for such a large man.

We encounter no one on our way up. Ghost unlocks a door and ushers me into what can only be his private quarters. The space is spartanly furnished but meticulously neat—a few pieces of solid wooden furniture, a leather armchair in one corner, and a large bed dominating the room. The whole thing is lovely, far nicer than my cramped, damp place, but...

A bed. One bed.

The realization dawns on me, and a knot of anxiety tightens in my stomach. Is this...? Does he...?

"Where should I sleep?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Ghost nods at the bed.

"Right. And you? Where will you...?" My voice trails off, already knowing his answer.

Another nod at the same bed.

Right. Fine.

He crosses his arms over his chest casually, a brow raised, as if waiting for a response from me.

The tension in my shoulders tightens just a fraction more as I contemplate the bed—our shared space for the night. "Okay." Embarrassingly, the word comes out as more of a squeak than actual speech.

Ghost's eyes fall on the damp duffel bag I'm hugging to my middle like a shield and with casual confidence, he crosses the room, shrugging off his cut and hanging it with careful reverence on a hook by the door. The muscles in his back ripple beneath his t-shirt as he bends to pull something from a drawer.

"Bathroom's through there if you want to change," he says, handing me what appears to be one of his t-shirts. "Should work as a nightshirt."

I manage a withering smile despite my nerves, before retreating to the small attached bathroom, desperate for a moment alone to collect my scattered thoughts.

Inside the bathroom, I take a steadying breath, lean against the closed door, and think about the strange turn this evening has taken. What is Ghost expecting tonight?

Sex, of course. Duh, Mia.

A delicious thrill runs through me.

I've never had sex before. Not because I lacked opportunities, if you want to call men like creepy Dave opportunities, but because I've never wanted to do it with anyone—until now. Until Ghost.

In this moment, I'm overtaken by a sensation so rare it's almost foreign to me. Fortune. If I'm going to lose my virginity, I'm fortunate it's with a man like Ghost. A real man—one who radiates a fierce masculinity and primal strength. A man with honor.

Honor?

He's the president of an outlaw biker club, not to mention he came dangerously close to ending a life right in front of you tonight. Can you really call him honorable?

There's an undeniable darkness to him. But he acted to shield me, and that knowledge alone sparks tingles in my belly.

My heart races wildly, chaotically, and I have to employ my breathing exercise again—four counts in, four counts out.

It seems to work.

I almost giggle aloud as I fumble with his t-shirt. It's warm and smells faintly of leather and spice. When I slide it over my head, it swallows me whole, the hem falling almost to my knees. There's something vaguely erotic about wearing the t-shirt of a huge biker and shivers of nervous excitement slither through me as I anticipate his rough hands taking it off me.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My hair is a tangled mess, and my eyes betray my excitement. There's a faint flush to my cheeks that makes me look more like a girl about to go to her first dance than a woman about to share a bed with a man

like Ghost—a man whose very presence intimidates.

In here, I can hear faint sounds wafting up from downstairs—shouts intermingled with the rhythmic base of the music. The energy feels alive, almost electric. I can't shake the curiosity creeping in. This is his world. What would it feel like to belong here?

What would it feel like to belong anywhere?

When I emerge from the bathroom, Ghost is reclining on the bed, his arms behind his head and his legs crossed at the ankles watching me with those intense dark gray eyes. He's wearing nothing but tight boxer briefs, putting his well-built body on full display. Intricate tattoos cover his muscled chest and arms —dark swirls and sharp angles that almost, but not quite, hide the collection of scars marring his skin. Powerful thighs, strong calf muscles, and deeply-defined abs are clearly visible, as is a tempting V that points the way to the large bulge beneath the waistband of his briefs. He's magnificent.

My cheeks heat and a wave of arousal drenches my panties. He's so big and sexy and masculine.

A relaxed grin is plastered on his face.

"Better?" he asks, tilting his head toward me, his voice low and smooth like warm honey.

"Yeah. Better." I nod, enthusiastic but still teetering on that precipice of nerves.

I take a tentative step toward the bed then stop. This is it. My first time. My first ever sexual experience. Despite my nerves, I have to bite my bottom lip to keep from grinning like a lunatic.

And then he opens his mouth and my excitement crashes and burns.

"You don't need to worry," he says quietly. "I don't plan on touching you tonight."

I want to beg, I want to plead—touch me, please! And I almost do, but the words catch in my throat and stay there.

I simply nod, trying to hide my slight disappointment.

Silly. I'm silly. Of course he doesn't want...

He's only being honorable, offering shelter to a woman who's having a shit night. Nothing more.

Finally willing my feet to move again, I climb into bed. The sheets are surprisingly soft, and the mattress is far more comfortable than my lumpy futon.

Although I'm careful to maintain space between us, I can feel the warmth radiating off him. His powerful presence is intoxicating.

He reaches over and switches off the bedside lamp, plunging us into darkness. For several long moments, we lie in an awkward, charged silence.

"Tell me something," Ghost says finally, his deep voice rumbling in the darkness. "How is someone who works as hard as you living in a flooded shitbox?"

I'm mortified. I stare up at the ceiling, fighting back the burning in my eyes as I search for the right words to explain. How much to reveal? What parts of my unsavory past do I lay bare? I already feel like a charity case, do I really want to lay my sob story on him?

No, I don't, but something tells me he's not about to let it go, so I feed him a half-truth.

"I can't rent anywhere decent. My credit is ruined."

"How did that happen?"

Is that judgement I hear in his tone? I really hope not. This is already embarrassing enough. I swallow hard, setting my shoulders back as I steel myself for the confession.

"My last foster parents," I start, my voice steadier than I feel, "they... they used my social security number. Opened credit cards, took out loans. Wracked up huge bills. I didn't even know until I tried to rent my first apartment."

Ghost's rumbling snarl startles me. It almost sounds like he growled the word "motherfuckers."

"There's not much I can do." My voice cracks and I swallow hard against the lump in my throat.

When he asks, "Have they been prosecuted?" I'm suddenly overcome with shame.

"Um...well, no. I thought about going to the police, but I don't need that." It'll only make them hate me more and possibly come after me. By way of explanation, and praying I don't sound as pathetic as I feel, I add, "It's hard to fight a legal battle when you're all alone and mere survival is kicking your butt."

Ghost rolls onto his side to face me, and even in the dim light, I can see the intensity burning in his dark eyes.

"Look at me." His voice is commanding but gentle. When I meet his gaze, the fierce protectiveness there steals my breath. "You're not alone anymore. You've got me now."

I suck in a sharp inhale and before I can stop myself, I whisper, "Do I? Do I have you?"

"You're fucking-A right you do."

An unfamiliar warmth blooms in my chest—a feeling so overwhelming it brings tears to my eyes.

They're not tears of sadness or frustration this time. They're tears of hope. Of gratitude. Of relief.

My emotions override my brain, and I act before I think. Rolling my body toward his, my eyes still damp with unshed tears, I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him.

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Chapter 6

Ghost

Her lips are soft. As soft as I imagined. Sweet. The taste of her is pure, untainted, like everything else about her. One tentative kiss, a hesitant offering, and every ounce of control I've been clinging to these past weeks, these past hours, these past minutes ...shatters.

My angel is all I need. All I've been waiting for.

I pull her closer, needing to feel her against me, her small frame swallowed by my larger one. Her hands are still around my neck, her fingers tangling in my hair, and the simple act sends a jolt of pure possessive pleasure through me. She's mine. Every cell in my body screams it. And she doesn't even know it yet.

I break the kiss, just for a breath, needing to see her, to see the effect I'm having on her. Her eyes are half-closed, her lips parted, and a soft flush creeps up her neck and paints her cheeks a delicate pink. Beautiful. She's so fucking beautiful.

I take the lead, my mouth finding hers again, more insistent this time, more demanding. I can't get enough of her. Her taste, her scent, the way she trembles in my arms...it's intoxicating. I pull back slightly, trailing kisses down her jawline, across her throat, feeling the rapid pulse fluttering beneath her skin. She's nervous, but there's something else there too. Desire. Hot, undeniable desire. And the knowledge that I'm the one igniting it in her makes my blood burn like fire.

My hands move on their own accord, tracing the delicate curve of her spine, pulling her closer until there's no space between us. I can feel her breath hitch as my fingers brush against the swell of her breast through the thin t-shirt. She's so soft, so small, so...perfect.

I hadn't intended to touch her tonight, wanting to give her time to get used to the idea of us . But, she initiated this...

I groan against her lips, needing more, needing to feel her skin against mine. My fingers pinch the hem of her shirt, impatience gnawing at me. She stills for a moment, her breath hitching, and I pause, giving her a chance to pull away. To say no. But she doesn't. She arches her back slightly, offering herself to me, and the last vestiges of my restraint disappear.

I peel the shirt from her shoulders, my gaze locked on hers. Her nipples are tight and hard. Exquisite. Everything about her is exquisite.

I lower my head, my mouth closing over one taut nipple, sucking gently. She gasps, her body arching against me, and I can feel her tremble. The sound is like a siren's call, driving me wild. I move to the other breast, lavishing attention on her, tasting her, nipping at her skin until it's flushed and swollen.

Her hands grip my hair. Her fingers dig into my scalp, and she softly moans, "Ghost."

The sound is pure, unadulterated pleasure, and it's like a drug to me. I could spend a lifetime just listening to her moan my name.

My hands move lower, tracing the curve of her stomach, dipping beneath the waistband of her panties. Her skin is like silk beneath my touch, and I can feel the heat radiating from her. I run a finger over her folds. She's wet. So wet for me. The discovery sends a surge of pure triumph through me. She wants me. She craves me.

Just as I crave her.

“My angel,” I murmur against her skin, the words slipping out without conscious thought. They feel right. It feels like she belongs to me.

Her breath hitches again as my fingers find her clit, and she cries out, her body tensing. I might be pushing her, pushing her boundaries, but I can't stop myself now. I need to feel her pleasure, to know that I'm the one who's giving it to her.

“Ghost,” she whispers, her voice thick with desire but also harboring a hint of uncertainty. “I...I don't know what to do.”

I pause, my fingers still on her clit, and look into her eyes. “Are you a virgin, angel?”

She nods, her cheeks flushed crimson.

I suspected as much, but having it confirmed—the knowledge that I'm the first, that I'm the one who will take her innocence—sends a wave of fierce possessiveness through me. But it won't happen tonight. Not like this. Not when she's so nervous, so unsure. I don't want to rush her. She needs time to get used to this new normal. This new world she's now the queen of.

“I'm not going to take your virginity tonight, angel,” I tell her, my voice low and husky.

Her eyes widen in surprise, and I can see a flicker of disappointment in their depths. Good. She wants me.

“But,” I continue, a slow smile spreading across my face, “I am going to make you feel very, very good.”

She's still flustered, her gaze darting away from mine.

"Shh... Just lie back and enjoy," I tell her, my voice rough with need. I pull her panties down her legs, my gaze never leaving hers. She's stunning. Her innocence, her vulnerability, she's breathtaking.

I move between her legs, one hand cupping her face. "Trust me, angel," I murmur, my thumb brushes her swollen lips. "I'm going to take care of you."

And then I lower my head, my tongue tracing the delicate line of her inner thigh. She gasps, her body tensing beneath me, and I know I'm about to unleash a storm of ecstasy in her.

The taste of her is so fucking sweet it's mind-blowing. I lick and suck, my hands cupping her ass, holding her close as she begins to squirm beneath me. Her little coos and mews are like music to my ears, and I lose myself in her sweetness. I forget everything but the feel of her in my mouth, the taste of her on my tongue.

She's so tight, so sensitive. Each lick elicits a shiver from her, and she cries out, her nails digging into my shoulders. She's getting closer, I feel the tension building in her muscles, and I know she's about to come undone.

"Come on, angel," I whisper against her skin. "Let go."

And then she does. Her body arches against me. Her cries echo through the room, and I feel her pulsing contractions as she comes apart in my mouth. The taste of her orgasm is like fire in my veins, and I have to grit my teeth to keep from shooting my load in my boxer briefs.

When she finally stills, her breath coming in ragged gasps, I pull back slightly, my gaze searching hers. Her eyes are glazed with pleasure, her lips swollen and kiss-red.

Her cheeks are flushed. “I...I’ve never felt anything like that before,” she whispers.

I’m lost in a moment of confusion. And then realization dawns. “Was that the first time you came?”

She nods shyly.

“There’s no need to be embarrassed, angel. Not with me,” I tell her, my voice thick with emotion. “I’m going to make you feel a lot of things you’ve never felt before. Good things, I promise you that.”

I pull her close, holding her against my chest, feeling the rapid beat of her heart against mine.

She doesn’t realize the significance of me putting her on the back of my bike or that no other woman has ever ridden there. She doesn’t know that she’s the first woman I’ve ever allowed in my private quarters, or that with both of these actions, I’ve laid claim to her as my ol’ lady, my queen, the first lady of the Shadow Riders MC.

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Chapter 7

Mira

I wake to sunlight streaming through unfamiliar windows and my cheeks flush hot as memories of last night rush back—Ghost’s touch, his kiss, the way he made me feel things I’d never felt before. For a moment, panic claws at my chest. Did I dream it all?

But no—I’m still wearing Ghost’s t-shirt, and this is definitely not my flooded basement apartment. The scent of leather and man lingers on the pillow beside me. Ghost’s pillow. But the bed is empty now, the sheets cool where he should be.

I sit up slowly, trying to get my bearings. This is Ghost’s private room above the clubhouse. His sanctuary that he shared with me. But is it okay for me to leave? He didn’t say I had to stay put, but then again, he didn’t say I could wander around either.

The faint sounds of life drift up from below—voices, laughter, the occasional rev of a motorcycle. This is a world I know nothing about.

After using the bathroom and finger-combing my hair into some semblance of order, I dig through my damp duffle and pull out a pair of thrift store jeans with a couple holes in not-so-fashionable areas, and slide them on under Ghost’s t-shirt, which I can’t bear to remove.

Then, gathering my courage, I venture downstairs.

The staircase opens into what appears to be the main room of the clubhouse—a large open space scattered with leather couches and chairs, pool tables, what looks like some kind of shrine of motorcycle parts mounted on a wall to the left, and a massive bar dominating the far wall.

I'm not sure if it's my imagination or if the room actually falls silent as I descend the last few steps. I avoid making eye contact, but I'm pretty sure every gaze turns to me, and I fight the urge to shrink into myself. These people are Ghost's family—his chosen family. I don't want to appear weak in front of them.

A few of the men nod in my direction. I recognize some faces from the diner, and they seem friendly enough, offering small smiles or raised coffee mugs in greeting. But the women...their stares are razor sharp, cutting me to ribbons with unconcealed disdain.

I suppress a shiver. I faced, mean girls before, both in school and the foster families in which I grew up.

They're gorgeous—all of them. Tight clothes showing off more of their perfect figures than I'd ever dare reveal in public, flawless makeup, confident curves. Everything I'm not in my borrowed oversized t-shirt and outdated jeans. One of them, a statuesque blonde with enormous breasts, looks me up and down with a smirk that takes me right back to high school.

"Well, well. What do we have here?" Her voice drips honey-coated venom. "Did the prez pick up a stray?"

I lift my chin, willing my voice not to shake. "Hello, I'm Mira."

"Are you now?" Another woman, this one with fire-engine red hair, circles me like a shark. "And what exactly are you doing here? In Prez's shirt, no less?"

"I..." The words stick in my throat. What am I doing here? What am I to Ghost? One night of fooling around doesn't make me anything to him. We didn't even have actual intercourse.

"Oh honey," the blonde's laugh is cruel, "you actually think you're special? That shirt you're wearing? Half the girls here have worn it. Ghost likes his...charity cases."

The words hit like physical blows, but I refuse to let them see how much they hurt. I've survived worse. Much worse.

"Nice shoes," Red sneers, eyeing my worn sneakers. "Did you get those at Goodwill? Or maybe dumpster diving?"

The blonde laughs. "My grandmother had a pair just like them."

"Leave it." A commanding voice cuts through their laughter. The man from last night—the one who was at the diner with Ghost—strides over. His cut identifies him as VP. "Get gone," he commands, and the women scatter like roaches in sunlight.

"I'm Blade," he introduces himself with a nod. "Don't let them get to you. They're just jealous."

"Of what?" I ask before I can stop myself. But really, what do they have to be jealous of? My second-hand clothes? My sleep-rumpled hair? Makeup-free face?

"Of the fact that you're Ghost's ol' lady."

I blink at him, hoping I've misheard him. "His...what?"

"His woman. His ol' lady." Blade's expression is serious, but I know he's mocking me. He has to be. Joining the mean girls in cruelly taunting me. Drilling it in that

there's no way someone like Ghost—powerful, dangerous, respected—would want a penniless woman dressed like an old lady in mom jeans and grandma shoes.

"Right," I manage, backing away. "Thanks for the...clarification."

I turn to flee back upstairs, hating myself for running, for not standing up to them, for being the same scared little girl I've always been. The stairs swim before my eyes as spots dance in my vision, but I keep my legs moving as quickly as I can. My chest constricts painfully, and I stumble, my hand flying to my sternum.

Not now. Please not now. I need to get to my prescription bottle.

As I climb the first few steps, the edges of my vision go dark. I'm going to fall. My knees buckle, but instead of hitting the hard stairs, I feel strong arms catch me, lifting me into the air as though I weigh nothing.

"I've got you, angel." Ghost's voice rumbles against my ear as he cradles me to his chest.

"In my bag..." I gasp out. "My...my meds."

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Chapter 8

Ghost

I meant to return to the room before Mira woke up.

Watching her sleep this morning was surreal. Her features softened in slumber, all that battle armor she wears finally lowered. I felt the irrepressible urge to annihilate anyone who'd ever hurt her. Starting with those fucking foster parents.

So, with dawn barely breaking, I dragged Cipher and Saint into an early meeting while my angel slept upstairs.

"Mark and Linda Peterson," Cipher, the club's tech genius, mutters, as his fingers fly over his laptop keyboard. "They've been fostering kids for fifteen years."

I lean forward, every muscle in my body coiled tightly. "How many?"

"Thirty-seven kids total." Cipher's eyes narrow at the screen. "And get this—looks like they pulled the same identity theft scam on at least twelve of them. Credit cards, loans, the works. But Mira got hit the worst."

Red clouds my vision. "How much?"

"Over fifty grand in her name alone." He looks up at me. "These shitstains knew exactly what they were doing, Prez. Waited until each kid was eighteen, aged out of the system, and about to leave their house, then opened accounts using the kids'

social security numbers. As of this date, I don't see that any of them have filed fraud or identity theft charges against the Petersons."

My fist slams into the wall before I even realize I've moved. The drywall crumbles, but I barely feel it. "These motherfuckers have been systematically destroying kids' lives for over a decade?"

Saint nods grimly. "Gets worse. They're in deep with Kovalev."

"The loan shark?" That's an interesting twist. Ivan Kovalev is a seedy, small time Russian gangster. Disorganized, hasn't stirred up too much fuss around here, so while he's been on our radar for a while, we haven't looked too closely at him. "How deep?"

"About two hundred grand. They've been borrowing to cover their gambling debts. Interest is killing them." Saint pauses. "Prez...according to one of my contacts on the street, Kovalev's been pressuring them to do a 'trade' to cover what they owe, and Mira's name has come up several times."

We stare at one another, the implication hitting like a freight train. There have been rumors floating around lately that Kovalev was dabbling in human trafficking, but we thought that was all they were, rumors. I'm realizing now that we fucked up by not watching the fucker closer. By the look on both Saint's and Cipher's faces, they're aware of the human trafficking rumors as well.

They're trying to sell Mira to cover their fucking debt?!

"I want everything," I growl. "Bank records, property deeds, every fucking piece of paper with their names on it. And I want to know every detail of their connection to Ivan fucking Kovalev."

"Already on it." Cipher's fingers resume their dance across the keys.

Now, hours later, I cradle a weak, pale-faced Mira in my arms. What the fuck's wrong with her? Is she sick? I know one thing, she needs to eat. She's too thin for her frame, and I'm kicking myself for not having a hot breakfast ready and waiting when she woke.

"In my bag..." she mumbles as I carry her up the stairs and back to my room. "My...my meds."

I lay her against the pillow as I rifle through her duffel. She looks small and vulnerable.

There's a prescription pill container at the bottom, and I scan the label before handing it to her. Metoprolol.

"Are you sick?" It's a stupid question. Her hands are quivering slightly and her lips have taken on a blue tinge. There's a light sheen of perspiration on her forehead.

She fumbles with the child-proof cap then shakes out a pill.

I watch, puzzled as she runs her thumbnail over the face of the pill several times, carving a groove across it before carefully breaking the tiny tablet in half.

"What are you doing, angel?"

She startles slightly, like she forgot I was standing here watching her. "Oh, I... I only take half." Her voice is quiet, matter-of-fact, but instead of looking me in the eye, she stares up at the corner of the room.

A seething fury bubbles up from my chest. "Show me the bottle."

She hands it over without argument. As I thought, the instructions clearly state: Take one tablet daily. Do not split or crush tablets.

"You're supposed to take a whole pill." My voice comes out rougher than intended.

"I know, but I need to make them last until payday." She shrugs like this is just how life works. "They're expensive." She lets out a weary breath. "Everything's expensive, and now that I lost the cleaning job?—"

I cut her off, fighting to control the fury building inside me. "How long have you been doing this?"

"I don't always." She won't meet my eyes. "It's just... Sometimes...sometimes I have to choose. When rent is due, or I'm out of groceries..." She twists her fingers in her lap.

"There's no other way?"

She looks up, a spark of anger in her eyes now, which is better than the resignation of a second ago. "Last winter, I had to pawn my mother's locket—the only thing I had left of my parents—just to afford a refill."

The confession hits me like a physical blow. My beautiful, proud angel having to sell her only connection to her deceased parents just to stay alive. While those foster parent fuckers bled her dry.

I stride to the door and yell down to the common room in a booming voice, "Prospect!"

In two point three minutes, a kid rushes in panting. "Yes, Prez!"

“I hand him the prescription bottle. Get your ass to the pharmacy. I want this prescription refilled. Now.”

"On it, Prez!"

I grab my cell and punch in a number. "Doc? Yeah, it's Ghost. I need a favor. Got a woman here with a heart condition needs to see a specialist. I want the best... Two months? Fuck that! She needs to be seen ASAP. I don't care what favors you need to call in, Doc, this can't wait."

When I hang up, Mira is staring at me with wide eyes. "Ghost, you don't have to?—"

"Yes, I do." I sit beside her on the bed, cupping her face in my hands. "Listen to me, angel. You never have to choose between medicine and food again. Never have to pawn a piece of yourself just to survive. You understand?"

Tears well in her eyes. "I don't want to be a charity case, and I can't pay you back?—"

"You're not a fucking charity case," I growl. "You're mine. Taking care of what's mine isn't charity."

A blush stains her cheeks pink. She looks like she's about to argue, but thinks better of it. "Okay. I should get ready for work..."

“Fuck no.” The words come out sharp, commanding. "You're resting today."

"But I need the money?—"

"What you need is to rest, get your strength back, and let me take care of you."

She sets her jaw stubbornly. "I can't just no-show for my shift. I need that job, and I'm not comfortable depending on someone else. I've always taken care of myself."

And there it is, the core of her resistance. My fierce survivor, so used to standing alone she doesn't know how to let anyone stand beside her.

I gentle my voice. "One day of rest won't kill you, angel. Stay home today, let the medication kick in properly."

She bites her lip, considering. "Just today?"

"We'll start with today." It's a compromise I can live with. For now. She needs time to learn she can trust me, to understand that depending on someone doesn't make her weak.

"I have to at least call Dave and let him know."

At the mention of her sleazy manager's name, I grind my teeth. "What's the number?"

She hesitates, then recites the digits. I switch the phone to speaker before handing it to her. The asshole answers on the third ring.

"Hi, Dave. It's Mia."

"Where the hell are you?" His voice drips with petty authority. "Your shift starts in five minutes."

I snatch the phone. "Listen, Dave, " I spit his name out with a sneer. "This is the President of the Shadow Reapers MC. We met last night."

Silence. Then a choked sound of recognition. He knows who we are, and he knows who I am. Our reputation precedes us in this town.

"You've been working Mira too hard and she needs R&R time. She'll be taking the week off. With pay." I continue in the same low, menacing tone. "And when she returns,"—I almost say if she returns, but I don't want to rile Mira any more than she already is—"you're going to treat her with respect. Because if you don't..." I let the threat hang.

"Y-yes sir! Of course. A week off, paid vacation, absolutely."

I end the call, satisfied by the tremor of fear in his voice. When I look at Mira, she's staring at me with an expression I can't quite read.

"I can't believe you just did that," she whispers.

"Believe it." I pull her into my lap, inhaling the sweet scent of her hair. "Nobody fucks with what's mine, angel. The sooner you understand that, the better."

She tenses slightly, then gradually relaxes against my chest.

I press a kiss to her temple, already planning my move against her foster parents. They think they can fuck over my woman and get away with it? They're about to find out exactly how wrong they are.

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Chapter 9

Mira

My body feels lighter than it has in months—maybe years—as I nestle deeper into Ghost’s soft sheets. Thanks to finally getting a full dose of my medication and some much-needed rest, the flutter in my chest is now more butterfly wings and less angry hornets.

The morning drifts by in a haze of catnaps and quiet contemplation.

I appreciate Ghost’s kindness tremendously, but I can’t dispel the nagging hunch that he brought me here for a reason. That there must be a price to pay for his generosity. Nothing in life comes free—that’s one lesson the foster system taught me well.

A knock on the door is followed by a voice that calls out, “Mira? Can “I come in? I’ve got lunch for you.”

It’s the prospect who brought my medication earlier—Rash is what Ghost called him, which is a strange name. He’s been bringing me snacks intermittently all morning, each time with an earnest, eager-to-please smile. I’m beginning to suspect someone is trying to fatten me up.

"Come in, Rash," I call out, yawning and raising my arms in the air to stretch the sleep from my body.

He enters carefully balancing a tray loaded with a steaming bowl of soup, fresh bread,

and what looks like homemade cookies. "I'm supposed to tell you to eat all of it," he announces proudly. "Prez's orders."

My heart does a funny little skip when he mentions Ghost, one that has nothing to do with my medical condition. "Speaking of Ghost, where is he?" I try to keep my voice casual, but Rash's knowing grin tells me I'm not fooling him.

"Taking care of club business." He carefully sets the tray across my lap. "I think something big might be going down. Prez and the club officers have been in church all morning."

"Church?" I gape, unable to picture the hard core bikers on their knees in a chapel.

"It's what we call members-only meetings."

"Oh." I stare down at the soup, watching the steam curl upward. "Is everything okay?"

Rash shrugs. "I'm just a prospect. I won't be clued in on the details of club business until I earn my patch. Even then, club business is on a need-to-know basis, and Ghost runs a tight ship. Best president the Shadow Reapers have ever had, from what the old-timers say."

I absorb this information as I spoon up the rich chicken soup. There's so much I don't know. Actually, I know almost nothing about the inner workings of a motorcycle club. Part of me wants to get out of this bed, out of this room, and wander around the clubhouse, maybe find some members and ask some questions so I can learn about this world—Ghost's world, but I'm too chicken shit.

Earlier, I peeked out into the hallway, only to spot the two meanest of the mean girls from this morning—the blonde with big boobs and the redhead—lounging by the

stairs. The blonde's cruel words echo in my head. Half the girls here have worn that shirt.

Is that what Ghost expects from me? To become one of them? The thought makes my stomach churn despite the delicious soup.

"Rash is an interesting name," I say, trying to make conversation. I don't know what I expect, but it's not the look of pride that transforms his expression.

"It's my road name." He straightens, squaring his shoulders. "First week of prospecting, a truck cut me off on the interstate. I had to lay my bike down, and I got dragged a good fifty feet." He pulls up his pant leg to reveal a web of silvery scars. "Doc said it's the worst case of road rash he ever treated. The name kind of stuck after that."

I wince in sympathy, but he just grins. "Yep, I earned it."

"Rash, I have a question," I say hesitantly. "The women here...the ones I saw this morning..."

His face darkens slightly. "Don't pay them any mind. They're just..." He trails off, clearly searching for a polite word.

"They're what?" I ask quietly.

"They hang around to...uh..." His ears turn red. "To service the patched members."

My eyes widen. "Oh, they're..." my voice trails off.

"Whores." He nods, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. "Each one is hoping to snag a patch—to become an old lady."

I reel at the term. Old lady? What does that mean? I thought it was an insult when Blade said it this morning, but now I'm not so sure.

Still appearing embarrassed, Rash collects the dirty lunch dishes swiftly and efficiently and before I get the chance to question him further, he's gone.

After Rash leaves, I curl up in the leather armchair by the window and watch the comings and goings in the compound below. Motorcycles rumble in and out through the gates while big, burly men in leather cuts gather in small groups, talking.

I could get used to being here. These guys might be hardcore bikers, but they seem like a family. The smart thing would be for me to leave now, before I get too attached. But I remember Ghost's words from this morning: "You're mine."

What exactly did he mean? Two simple words that somehow managed to sound like both a threat and a promise.

When the door opens, this time without a forewarning knock, I expect to see Rash again, but it's Ghost himself who enters carrying a dinner tray. The sight of him filling the room with his commanding presence makes my breath catch.

"You're looking better," he observes, setting the tray on the small table by the window. "The rest and proper medication dosage helping?"

I nod, unable to deny it. "I feel stronger than I have in ages," I admit. "Though I hate being idle."

"You've got an appointment tomorrow with Dr. Cariloha—best cardiac specialist on the west coast." He says this casually, as if getting an appointment with a top specialist overnight isn't an absolute miracle.

"How did you...?" I shake my head in amazement. "Those appointments usually take months to get."

The corner of his mouth turns up slightly. "I can be very persuasive when I want to be."

He dishes up two plates of what appears to be homemade lasagna, and we eat in comfortable silence for a few minutes before he speaks again.

"Cipher's been looking into your foster parents," he says carefully, watching my reaction. "Seems they've stolen from other kids too."

The fork trembles slightly in my hand as the implications of his words hit me. I don't know why I thought I was the only one. "They cycled through foster kids like changing seasons." The food in front of me has lost its taste. I was just a resource for them to use up and throw away.

When I glance up, Ghost is watching me. His dark eyes are unsettling, and I need to know what's going on here between us.

"Ghost?" I set my fork down, gathering my courage. "Why am I here? Really."

His brow furrows. "What do you mean?"

"Why did you bring me here?" I gesture to the room in general, then to myself. "Is this... Am I supposed to become one of those, um, club girls?"

The glass in his hand shatters.

I jump at the sound, my heart racing as he slowly uncurls his fingers, letting the broken shards fall to the table. A thin line of blood wells up on his palm, but he

doesn't seem to notice as he points an angry finger at me.

"Never," he growls, the word vibrating with fury. "That will never happen. You are mine, angel. Not the club's. Not anyone else's. Mine." His eyes burn like flames. "No one else will ever touch you."

"So, I'm your whore?"

"You're not a fucking whore!" The fury in his voice should frighten me. Instead, it sends a shiver of delight down my spine. "You're my queen, my ol' lady. My other half."

His answer takes my breath away. His other half? That's what it means to be an ol' lady? No wonder the club whores are hoping to "snag a patch" as Rash phrased it.

"You said no one will touch me, but will you?" I whisper. "Touch me, I mean?"

His response is immediate and overwhelming. He crosses the space between us in one fluid motion, pulling me into his arms. His kiss is both fierce and tender, claiming and cherishing. And in that moment, I surrender. I'm his.

Ghost's kiss deepens, his arms wrapping around me, pulling me closer until there's no space left between us. His body is hard, muscled, and I can feel the heat radiating off him, warming me from the inside out. My hands tremble slightly as I reach up to touch his face, the stubble on his jaw rough against my fingertips.

He pulls back just enough to look into my eyes, his gaze intense and searching. "Are you sure you're feeling better, angel?" His voice is rough with desire, but there's a tenderness there that makes my heart ache.

I nod, unable to find the words to express the depth of my feelings and how much I

want him. "I've never in my life felt better."

He smiles, a slow, sensual curve of his lips that makes my stomach flutter with anticipation. "You're so perfect, baby," he murmurs, his hands sliding down to cup my ass, lifting me effortlessly. "My perfect angel."

I wrap my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck, as he carries me to the bed. He lays me down gently, his body covering mine as he captures my lips in another searing kiss. His hands roam over my body, exploring every curve, every dip, as if it were sacred ground.

I gasp as his fingers find the hem of my shirt— his shirt, whatever—pushing it up to expose my stomach. His lips follow the path of his hands, trailing kisses across my skin that leave me breathless and aching for more. He unbuttons my jeans, sliding them down my hips along with my panties, leaving me bare and vulnerable beneath him.

His eyes darken as he takes in the sight of me, naked and exposed. "God, you make my dick so fucking hard," he growls, his voice dripping with lusty desire.

I blush under his intense gaze, but I don't try to cover myself. I want him to see me, to know me, in every way possible.

He kneels between my legs, his hands sliding up my thighs, spreading them wider. I tremble with anticipation as he lowers his head, his breath hot against my most intimate place. When his tongue flicks out, tasting me, I cry out, my hips arching off the bed.

He chuckles, a low, satisfied sound that vibrates through me. "You taste so sweet, angel," he murmurs, his fingers joining his tongue, stroking and teasing until I'm writhing beneath him, begging for release.

When my climax hits, it's like nothing I've ever experienced before. Waves of pleasure wash over me, leaving me panting and trembling in their wake. Ghost looks up at me, a wicked grin on his face, his lips glistening with my arousal.

"That was just the beginning," he promises, his voice a low growl that sends shivers down my spine.

He stands up, stripping off his clothes with quick, efficient movements. My eyes widen as I take in the sight of him, naked and aroused.

"Holy shit." The words escape my lips before I can stop them, but how can I help it with his cock jutting straight out like that—long, and hard, and fully erect.

He's magnificent, every inch of him sculpted and chiseled, from his broad shoulders to his narrow hips, to the thick length of him standing proud.

He climbs back onto the bed, his body covering mine once more. His weight is a comfort, a shield against the world outside. I wrap my arms around him, pulling him closer, needing to feel him, all of him.

He kisses me again, his tongue sliding against mine in a slow, sensual dance. I can taste myself on his lips, and it's strangely erotic, a reminder of the pleasure he's already given me.

His hand slides down between us, guiding himself to my entrance. I tense slightly, a sudden flare of nervousness making me pause. He senses my hesitation and pulls back, his eyes softening as he looks down at me.

"We don't have to do this tonight, angel," he murmurs, his thumb brushing gently against my cheek. "We've got all the time in the world. We can wait as long as you need."

I shake my head, my voice steady and sure. "I don't want to wait. I want you now, Ghost. I want all of you."

He smiles, a slow curve of his lips that makes my heart flutter. "Then you'll get all of me."

He presses forward, slowly, carefully, giving my body time to adjust to the invasion, and...oh, my god! There's a brief moment of pain, a sharp, burning sensation that makes me gasp. He stills immediately, his eyes searching mine.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his voice thick with concern.

I breathe through the discomfort. "It's okay," I whisper. "Just a sting. It's already fading."

He waits until I give him a small nod, silent permission to continue. He moves slowly at first, his hips rocking gently against mine, each thrust pushing him deeper inside. The pain fades, replaced by growing pleasure, a warmth that spreads through my entire body.

I wrap my legs around his hips, pulling him closer, urging him on. He groans, his forehead pressing against mine as he increases the pace, his thrusts becoming harder, faster.

"God, angel," he growls, his voice husky and gruff. "You feel so fucking good. Never felt this... Oh, fuck!"

I cling to him, my nails digging into his back as his thrusts pick up momentum, growing more and more erratic. The pleasure builds with each thrust. I can feel my orgasm coming, a wave of sensation that threatens to consume me.

"Ghost," I gasp, my body arching against his. "I'm... I feel..."

He growls, a low, feral sound that sends shivers down my spine. "Come for me, angel," he commands, his voice rough with need. "Let me feel you come around my cock."

And I do. It rolls over me like a tidal wave, sweeping me away in a rush of pleasure so intense it's almost painful. I cry out, my body convulsing beneath him, my inner muscles clamping down around him.

He follows me over the edge, his body tensing as he shoots warm spurts of his seed deep inside me, filling me, marking me as his.

We lie like that for a long moment, our bodies still joined, our breaths mingling as we come down from the high. His forehead rests against mine, his eyes closed, a look of utter contentment on his face.

"That was..." I trail off, unable to find the words to describe what just happened between us.

He smiles, a slow, lazy curve of his lips that makes my heart flutter. "Yeah, it was," he agrees, his voice rough with satisfaction.

He rolls onto his side, pulling me with him, our bodies still tangled together. His hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing gently against my skin.

"You're my ol' lady now," he murmurs, his eyes searching mine. "You get that, right?"

I nod, a tear leaking from my eye as I experience something I've wanted for so long. Something I've longed for, but never dreamed I'd ever truly have—a sense of

belonging.

"I'm yours," I whisper the words like a vow.

He smiles, a soft, tender expression that makes my heart ache. "And I'm yours, angel. Always."

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Chapter 10

Ghost

“The fucker squealed like a sow giving birth,” Saint chuckles, as he leans back on the worn leather couch in my office.

Blade, sprawled next to him, adds sound effects as he uses his switchblade with methodical precision to clean beneath his fingernails. “Oink, oink, ooh-wee, little piggy.”

“One less scumbag walking the streets.” CIPHER’s amber eyes hold a satisfied gleam as he hunches over his laptop.

I grunt in agreement, feeling no remorse whatsoever for the torture session I treated the lawyer who cornered my angel to before I put an end to his miserable existence.

Some might call us monsters for dealing with predators our way—swiftly and harshly—but I’ve seen the damage slimy motherfuckers like him leave in their wake too many times to lose a second of sleep over wiping him off the face of the Earth. I have no sympathy for assholes who prey on the innocent. None of us do.

"Good riddance," Saint says, stretching his long legs.

CIPHER's fingers fly across his keyboard, the rapid-fire clicking a familiar soundtrack to our morning meetings. “Prez, you need to see this.” His voice carries an edge that has us all straightening. “Got the full intel on Kovalev and the Petersons.”

My jaw clenches as I move to look over his shoulder. The screen fills with documents, bank statements, text messages—a digital trail of depravity that makes my trigger finger itch.

"They were definitely going to sell her?" The words come out as a growl, my vision clouding red at the edges. "To that piece of shit?"

Cipher nods grimly. "The Petersons owe Kovalev nearly two hundred grand. They couldn't pay, so they offered him Mira instead."

The arms of my chair groan under my grip. Those bastards looked at my angel—my pure, kind-hearted angel who helps old ladies count their change and pay for their meals—and saw nothing but a commodity to trade.

"Kovalev's been setting up a trafficking ring right under our noses," Saint says, his accent thickening with anger. "Small scale, staying just quiet enough to avoid attention."

"Until now." I straighten, cold rage settling in my chest like ice. "He made a mistake targeting what's mine—and in my very own fucking territory!"

Saint enters, his face set in hard lines. "Just got word from our contact at the docks. Kovalev's got a shipment coming in tomorrow night."

Fuck. We all know what he means by shipment. Women. Girls. Lives to be sold and destroyed.

"Time to remind that cockroach whose territory this is," I say, my voice deadly calm. The others nod, the air crackling with shared purpose.

We spend the next hour planning, marking entry points on dock blueprints,

coordinating with our inside sources.

A soft knock interrupts our strategizing. The door opens and Mira peers in, her presence instantly transforming the energy in the room. She's wearing another of my shirts, the hem hitting mid-thigh. I love seeing her in my clothing. I may have gone as far as to hide the shirts she brought with her, replacing them with my own.

My club brothers exchange knowing grins as they wordlessly stand and file out, Cipher clutching his laptop. Saint winks at Mira as he passes, making her blush prettily.

"Sorry to interrupt," she says softly once we're alone. "I just...missed you."

Four simple words that pierce straight through my hardened shell. This woman has no idea the power she holds over me.

I cross to her in two strides, gathering her close. She fits perfectly against me, like she was made to be there. Her hands curl into my leather cut as she tilts her face up to mine.

"Never apologize for wanting me, angel," I murmur against her hair.

I press a kiss to her temple, breathing in her sweet scent. Tomorrow, I'll paint the docks red if I have to. But right now, in this moment, I just hold her close and let her gentle presence soothe the violence in my soul.

Chapter 11

Mira

“But, Ghost, I’ll be fine.” I smooth my hands over Ghost's leather cut. “You’re the president of an MC. You have important business to handle.”

"Nothing's more important than you, angel."

His words wrap around me like a cozy blanket, warm, soothing, and comforting. After a lifetime of being nobody's anything, being somebody's priority is overwhelming. In a good way—in an awesome way.

But I know something’s going down with the club today. I heard him tell Blade, the VP, and Saint, the club Sergeant-at-Arms, that he wanted the plan to be foolproof since he wouldn't be with them for its execution. Ghost has already done so much for me, I’d feel like a spoiled princess if he had to miss important club business to accompany me to the doctor’s office.

“Well, I’m no newbie to doctors’ appointments. It’ll just be a consultation—reviewing my history, running some tests. Basic stuff.”

His jaw clenches as he studies my face.

“Really.” I use my best persuasive tone and I can see I’m wearing him down. “Probably just a quick exam, a prescription refill, and I’ll be on my way.”

He lets out a resigned breath. "I'm sending a prospect with you and he's to stay with you at all times. No arguments."

"No arguments," I agree.

Ghost's steel-gray eyes narrow. "And you call me for any reason whatsoever, got it?"

"Got it." I nod emphatically.

"Rash," he calls for the prospect who's already hovering nearby. "You do not let her out of your sight. And you call immediately if anything—and I mean anything—feels off. Understand?"

Rash's posture straightens and I almost expect him to salute. "I understand, Prez."

"Stop worrying about me." I stretch up on my tiptoes to kiss Ghost's stubbled jaw and breathe in his spicy leather scent. I can't get enough of him, and I secretly love how overprotective and uber-possessive he is of me. "Now go save the world, or whatever it is big bad bikers do."

A hint of a smile touches his lips. "Smartass." His large hand cups my face, thumb brushing my cheekbone. "I mean it about calling. For any reason."

"Yes, sir." I throw him a mock salute that earns me a growl and another kiss—this one decidedly less innocent—before he reluctantly releases me.

The ride to the specialist's office is quiet. Rash keeps checking his mirrors and making strange turns. It has me wondering if Ghost ordered him to take a circuitous route to avoid being followed. I wouldn't put it past him.

Dr. Cariloha's office is housed in a gleaming medical complex that screams upper-

class expensive. The kind of place I'd never have dreamed of visiting before Ghost crashed into my life like a leather and chrome hurricane.

The doctor himself is older, distinguished-looking, with kind eyes that crinkle at the corners when he smiles. But his expression grows increasingly grave as he reviews my test results.

"Miss Stillwell," he begins, his tone carrying a careful neutrality that makes my stomach clench. "Your condition seems to have progressed significantly. The inadequate medication management"—his lips thin disapprovingly—"has allowed the damage to accelerate."

"Umm," I twist my hands in my lap. "How bad?"

"Without major immediate surgical intervention—within the next couple months—the damage will become irreversible." He pulls up some images on his computer screen. "See these areas here? The tissue is already showing signs of?"

The rest of his explanation fades into white noise as the numbers run through my mind. Surgical costs. Hospital stays. Recovery time. Follow-up care. The total makes my head spin.

Even with insurance—which I don't have—it would be astronomical. Without it? Impossible.

I manage to maintain my composure through the rest of the appointment, nodding at appropriate intervals as Dr. Cariloha outlines treatment options. But inside, I'm crumbling.

I meet Rash back in the waiting room and as we leave the building, Rash touches my elbow gently. "You okay?"

No. I'm not okay. I'll never be okay. I'm broken, damaged, and—just like I've always been—a huge burden.

"Can we make a stop before heading back to the compound?" My voice sounds distant, even to my own ears. "There's someone I need to visit."

He hesitates. "Prez said straight back..."

"Please?" I hate the desperation in my voice, but I can't help it. "I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

Something in my expression must convince him because he nods slowly. "Where to?"

"Evergreen Cemetery"

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Chapter 12

Ghost

I hate that I'm not with my angel at her cardiologist appointment, and my expression must show it since most of the brothers are giving me a wide berth.

"The cut came in," Blade mentions casually as we head out to mount our bikes. He smirks, "Special delivery."

I know exactly what he's talking about. I only just ordered the cut for Mira yesterday with "Property of Ghost" emblazoned across the back. I paid triple to have it crafted and couriered here overnight. I can already picture my angel wearing it—my mark of protection and possession for the whole club—for the whole world—to see.

"Nice." Hawk whistles from behind us. "Your girl's gonna look smoking hot in leather."

My head snaps toward him, a warning growl rising in my throat.

"Easy, brother." Hawk raises his hands in surrender. "Just appreciate a beautiful woman is all. We all know she's yours."

"Then keep your appreciation to yourself," I snarl. The thought of any other man looking at my angel that way makes my trigger finger itch.

I check my phone for the tenth time in as many minutes. No texts, no calls.

“Everything's in position,” Blade confirms, adjusting his kevlar. “Saint's got teams covering both warehouse exits. Cipher's monitoring security feeds.”

I nod, tucking my phone away. Rash is a good guy. He'll be a fully patched member soon. Right now, I need to focus on shutting down Kovalev's operation.

“Focus,” Saint cuts in. “Movement at the south entrance.”

Through my scope, I watch as a white van pulls up to the loading dock. Two thugs emerge, scanning the area before signaling the all-clear.

“Hold positions,” I command over the comms. “Wait for visual confirmation.”

Minutes tick by like hours. Something feels off. The normal bustle of dock activity is conspicuously absent.

“Ghost.” Cipher's voice crackles through my earpiece. “I'm seeing some weird interference on the security feeds.”

Before I can respond, gunfire erupts from multiple directions.

“Ambush!” Saint shouts through the comm. “They knew we were coming. Abort! I repeat, abort!”

I duck behind a shipping container as bullets ping off metal around us. “Fall back to secondary positions! Do not engage unless necessary.”

Through the chaos, I catch glimpses of the van peeling away.

“Son of a bitch,” Blade curses beside me. “What the fuck was that?”

“How'd they know?” Hawk voices the question that burns in all our minds as we execute our extraction protocol.

An icy finger of dread snakes down my spine. Someone tipped them off. Had to be. Someone knew our plans.

Back at the clubhouse, tension crackles through the air as we debrief.

"They were ready and waiting for us," Saint paces, agitation evident in every movement. "Had counter-surveillance in place, multiple shooter positions pre-set."

"Only way they could've known is if someone talked," Cipher adds grimly, his laptop displaying thermal images of the ambush positions.

No one wants to say what we're all thinking.

I study the faces of my brothers gathered around the table. These men are my chosen blood. This club is my chosen family. The thought of a traitor among us turns my stomach.

“From here on out, we lock it down until further notice,” I order. "No one outside the inner circle is privy to operations unless and until absolutely necessary. Cipher, I want every communication channel monitored."

The reminder of our failure twists like a knife. I'm not thrilled that the women we tried to save today are still in Kovalev's hands, facing the same horrors that awaited my angel if those foster parent scum had their way.

“Kovalev just made this personal,” I growl.

"And the rat?" Blade's hand rests meaningfully on his knife.

"We find the rat too." My voice drops to a dangerous whisper. "And when we do, they'll learn what happens to anyone who betrays this club—and it will be a slow and painful lesson."

Chapter 13

Mira

The cemetery is peaceful as I wind through the neat rows of headstones. I know the path by heart—not that I visit often. My parents died when I was a toddler, and I was too young to remember them, but sometimes I imagine I can recall the sound of my mother's laugh or the warmth of my father's hugs. Lately, I've been coming here when I really need to talk—to get something off my chest or to contemplate my problems.

My lip quivers as I sink to my knees on the damp grass. My parents' share a headstone. It's simple, unadorned. No angels or fancy epitaphs, just their names and dates. I stare at it for a long minute before I begin my confession.

"Mom and Dad, I'm so tired." And then the words spill out, all my fears and insecurities flowing like a river. "I met someone. Someone amazing. He makes me feel safe and cherished and...worthy. But I found out today just how broken and damaged my body is. Fixing me will cost so much. Too much. If I stay with him—if he even wants me to stay—I'll only be a burden like I've been to everyone all my life. I can't bear to be a burden—not to him."

Tears blur my vision as I trace their names with trembling fingers. "The other women at the clubhouse, they're all so beautiful and strong and sassy. And I'm...plain, sick Mira with second-hand clothes and failing heart."

A sob catches in my throat. "He wants me to be his ol' lady. That's what bikers call

their significant other. But he doesn't know what he's getting into with me. Ghost deserves better than a broken woman who can't even afford to keep herself alive. I think I love him," I confess to the silent grave. "And that's why I can't tell him."

The thought of seeing disdain—or even worse, pity—replace that fierce tenderness in his eyes, makes me want to wretch.

"I'm tired of this life," I whisper to the silent stone. "I'm tired of fighting, tired of losing, tired of being a burden to everyone who enters my orbit. Maybe...maybe it would be better if I just..."

I can't finish the thought. Can't voice the dark possibility that's been growing in my mind since the doctor's office. That maybe it would be kinder to everyone—to Ghost especially—if I just...bow out gracefully. Let nature take its course.

"I wish you were here," I tell my parents' headstone. "I wish I knew if you'd be proud of me, or disappointed in what I've become. I wish..."

By the time I push myself to my feet, my legs are numb from kneeling so long, but the physical discomfort is nothing compared to the ache in my chest.

I make my way back to the truck, where Rash has been waiting patiently, trying to look like he hasn't been watching me from a distance, but I don't miss his concerned eyes. "Ready to head back?"

I nod, unable to trust my voice. As we pull away from the cemetery, I take one last look at my parents' gravesite. A final goodbye? Maybe. I don't know anymore.

By the time we pull into the clubhouse compound, I'm smiling, pretending everything's fine while worry gnaws at me.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I almost collide with Big-Boobed Blonde—the club girl who seems to hate me for some reason—as I enter.

"Well, if it isn't little Miss Pity Party, Ghost's charity case," she sneers, looking me up and down. "Just get back from dumpster diving?"

Something inside me snaps. Maybe it's the devastating news from the doctor, or maybe I'm just tired of being life's punching bag, but suddenly I can't take it anymore.

"What exactly is your problem with me?" I demand, squaring my shoulders. My voice comes out stronger than I expect, fueled by years of pent-up frustration.

Her perfectly plucked eyebrows shoot up in surprise. Clearly, she expected me to cower like before.

"My problem?" She laughs, but there's an edge to her voice and a frighteningly hard look in her eyes. "You are my problem. Look at you in those pathetic second-hand clothes, with that cheap haircut. You come in here like a drowned street rat and he looks at you like you're a supermodel. Well your time here is numbered, bitch. There's no way you're anything more to Ghost than a pet project."

A couple of the other club girls hanging nearby shift uncomfortably. The redhead looks like she might come forward to back up her blonde cohort, but then her gaze lands on something over my shoulder, her eyes widen, and instead she steps back.

"You know what I think?" I lean my body forward, channeling every ounce of shame and anger I've ever swallowed. "I think you're pissed that Ghost treats me like a person, not just another piece of clubhouse furniture."

Her face contorts with rage. "You little fucking?—"

"Is there a problem here?" Ghost's deep voice cuts through the tension like a knife.

The blonde's demeanor changes instantly—because of course it does. Her expression morphs into one of wounded innocence. "Oh, Ghost, baby, I was trying to be friendly and welcoming, but she attacked me out of nowhere!" Her lower lip trembles theatrically.

Ghost's steel-gray eyes move between us, his expression unreadable. Without a word, he takes my elbow and guides me upstairs to his room. Once inside, he fixes me with an irate stare.

"Has this happened before?"

His intense gaze flusters me and for a second, I'm unable to coherently form words. "I...it's...she..."

"Answer the question, angel. Has she done this to you before?"

It's then that I realize that Ghost may be pissed—livid, actually—but not at me. I hesitate, not wanting to cause trouble. "It's nothing I can't handle."

"That's not what I asked." His voice carries a dangerous edge. "Tell me the truth, angel. Has Krystal been harassing you?"

I shrug and study the floor. "I don't want to be a troublemaker." "Look at me." He waits until I meet his gaze. "Either you tell me what's been going on, or I go down there and toss every single club whore out on her ass right now."

"What?" I blink in shock. "But...they live here. You'd really kick them all out?"

"In a heartbeat." There's no hesitation in his voice.

I let out a slow breath. “She...she made fun of my clothes and shoes and...” I swallow the lump in my throat. “It’s not a big deal. I can’t really afford to be fashionable and I’ve dealt with mean girls like her all my life.”

“What else,” he demands, his face a stony mask.

“Um...I was wearing your shirt and...” my face heats and I wish I could backtrack and not finish the sentence, but there’s no way Ghost will let me get out of this. “She told me all of the women here have worn that shirt, that I’m nothing special.”

To my surprise, he throws back his head and barks a laugh. “First, angel, not only are you special, you are the only woman who has ever worn one of my shirts, and the only woman who ever will.”

My eyes widen at that confession, but he’s not done.

“Second.” He pulls out a credit card and holds it out to me. “I haven’t had a chance to give you this, but now is as good a time as any. I want you to go shopping. Buy whatever you want—clothes, shoes, jewelry, whatever makes you feel good. No limit.”

I stare at the black card like it might bite me. “Ghost, I can’t?—”

“You can and you will.” His tone brooks no argument. “But you don’t leave the compound without at least two prospects guarding you. Things are...heating up and I need to know you’re safe.”

The card feels heavy in my hand, weighted with implications I’m not ready to face. Here he is, offering me the world, while I’m planning to leave before I become an even bigger nuisance.

“And lastly, if you ever get into another altercation and don't tell me about it, I'll turn that pretty ass of yours red.”

Heat floods my cheeks at his words, and a shiver that has nothing to do with fear runs down my spine. Ghost notices, his lips curving into a knowing smirk.

“Now,” he pulls me close, “tell me how the doctor's appointment went.”

Oh, great. Here we go.

"Fine," I lie, hating myself for it. "Just preliminary stuff like I thought. Information gathering."

He studies my face for a long moment, and I force myself to hold his gaze. If he sees the truth, well, I can't bare to watch the passion in his eyes turn to irritation and annoyance when he realizes I'm more trouble than I'm worth. Or worse—the desire could turn to pity. I couldn't bear that.

As he holds me, I memorize everything about this moment—the strength of his arms, the steady beat of his heart against my cheek, his spicy leather scent.

I love him. I'm in love with a big, bad, biker who treats me like I'm precious. And that's exactly why I have to leave. It will hurt—God, it will hurt worse than anything, but I have to let him go before I become an anchor that drags him down with me.

I can do this. I can be strong one last time.

For him.

Chapter 14

Ghost

"You have two hours." My voice cuts through the common room like a reaper's scythe. "Pack your shit and get out."

Krystal stares at me like I've lost my mind. Her ridiculously over-plumped lips open and close several times before she finds her voice.

"You can't be serious." She forces a laugh that sounds more desperate than amused. "I'm the most popular club girl here. Ghost, baby, this is all just a misunderstanding?—"

"Don't." The single word carries enough menace to make her take a step back. "You knew exactly what you were doing. Mira is my ol' lady."

"Ol' lady?" Her face twists with ugly jealousy. "She's not wearing your cut. She can't be?—"

"The cut's already in my possession. I'll be giving it to her today." I lean in close, enjoying the way she shrinks away from me. "But that's not the point. You knew she was mine. You saw her ride on my bike."

Understanding dawns in her eyes. Everyone in the MC world knows what it means when a woman rides on the back of a president's bike. It's a claim, plain and simple.

"That's what this is really about, isn't it?" My lip curls in disgust. "You've been trying to get into my bed since you showed up here, and it burns your ass that I chose her."

"Her?" Crystal's voice rises shrilly. "Look at her! She dresses like a homeless person. She?—"

"Is worth more than every club whore who's ever walked through those doors combined." I gesture toward the exit. "Two hours. If I find so much as a bobby pin of yours here after that, you won't like what happens next."

She opens her mouth again but something in my expression makes her think better of it. Smart. Finally.

"This is bullshit," she mutters, stomping toward the stairs. "Complete bullshit."

I watch her go, already mentally changing the security codes. Club girls come and go—it's part of the lifestyle—but no one, and I mean no one, disrespects my old lady.

Blade appears at my shoulder, a knowing smirk on his face. "Bout time you kicked that one to the curb. She's been stirring up drama since she got here."

I grunt in agreement as we saunter into the kitchen. My attention is instantly drawn to a table in the corner where my angel sits pushing her breakfast around her plate. Something's off. Even from here, I can see the tension in her shoulders.

Blade and I load up our own plates—I make sure to get extra bacon since y angel needs to eat more—and join her. She startles slightly when I slide onto the seat beside her, like she's a thousand miles away in her head.

"Morning, angel." I press a kiss to her temple, breathing in her sweet, fresh scent. "Feeling okay?"

"Mm-hmm." She offers a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "Fine."

Blade drops into the seat across from us, immediately launching into a funny story about the last club party. I listen with half an ear, most of my attention on my angel. She's quieter than usual, withdrawn. When I slide my extra bacon onto her plate, she just stares at it like she's never seen food before.

"You sure you're feeling okay?" I interrupt Blade mid-sentence, turning to cup my angel's face in my hand. Her skin feels cool to the touch, but there's a hint of fever in her eyes.

"I'm fine." Another not-quite-right smile. "Just tired, maybe."

She's lying. I can feel it in my gut. Something happened at that doctor's appointment yesterday, something she's not telling me.

"Ghost?" Blade's voice pulls me back to the conversation. "You calling church soon?"

"Yeah." I force myself to focus. "'Bout twenty minutes."

Blade nods and my angel stands abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor. "I should..." She gestures vaguely toward the stairs. "I have things to do."

Before I can stop her, she's gone, practically running from the table. What the fuck?

"Brother." Blade's voice is serious now. "You sure everything's okay with your ol' lady?"

I stare at her abandoned plate, food barely touched. "No," I admit. "Something's wrong."

"Want me to have Cipher look into the records from that doctor visit?"

I consider it. It would be easy enough to hack the medical records, find out exactly what the specialist said. But that feels like a violation of trust, and if there's one thing I want from my angel, it's her trust.

"Maybe..." I push back from the table. "But give me time to handle it my way first."

Blade nods, understanding.

I just need to figure out what I'm fighting against.

Through the front window, I watch Krystal load her car, shooting venomous glares at the clubhouse. I don't feel an ounce of remorse at kicking her out on her ass. She knew better. She should have been more welcoming to my ol' lady.

I'll kick them all out if I have to, because what matters most is my sweet, stubborn angel who thinks she has to handle everything alone.

She's about to learn differently.

I didn't spend weeks watching over her, didn't finally claim her as mine, just to let her push me away now. Whatever demons she's battling in that pretty head of hers, we'll face them together.

First, I'll deal with club business. Then tonight? Tonight I'm going to figure out exactly what's going on with my angel, even if I have to tie her to the bed and lick every inch of her sweet little body to get answers.

Actually, that's not a bad idea...

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Chapter 15

Mira

I wait.

I wait until Ghost calls church and I hear the club brothers head off to their meeting room. Then I wait exactly seven minutes more before moving. My hands shake as I climb the stairs to our room. No. His room. I can't think of it as ours, not now.

The few possessions I brought fit easily into my duffel. As I fold his borrowed t-shirt and place it carefully on the bed, memories of last night flood my mind—his hands, his lips, the way he made me feel cherished and whole and...loved.

A tear splashes onto the shirt and I hastily wipe it away. I can't break down. Not yet. Breaking down comes later, when I'm far away from here. Far from him.

I pull out paper and pen, but what can I possibly write? How do I explain that I'm leaving because I love him too much to burden him with my broken heart—literally and figuratively? In the end, I simply write: I'm sorry. Please let me go. Don't come after me. You deserve better than a dying charity case.

The word 'dying' blurs as more tears fall. I fold the note and prop it against his pillow.

Creeping downstairs is like navigating a minefield. Every creak of the old wooden steps makes me freeze, certain someone will stop me. But the prospects are focused on their duties, the patches are in church, and the club girls are pointedly ignoring me.

I make it to the gate before my luck runs out.

"Going somewhere?" The prospect—not Rash, thankfully—eyes my duffel suspiciously.

"Shopping." I force brightness into my voice. "Ghost gave me his credit card, see?" I flash the black card he gave me yesterday, the one I have no intention of ever using.

He shakes his head. "Sorry, but I can't let you leave without at least two prospects escorting you. Prez's orders."

"But I?—"

I finally catch a break when a commotion on the road behind us draws his attention. Two bikes roar through the gate, their riders wearing patches I don't recognize. When the prospect turns to verify their credentials, I seize my chance, slipping past him while he's distracted.

My heart pounds erratically as I speed-walk from the compound. Each step feels like a blow to the gut, but I force myself to keep moving. I'm doing this for him. Ghost deserves a whole woman, not one who will bleed every last penny from him. Not one who needs expensive surgery just to stay alive.

The late morning sun beats down heavily as I walk. And walk. And walk.

By the time the diner comes into view, my breath is heaving and my chest feels like it's being squeezed in a tight fist. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision, but I push on. Just a little further. Just...

The world tilts sideways. I reach for something to steady myself but my hands grasp empty air. The last thing I see is creepy Dave's shocked face in the diner window.

The concrete rushes up to meet me, but I don't even feel the impact. Instead, I float in a void where there's no pain, no fear, no heartbreak. Just peaceful nothingness.

Somewhere far away, I hear voices. Urgent. Worried. Someone saying my name. Someone else screaming to call 911.

Let me go, I want to tell them. It's better this way.

But it's too much effort to respond.

My last coherent thought is of Ghost—of steel-gray eyes and gentle hands and a love so fierce it terrifies me. Of everything I'm leaving behind because I'm not strong enough, not healthy enough, not whole enough, not enough. Never enough...

Then, blessed darkness swallows me whole.

Ghost

"The warehouse on Pier 12 is our best—" Blade's voice cuts off as the chapel door bursts open.

Rage builds at the prospect's audacity to interrupt church.

"The fuck you think you're doing?" I rise slowly, deliberately, letting him see the threat of death in my eyes. I'm ready to tear this asshole a new one.

The prospect's face is ash-white, his chest heaving. "Prez... it's... it's Mira."

Two words. Just two words and my world stops spinning.

"She collapsed outside the diner in town," he rushes on. "Manager called 911, then

called us. Ambulance is?—"

I'm moving before he finishes speaking, shoving past him with enough force to slam him into the doorframe. Behind me, chairs scrape as my brothers rise, but their voices fade to white noise.

I care about nothing right now. Nothing but my angel.

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Chapter 16

Mira

White light pierces my eyelids as consciousness returns gradually, like waves lapping at a shore. The steady beep of monitors fills my ears, and I become aware of a warm pressure around my hand.

Ghost.

His large frame is hunched in a hospital chair beside my bed, his calloused fingers intertwined with mine. Dark circles shadow his eyes, and his normally immaculate cut is wrinkled like he's been wearing it for days.

"Hey angel," he murmurs, noticing my stirring. His voice is rough with exhaustion.

"What..." My throat feels like sandpaper. "What happened?"

"Your heart surgery went well. Doctor will be in soon to give you the full update."

Surgery? My free hand drifts to my chest, finding bandages beneath the hospital gown. The last thing I remember is leaving the compound, walking to the diner, and...

"You needed emergency surgery. And a transfusion," Ghost's grip on my hand tightens. "Funny thing is, our blood types match. And now, my blood is running through your veins, angel. You're literally carrying a part of me inside you."

The fierce, dominating tone sends tingles through me.

“How...? What happened?”

“You took off. Left the compound and collapsed outside the diner. I called your cardiologist,” he says quietly. “Found out the truth.”

Shame burns my cheeks and I turn away. “Ghost, I?—”

“Look at me.” He waits until I meet his steel-gray gaze. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“I couldn't bear to be a burden.” The words tumble out in a rush. “You've already done so much, and I have no way of repaying you. The surgery costs alone?—“

“You repay me by being alive,” he cuts in roughly. “By being here, beside me. You don't understand what you do to me, angel. How you calm the turbulence inside me. How you shine a light on the darkness in my soul.”

“But—”

“No buts. I'm never letting you go. Never.”

“Never is a long time,” I whisper.

“Not long enough.” His thumb traces patterns on my palm. “I've been watching you for weeks, you know. Falling in love with you little by little, every time you showered your incredible kindness on one of your customers. Every time you smiled at me—smiled through your own pain.”

A tear escapes my lower lid and trails down my cheek.

"When you're healed," he growls softly, "we're going to have a long discussion about you sneaking out of the compound and attempting to leave me. And I might need to warm that pretty backside to drive the lesson home."

Despite everything, a giggle escapes my lips. "Promise?"

His answering grin is both tender and wicked. "Cross my heart, angel."

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Ghost

Mira's skin glows golden in the morning light as she sleeps peacefully beside me, one hand curled beneath her chin, the other resting on my chest. The surgical scar has healed nicely, barely visible now beneath the silky nightgown she's wearing.

My fingers trace the elegant script on her inner wrist—a small tattoo of my road name that she got last week. Her first ink, marking her as mine in yet another permanent way. Just like the blood that flows through both our veins.

The club cut draped over the chair catches my eye—"Property of Ghost" emblazoned across the back. She wears it proudly now, embracing her role as my old lady with the same quiet strength she brings to everything.

Her breathing changes subtly and those beautiful eyes flutter open. "Morning," she murmurs, stretching against me like a contented cat.

"Morning, angel." I roll her beneath me, caging her with my arms as I drink in the sight of her. Healthy. Whole. Mine.

Her fingers trail down my chest, and I watch as she shivers.

"Mmm, someone's horny this morning," she teases, wrapping her legs around my waist so my hard-on digs into her soft belly.

"For you? Always." I capture her lips in a deep kiss, savoring her soft moan. Making love to her is still a revelation—each time more intense than the last. Like now, as I

slide into her wet heat, her body welcoming me home.

"Ghost," she gasps, arching beneath me. Her nails dig into my shoulders as I set a steady rhythm, drawing out her pleasure.

"That's it, angel. Let me hear you." I thrust deeper, harder, drinking in her cries of ecstasy. When she comes apart around me, it triggers my own release, and for a perfect moment, there's nothing but us.

Afterward, she curls against my side, tracing the tattoos on my chest. "Have you heard from Cipher?"

"Yeah." I press a kiss to her temple. "The Petersons' sentencing is today. With multiple identity theft charges, they're looking at twenty years minimum."

She nods, satisfaction clear in her expression. Those foster parent fuckers learned the hard way what happens when you cross my family. The club's lawyers buried them in so much evidence, even a public defender could've won the case with his eyes closed.

"And Kovalev?" She asks the question cautiously, knowing it's a sore subject.

"Gone to ground." For now. The slimy motherfucker slipped through our fingers that night at the docks, but we been working on dismantling his operation. None of us doubt it'll be long before he surfaces again.

"We'll get him," I assure her. "And when we do, he'll get what's coming to him."

"I know." She doesn't flinch at the implication. My angel is now fully accepting of the outlaw lifestyle. She knows that harsh retribution is part of our world and sometimes justice requires bloodshed.

"Speaking of justice," I shift to look at her properly. "Tell me more about your plans for the foundation."

Her whole face lights up. "I've been researching programs that help foster kids transition into adulthood. There's such a huge need, Ghost. So many of them age out of the system with nothing—no support, no resources, nowhere to go."

"Like you did." My jaw clenches at the memory of her living in that flooded basement, rationing medication just to survive.

"Yes, but I was lucky. I found you." She touches my face gently. "Or you found me."

I kiss her fingertips, one by one. "And you want to help those less fortunate." I'm not surprised in the least. My angel has a heart of pure gold.

"With the right support, their lives could really change for the better."

"The club's behind you one hundred percent." The brothers voted unanimously to support her vision. Hell, even hardass Saint got misty-eyed when she presented her plans. "Got Saint working with the lawyers to draft up the paperwork for a non-profit now."

"Really?" She sits up, eyes shining. "You mean it?"

"Course I do." I pull her back down, kissing her deeply. "Told you before, angel. Anything you want, I'll make it happen."

She straddles my hips again, the movement making my cock stir with renewed interest. "Anything?"

"Name it."

Mira

Five Years Later

The sizzle of bacon and quiet chatter of sleepy voices fills the kitchen with warmth as our fourteen-year-old daughter Sarah helps our twelve-year-old son Marcus with his math homework while ten-year-old Jenny braids eight-year-old Amy's hair.

My heart—now as strong and steady as an athlete's—swells with love as I watch them. These children, all former foster siblings from the Petersons' household, have blossomed in the five years since Ghost and I adopted them. Where once there were haunted eyes and hesitant smiles, now there is laughter and the kind of security I wish I'd had at their ages.

"Mom!" Jenny calls out. "Amy won't sit still!"

"I'm trying," Amy protests, wiggling in her chair. "But Uncle Blade says I have ants in my pants."

The familiar bickering brings a smile to my face. "Girls," I say, using my 'mom voice' that still sometimes surprises me. "Let's focus on getting ready for school."

Heavy footsteps on the stairs announce my man's arrival before his strong arms wrap around my waist from behind. "Morning, angel," he murmurs against my neck, and even after five years, his touch still sends shivers of delight down my spine.

"Dad!" He releases me to catch Amy as she launches herself at him, lifting her high

in the air while the others cluster around.

My deathly-dangerous biker husband—the man other outlaws fear—is putty in our children's hands. His duality still amazes me. I love him more every day for a thousand little reasons, not the least of which is the way he's embraced fatherhood, pouring all that protective instinct into giving these kids the stable, loving home they deserve.

"Alright, rugrats," he growls playfully. "Let your mom finish cooking before the prospects eat all the bacon."

As if summoned, Rash—now a fully patched member—pokes his head in. "Speaking of bacon..." He grins at me hopefully.

"Out!" Ghost barks, but there's no real heat in it. Rash is family too, just like all the MC brothers. The kids adore their "uncles," and the entire club has embraced our unorthodox family with open arms.

After breakfast and the controlled chaos of getting four kids off to school, I head to my office in the building next door. The Foster Youth Foundation has grown beyond my wildest dreams, helping hundreds of aging-out foster kids transition successfully to adulthood. We provide housing assistance, job training, medical care—everything I wished I'd had when I was struggling alone.

My assistant hands me the day's schedule as I settle behind my desk. There's a board meeting at ten, then lunch with a potential donor, followed by...

A knock interrupts my thoughts. Ghost stands in the doorway, something hidden behind his back.

"Shouldn't you be in church?" I ask, though my pulse quickens at his presence.

He shakes his head, entering and closing the door. "Got something more important first." His eyes, those mesmerizing steel-gray pools I fell in love with, hold mine intently. "Happy fifth anniversary, angel."

He perches his sexy ass on the edge of my desk and from behind his back, produces a small velvet box.

My hands shake slightly with excited anticipation as I take it, already emotional, though I have no idea what's inside.

"Open it," he urges softly.

I lift the lid and the world stops spinning.

There, nestled on black velvet, is my mother's gold locket. The very one I'd been forced to pawn years ago to afford my heart medication. The only memento I had of my parents.

"How?" My voice breaks on the single word as tears blur my vision.

"Been working on tracking it down for a while. Wasn't easy." His large hand cups my face, thumb brushing away an escaped tear. "Took years, but I finally succeeded."

I lift the locket with trembling fingers and flick open the small catch. Sure enough, inside are two tiny photos of my parents—young, smiling, full of hope for the future they wouldn't live to see.

"Ghost..." I'm crying freely now, overwhelmed by the magnitude of this gift.

He pulls me into his lap, strong arms cradling me close. "You gave me everything, angel," he murmurs into my hair as his arms tighten possessively. "You're my whole world, you and those kids. Never thought I'd have this kind of life, but fuck if I'd

change a single thing."

I throw my arms around his neck, pressing my face into his cut. I know exactly what he means. As I catch my reflection in the window, the woman looking back bears little resemblance to the scared, sick girl Ghost rescued from that flooded basement apartment. I'm strong now, in every way that matters. I have a purpose, a family, and a love story for the ages.

And it all started with a leather-clad guardian angel who refused to let me go.

"I love you," I tell him again, because I can never say it enough.

"Love you too, angel. Forever."