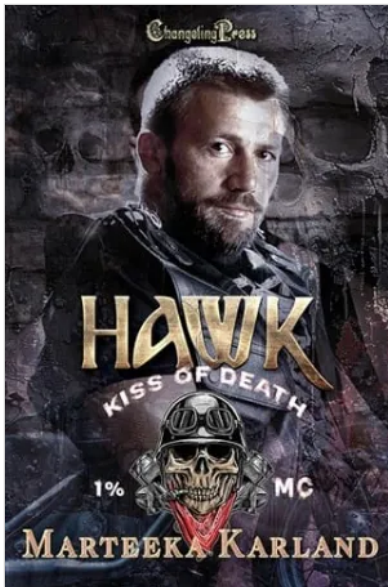




Hawk (Kiss of Death MC #3)

Author: Marteeka Karland

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: May God have mercy on Carrie's enemies, because I have none.

Carrie When I stumble out of the fog into a motorcycle club compound, the guys seem more freaked out over my name (something about an old movie?) than the fact that I'm covered in blood and asking for a jug of sulfuric acid. Not my best moment. Then Hawk steps in. His smile and the careful way he takes care of me steal my heart. I'm asking for heartache, but my whole life has been nothing but pain and disappointment. Just this once, I want to take control, take what I want. And I want Hawk. No matter what happens when my family finds me.

Hawk I knew Carrie was trouble the second I laid eyes on her. Of course, she was covered in blood, so, easy call. What I didn't count on is how completely and quickly I fell under her spell. I might not be ready to admit it, but my brothers know and plan accordingly. Carrie is mine. Even though she's proven she can take care of herself, whatever trouble she has coming for her will have to go through me.

Warning: Graphic violence and adult content which may be triggers for some readers. As always, there is a happily ever after with no cheating.

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“This is gonna be good.” I popped the top off my beer as I watched the scene about to unfold. Me and Chains sat at a table in the common room in steel folding chairs. Chains was leaning back with his booted feet on the table while I slouched with one ankle crossed over the opposite knee.

“Yep.”

Knight hurried to us from where he’d been snagging his own beer at the bar. Three club girls were in tow, all with tits out, wearing only thongs. I grinned, raising an arm to welcome the brunette with pouty lips onto my lap.

“We placin’ bets?” Knight looked gleeful in a maniacal kind of way. It was a little creepy to be honest.

I shrugged. “Might as well.”

“My money’s on Gunnar.” Knight high-fived Oktober as the big man walked up to us. Everyone was waiting eagerly. Pippa, Gunnar’s woman and Knuckles’s daughter, had already met and welcomed Hannah, but Gunnar and Cain had yet to confront Knuckles. Cain, the former president of Bones MC in Somerset, Kentucky, was Hannah’s father. I wasn’t really concerned for Knuckles. Especially after he’d attempted to beat the fuck out of Gunnar when he’d caught him and Pippa in bed together. So a beating was definitely going to happen.

“What’s goin’ on?” Oktober hadn’t been home long. After practically crawling back to the compound and into his room half dead from fatigue, I really thought he’d sleep for a fucking week. Bastard stumbled to bed for a couple hours and now looked fresh

as a daisy. I hated the man on principle.

“Gunnar and Cain both pulled up outside the compound.” Tiny, our road captain and not tiny at all, pulled up a chair and flipped it around backward to straddle it. He crossed his arms over the back of the chair, resting his forearms there. “I told the guys not to let them in yet, but Gunnar pulled rank.” He shrugged. “I mean, brother outranks officer any day of the week, I suppose.” Tiny didn’t look the least bit upset. In fact, I was pretty sure he was looking forward to this as much as the rest of us were.

That got chuckles from us all. Knight clinked beer bottles with Inferno as the other man walked by. The second he sat down, two club whores descended on him. He didn’t let them undress him but had one on his lap with his hand cupping a tit while sucking on a tit of the other woman. Made me give the tit of the woman in my lap a squeeze. She promptly giggled and arched into my palm. Yeah. Tits. Gotta love tits.

The door burst open and Gunnar stalked in, an intent look in his eyes. “Where the fuck is he?” The bite of demand in Gunnar’s voice was unmistakable. He was a man looking to do violence.

“You know...” Tiny nodded in Gunnar’s direction as he took a pull from his beer. “I do believe he’s good and pissed.”

I grinned as I raised my voice to be heard over the low din in the common room. “Where’s who, Big Gun?” I’d started calling him Big Gun the second he came to the club. Just ’cause I liked fucking with him. My way of showing affection. And honestly, any man who would go to prison to protect his sister was definitely a big gun.

“The Goddamned motherfucker who made my sister his old lady without permission!”

That got a hoot from everyone.

“Better be careful takin’ on the big boss, Gunnar.”

“Fixin’ t’ get your ass handed to ya, boy.”

“I got fifty bucks on the kid.”

“Never happen!”

“Prove me wrong?”

“Oh, I’ll take that action.”

And the betting was on all across the room up until the moment Knuckles descended the stairs into the big room. The club compound was like four city blocks of abandoned four- and five-story warehouses the club now owned. We’d walled it off so there was no entry into the compound without our say-so. Each warehouse had been renovated so the bottom two floors were for various things that fell under club business, while the top floor, or floors, were made into suites and apartments for all our members. We had all this because of Knuckles, despite him being in prison. Once Knuckles entered the room, the betting and excess chatter stopped.

“You got somethin’ to say to me, kid?” Knuckles crossed his arms over his chest. The pose was intimidating because Knuckles was a big-ass, strong motherfucker. His pecs and arm muscles all bulged with the effort, straining his black T-shirt. Only man in the club bigger than Knuckles was Tiny. More than one club girl had drooled over him since he got home, but Hannah had managed to shut them down. I’m not sure what exactly happened and none of the whores were saying, but to a woman, they left Knuckles alone.

“You’re Goddamned right I’ve got something to say to you!” Gunnar stalked toward Knuckles like a jungle cat getting ready to pounce.

As one, we all leaned forward in anticipation. I could practically feel the tension in the room. I know I was coiled tight as a banjo string. Gunnar stopped a few inches from Knuckles, neither man giving an inch. Both of them looked ready to kill.

“The next couple minutes should be fun.” Knight murmured the comment so softly I could barely hear him “But I think Gunnar can take him.”

I would have rolled my eyes, but Gunnar lunged at Knuckles. We all sucked in a breath.

Knuckles flinched back slightly, bringing his hands up into a defensive stance but Gunnar didn’t attack. Instead, he laughed and clapped Knuckles on the shoulder before pulling the other man into a welcoming embrace.

“You cocksucker,” Knuckles muttered, his tone disgruntled. The whole place roared in laughter.

“If only you could see the fuckin’ look on your face, man.” Gunnar continued to wale on Knuckles’s back so hard it probably felt like the beating Gunnar had refrained from giving him.

“It wasn’t like I could fight back.” Knuckles sounded disgruntled but was grinning. “Especially after I barged in on you and Pippa.”

“Exactly. Just know things can change if you don’t treat her right. You’re my brother, but she’s my sister.”

“And I’m her fuckin’ daddy.” The booming voice came from the man in the doorway

with a fierce scowl on his face. Cain Gill was the owner of one of the largest paramilitary companies in the world, as well as the former president of Bones MC. Our current president, Torpedo, was vice president at Bones before he came to be with us. Bohannon, our vice president, was the enforcer in the same outfit. Cain was also Gunnar and Hannah's father. And one tough-ass son of a bitch. "Which also makes me your daddy now." The look on Cain's face was a mixture of amusement and I-will-totally-fuck-you-the-fuck-up. "Gunnar may be younger than me, but I have bigger guns and better torture devices. You displease my little princess in any way" -- he pointed a finger at Knuckles -- "and I will remove your balls. With fire ants."

Both Gunnar and Knuckles winced even as the rest of us hollered with laughter. Soon after, Cain and Knuckles shook hands and everyone carried on.

Such is life.

The club whore in my lap turned to straddle me. Giving me a coquettish grin, she slid her panty-covered pussy over my lap, rubbing my cock. I wasn't hard, but there wasn't a man alive who could resist Ruby when she was in the mood to fuck.

"Been waitin' for you, Hawk. Got somethin' special for you in my room."

"Oh, I bet you do, darlin'." I slid my hands around to cup her plump ass. I squeezed, then smacked one fleshy globe. Much as I loved playing with Ruby -- or any of the club whores, really -- I wasn't feeling it tonight. For some reason, I was wound too fucking tight to let my guard down enough to enjoy the experience. "Got shit to do tonight. Next time I'm at a party, though, I'll fuck the shit outta ya."

Ruby pouted prettily. "Promises, promises." She leaned in and fed me her breast, encouraging me to latch on to the jutting nipple. Of course, I did. Her breasts were large, full, and obviously enhanced. I loved banging her from behind while gripping her hair in my fist. Watching that sight in front of a mirror never failed to get me off.

Despite even thinking about one of my favorite erotic images, my cock barely twitched.

“I’ll give you my cock another time. And if you’re good, I might even let you come.” I gave her a smile, but my attention was only half on her. Something felt just that little bit... off .

When Ruby tried to push the issue, I lifted her off my lap and set her on her feet. “Enough. I said no. Go find one of the other brothers. Plenty here who’d love to fuck you.” I turned her around and smacked her ass to get her moving, trying not to be too much of an asshole while still getting my point across.

Club whores were here for one reason. To fuck. Since most of us had spent time incarcerated, we knew what it was like to go without a woman for extended periods. That shit wasn’t happening again. Every woman we let in knew the score. She could put out or get out. Problem was, we’d created monsters. Because when most of the women started with us, we spoiled them rotten. We were good to them as we could be, protecting them and making sure they had food and shelter. Still were. The women knew how we were and did their best to take advantage of it. “No” wasn’t a word they heard often, and as a general rule, they hated the word and would push back every time we used it. It was cute.

Until Knuckles and Gunnar came to Kiss of Death with old ladies. Now, we were all waiting patiently for the explosion. The club was Knuckles’s. Everyone knew it. The guys from Bones were here at his request, from what I’d heard. Knuckles would be president again. I wasn’t sure what role Gunnar would play, but he was a new fish -- which all but guaranteed the club whores would be on him like stink on shit. It would happen. Only a matter of time.

The family reunion continued. Unfortunately, the women weren’t here. “Unfortunately” because I really wanted to see some fireworks tonight. Probably just

as well, because that feeling I had before was becoming an itch between my shoulder blades I couldn't ignore.

I stood, acknowledging my brothers as I passed them on the way to the door. I stepped outside and took a deep breath. It was barely summer and already the air was humid and thick with moisture. I welcomed it, though. Inside our little corner of the city we'd created a haven of sorts. One whole city block in the center, we'd turned into a small forest. In the center of that, was a park of sorts where we had a couple of vegetable gardens and several flowerbeds. Wasn't a very "biker" thing to do, but it was peaceful. At one time or another, after getting out of prison, we all needed the relative quiet and solitude.

"What's goin' on, Hawk?" I looked over my shoulder to find Chains. He'd been my cellie for a while, and after I'd gotten out, he found me and brought me to Kiss of Death. We'd helped clean out the trash in the club when they'd picked a fight with the wrong club.

"Don't know. Somethin'."

Chains nodded as he stepped beside me. He leaned against the rail in front of the main clubhouse. Crumbled concrete, gravel, and dirt lined the paths that made up the "roads" in our territory. It looked exactly like what it was. A prison of our own making. Only this one was to keep the rest of the world away from us instead of the other way around.

"You got that feelin' again?" Chains lit a cigarette, the flare of his lighter briefly illuminating the hard planes of his face. He'd been with me long enough to recognize when my instincts kicked in.

I nodded, scanning the perimeter of our compound. "Yeah. Like somethin's comin' our way."

“Something or someone?”

“Fuck if I know.” I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to shake the sensation. My instincts had saved my ass more times than I could count, both on the inside and out. When they started screaming like this, shit was about to go down.

We stood in silence for a few minutes, Chains smoking and me just watching the night. Our guard posts on top of each building were manned. Security lights flooding lights flooding the area close to our fencing provided a little extra protection for the buildings around us. If nothing else, the extra lighting made it easier for their own security cameras to get good imaging of whomever was trying to rip them off.

The sound of laughter and music drifting from the clubhouse behind us usually filled me with contentment. Tonight, it was an irritation. I needed to hear the night around me, to get an idea what was about to hit us.

I ducked under the railing and walked down the gravel path, not sure where I was going but needing to get away from the noise and light. Though the area around our compound was well lit, the interior was dark except for inside the various buildings. The paths between buildings and everything other than the center garden were covered in camo netting. We were as protected as we could be here. So why were my instincts screaming at me? The feeling got worse with each passing moment.

“Hawk?” Chains fell into step beside me, his gaze sweeping the area above the fence line. “You see somethin’?”

I didn’t answer. Wasn’t sure I could because with every second ticking by, my anxiety increased. It wasn’t late, but the high humidity and milder temperatures made the fog coming off the Cumberland River roll in thick as pea soup. Every breath in was heavy and wet, the water vapor tickling my nose. The security lights reflected back, making visibility very far outside our walls nearly impossible.

The moment I saw the small figure emerge from the thick mist, it felt like all the hair stood up on my body. It was definitely a woman, but there was something off about her. I took a step forward. Then another. I was stopped when Chains grabbed my arm.

“Easy, brother. That’s creepy as fuck and I don’t fuckin’ know...” He trailed off. Which is when I got my first good look at the woman, courtesy of the flood lights as she came closer. No mistaking she was heading straight for us with a purposeful stride. “Why’s she covered in mud?”

“Don’t think that’s mud, Hawk.” Chains puffed his chest out and called out to the would-be intruder. “Stop there, little miss. Private property and all that.”

She stopped directly in one spotlight so there was no mistaking her appearance and physical state. “That your blood?” Private property or not, need for secrecy and privacy or not, I absolutely would not deny a woman help who’d lost that much blood.

“What?” She had a confused look on her face, then looked down at herself. “Oh! That. Nah, not my blood. I’m good.” She gave me a bright smile and a big thumbs up. “But I’m kind of in a bit of a bind?” She actually looked like she was genuinely sorry to take up our time. Like she wasn’t covered in blood looking like something out of a horror movie.

I glanced over at Chains. His fists were clenched at his side, his eyes wide. Guy was superstitious as fuck, but I’d never seen him like this. Looking back to the woman, I started to answer when a light flashed over her blood-splattered face and I had to fight off a shudder. Never show weakness. It was a mantra that had served me well. Yet, here I was about to piss myself because of one tiny woman with a little blood on her. OK, so a lot of blood, but how did I know it was even blood? Might be fake blood. Might be animal blood, which was disturbing in itself. Maybe it was mud after all, and the lighting and mist were distorting the colors.

“Yeah, small bind.” She winced and held her thumb and finger an inch apart. “Very small. Almost nonexistent, except it’s not.” Her expression fell slightly. “Um, anyway. I gave the guys every chance to walk away. I swear.” Her eyes were almost comically wide. Like she was a kid trying to talk her parents out of a punishment for something she’d done.

“Gave who a chance to walk away?” The question tumbled from my lips without my consent. I didn’t need to know. Didn’t want to know. The less I knew the better. Ex-con and all. I saw Chains out of the corner of my eye. He gave me a sharp look, but didn’t say anything, either unwilling to show division or to stop the carnage he knew would follow. Yeah. We were sick bastards like that.

“Oh, the guys I stabbed.” She gave a slight, nervous laugh. “I wouldn’t have hurt either of them if one of them hadn’t pulled the knife after I broke the other guy’s leg. And I wouldn’t have broken his leg if he hadn’t tried to hit me.”

“Tried to hit you.” Could I sound any more stupid?

“Yeah. They were trying to rob me, and I took exception.” This time her voice was prim and proper, but she still looked nervous as shit. Which, I guess I understood. No, Goddamnit, I didn’t understand! Why was I freaking out like this? Why was she not freaking out?

“What the fuck?” Knuckles and Gunnar approached. Fuckers had either snuck up on me or I was officially a pussy because this girl was seriously freaking me out. I was going with losing my edge. I was getting older, after all. Because no way I was that big a pussy. I wasn’t even sure which one of them spoke.

“Uh, hi.” Creepy Girl gave us all a little wave. “Can we... I mean, I’d like to get out of the light, if you don’t mind? Makes me kind of nervous.”

“Yeah,” Chains muttered. “I bet.”

Knuckles made himself front and center while Gunnar stood at his left shoulder. I like that the pup had the boss’s back. He was an excellent addition to the club as far as I was concerned. “What’s your name, girl?”

“Carrie.”

“No way, man.” Chains took a step backward, shaking his head. “No fuckin’ way.”

“Shit.” I thought that was Gunnar. A quick glance and the man was scrubbing a hand over the back of his neck. “That’s just fuckin’ creepy.”

“Strange,” she muttered. “I didn’t expect this reaction.” Then she spat, making a face, disgust evident. “Gross.”

“You do this kind of thing often?” Why wouldn’t my mouth stay shut? I wanted to bang my head against a wall, but I was making a big enough an ass of myself as it was.

“What?” She spat again, wiping at her mouth with her fingers and the back of her hand.

“Show up at a gated compound full of strangers, covered in the blood of your enemies.” Nope. Still couldn’t shut up.

Then the damndest thing happened. Little Carrie smiled. Like I’d said the funniest thing ever. And I knew I was doomed. Because my cock hardened so fast I was certain every ounce of blood went straight to my groin. I groaned and had to fight to stay on my feet. For a man who never showed weakness, I was showing an awful lot of weaknesses.

“That’s a cool description.” Her smile was beautiful. Except for the fact it kind of looked deranged. I wasn’t altogether certain she wasn’t deranged. Which would make this attraction I had to her complicated.

“Where’s the bodies?” Knuckles took another step forward, putting the attention squarely on himself.

“Um, back that way? Between the buildings.” She pointed in the direction she came from. “If you’ve got some sulfuric acid or something, I could fix it. I’m pretty sure there are several abandoned buildings I could use to store them for a couple days until they dissolve.”

“I’m outta here,” Chains muttered, turning and jogging back to the clubhouse. He had to go through a couple of the guys who’d wandered out here when Knuckles and Gunnar joined us.

“Sweet baby Jesus in the manger.” I winced as Torpedo, our current president and his VP, Bohannon pushed their way through the gathering crowd. “No one’s dissolving a body.”

“Oh, I know.” Carrie said brightly. “There’s two.” There was something hanging from her lip and I took my finger, mimicking wiping the corner of my lip. She gave me a confused look, so I did it again. She lifted her hand to her face and came away with whatever gore was around her mouth. She immediately gagged once, shaking her hand to sling the... I cringed to think of what exactly was clinging to her finger, but she tried to shake it off.

She stopped and turned her gaze back to Torpedo. The big man gave her a death stare for several seconds. Most men I knew might have thought twice about crossing Torpedo when he got that particular expression on his face. To my surprise, Torpedo looked away first. “Christ, I’m too fuckin’ old for this shit. Bohannon.”

“Don’t look at me, prez. I’m just as old as you are.” Bohannon actually chuckled, though he looked as shell-shocked as I felt.

To be clear, it wasn’t the situation had us all spooked. Violence was a way of life for me in and out of prison. It was the whole surrealness of the moment. If this was one of my brothers at the gate, I’d have already gotten the materials he needed, and we’d be out there taking care of business. But this woman was five foot nothing and maybe a hundred pounds. If she ate a sandwich.

And she was still spitting blood.

And her name was Carrie.

“You get hurt? Your mouth’s bleeding.” Bohannon, bless his heart, was braving the waters. I’d wondered the same Goddamned thing, but there was no fucking way I was asking that shit.

“No.” She made a face then spit out more blood. Then she kind of gagged a little. “Gross.” She kept spitting until she was finally satisfied. “That’s not my blood.”

“What did you do? Drink their blood? How the fuck did you get that much blood in your mouth?” Bohannon looked morbidly curious and I knew he was just as freaked as the rest of us. He also looked like he regretted the question the second it left his mouth. I know I winced. Pretty sure more than one of the other brothers witnessed the spectacle.

“No.” She spat again. “But one of the guys grabbed me in a bear hug from the front and I couldn’t move. So I bit his ear off. Then the other guy? He got behind me and put his hand over my mouth when I screamed. So I bit a chunk out of his hand. I think it’s the ear I’m having trouble with. Cartilage. Or something.” She went pale, her breathing growing ever more rapid. “I’m so s-sorry!” she sobbed out. Carrie

collapsed on the ground in a heap looking so broken and terrified it made my heart ache. I actually rubbed the middle of my chest trying to soothe the hurt. Then she looked up at me. Not anyone else. Me. “I-I’m so s-sorry. Please help me.”

“Well, fuck.” Christ, my life!

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Carrie

I was really surprised I managed to hold out this long before I completely lost my shit. It was the whole gristle in my teeth thing, knowing it was a person's flesh that tipped me over, I think. All the men were looking at me like I was a complete lunatic, and I didn't blame them. For some reason, though, out of all the men there, despite knowing I needed to fear every single one of them, the big man who'd first met me at the gate held my gaze, and I did the only thing I could think of.

"I-I'm so s-sorry. Please help me." It was pathetic and miserable. "I did it." I sobbed out. "I killed them."

"I think I know where she's talkin' about, Bohannon."

"Take a crew," one of them ordered. "See what you find, then let me know what's going on."

"I found the incident, Torpedo. It happened just like she said." Another guy, his gaze drifting to me once before shoving a tablet in front of Torpedo's face.

The other man -- Torpedo, who seemed to be in charge -- viewed it and nodded his head crisply. "Back it up. Follow everyone's movements." Torpedo gave me a hard look.

"She needs looked over to make sure she's not injured." The big man stepped forward and knelt in front of me. "I'm Hawk, little lady."

“Carrie,” she said.

“Yeah, honey. I got that.” He smiled.

“Are you going to turn me in to the cops? That’s what happens when you kill someone. Right?”

Hawk glanced up at the one called Torpedo, then at one of two other men who seemed to be part of the group but also standing apart. Torpedo turned to those two men and raised an eyebrow.

“What do you think, Knuckles? This is your outfit.”

“Take her in. Let her get cleaned up and get Pain to check her over. Knight, I want you to examine every second of footage you can find. If she’s on the up and up, we’ll take care of this... uh, how did she put it, Gunnar?”

Gunnar held up his thumb and forefinger an inch apart. “Little bit of a bind, I think. I wasn’t close enough to hear much.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose.” I sounded whiny even to myself. “OK, so I did do it on purpose, but only because they were gonna hurt me. And I didn’t kill them as a first resort. Only when the one guy brought out a knife, and I knew things were serious.”

Hawk’s brow furrowed as he studied me. I couldn’t tell if he was horrified or impressed, and honestly, at this point, I didn’t care. My hands were shaking so badly I had to sit on them.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” he said, his voice surprisingly gentle for a man who looked like he could bench press a motorcycle. He reached out, hesitated. I swayed slightly, the adrenaline crash hitting me hard. “Your story checks out, everything will

be fine.”

“And if it doesn’t?” It was embarrassing, but my voice shook. My dad would be so ashamed of me right now. He’d raised his only daughter to be as strong as her brothers. Not even one of my brothers would be on his ass in the gravel while men stood over them. They’d be on their feet ready to fight for their lives. Me? I just wanted to go home and hide for the rest of mine.

He raised an eyebrow. “Is it going to?”

I shrugged. “It’s a matter of perspective, I guess.”

“Relax, uh, Carrie.” He stumbled over my name, and I didn’t understand why. “We’re gonna look at all the footage we can find, but Knight seems pretty satisfied with the fight.”

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” I mumbled, then promptly vomited on the ground next to Hawk’s boots. Thankfully, I missed his actual footwear.

“Christ,” someone muttered behind me.

“Oh, like you’ve never blown chunks after a fight, Moose.” Gunnar shoved Moose backward. Not hard, but enough that the younger man got the message.

“I’m a sympathy puker, all right?” the younger man grumbled. “Meant no disrespect.” Several of the remaining guys laughed and clapped Moose on the back as they passed.

Hawk didn’t even flinch at the mess near his boots. “It’s the shock, honey. Happens to everyone the first time.” He looked over his shoulder. “Gunnar, can you get a prospect to get her some water?”

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, which was pointless since my hand was as disgusting as my face. “I didn’t want to kill anyone,” I whispered, only for Hawk’s ears. “But they wouldn’t stop.”

“I know, darlin’.” I was surprised at the confidence in his tone, but as I looked up at him, he seemed sincere. Not like he was humoring me to get me to do what he wanted. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, but I believe Knight’s assessment. He’s never wrong. Besides, self-defense is a thing, you know? Ain’t no one here gonna judge you for defendin’ yourself.”

“But I stabbed him in the chest. Multiple times.” I emphasized the last part by jabbing my finger in the air. “And I’m pretty sure I broke the other guy’s windpipe after I broke his leg.”

I looked up to find all the men staring at me with varying expressions of shock, amusement, and something else I couldn’t quite identify. Hawk seemed to be fighting back a smile.

“Jesus,” Torpedo muttered. “How’d a little thing like you manage that?”

“I had six older brothers and a dad who wished I was a boy. It was learn to fight or be crushed by the weight of all the testosterone.” I wiped at my face, probably making more of a mess. The thought made me want to gag again. “I panicked. I just...” I sucked in a breath as my voice hitched. “I just wanted to get away.”

Hawk stood up and extended his hand to me. “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up. I’ll see if we can round up a toothbrush for you. Might have to send one of the guys to get you a few things, but I’ll get you comfortable.”

I hesitated for a moment before taking his hand. His palm was warm and calloused, his grip gentle but firm as he helped me to my feet. The world tilted briefly, and I

swayed.

“Whoa, there.” Hawk’s arm came around my waist to steady me. “Easy, killer.”

I nearly laughed at the nickname, but it came out more of a sob as the reality of what I’d done crashed over me again. I had killed someone. Two someones. I trembled so violently I could barely stand.

“I’ve got you,” Hawk murmured against my ear. “Just breathe.” He guided me forward, his large frame sheltering me from the curious stares of the other men. When I stumbled again, he simply lifted me into his arms and strode past the others toward another big warehouse in a field of them. I was vaguely aware of the other men parting to let us through, their voices a low murmur around us. Some of them looked impressed, others wary. I couldn’t blame them.

“Where are we going?” I asked, my voice small.

“Clubhouse first. Get you some privacy so you can clean up, then we’ll figure out what happens next.” His voice was matter of fact, and somehow that steadied me more than if he’d tried to be comforting.

The clubhouse, as he called it, was massive and surprisingly clean. The interior had an industrial vibe going on. Basically, there were steel posts and lots of concrete. Furniture consisted of several tables, couches, and chairs, none of which were in the best of shape, but didn’t look dirty. While the place smelled of beer and pot, it wasn’t disgusting or anything.

The place had twenty or thirty men, as well as at least the same number of women. Probably more. I heard the whispers as Hawk walked in carrying me. It was mostly the men, but the women picked up the lead of the guys, whispering among themselves. I caught snippets like, “Carrie, like the movie?” and “Batshit crazy” and

“Tiny little thing to cause that much havoc,” and cringed. Great first impression, Carrie . Show up covered in blood and vomit on their property. And now I really needed to Google the movie Carrie, because there was obviously something I was missing.

Every fiber of my being screamed to hide my face, but there was nowhere to go except to bury myself against Hawk’s chest. I’d never been more mortified in my life. And the real shit of it was, now that I was coming down and I wasn’t so hyper-focused on simply surviving, I was very aware of the man who carried me. And, sweet God, he smelled good! The inappropriate thought made me even more ashamed. Maybe I was weak, like my father always said. If I was this distracted by a man when I should be planning my escape, then it made me weak and stupid.

“Jesus, Hawk. What’d you drag in?” A woman with platinum-blond hair stepped in front of us, blocking our path. Her eyes were heavily lined with black, making the blue pop even more dramatically.

Hawk stopped, his grip on me tightening slightly. “Outta the way, Silk.”

“But who is she?” The woman, Silk, pointed a long, red nail at me. “And why is she covered in blood?”

“None of your business,” Hawk replied, his voice clipped. “Now move.”

Silk’s eyes narrowed, but she stepped aside, her gaze following us as Hawk carried me through the crowd. I could feel dozens of curious eyes on me, and I wished I could disappear.

“Sorry about that,” Hawk murmured as we headed down a hallway. “Club whores can be territorial.”

“Club whores?” I asked weakly, my shaking getting worse. “Why am I so cold?”

“Shock. Part of it. A hot shower would do you good. Maybe make you feel human again, yeah?”

I looked up at him and knew my eyes were wide and wild-looking because it was how I felt. My dad always said I could never hide my feelings worth a damn. He said it made me vulnerable, and I needed to learn to guard myself. Instead of disappointment when I met Hawk’s gaze, though, I saw only kindness and understanding.

He carried me up two flights of stairs, then down a long hallway. It looked like there were several apartments. Hawk took me to the end of the hall and set me on my feet long enough to open the door with a key. I thought he might invite me inside, but instead he picked me back up and carried me inside himself, going straight to the bathroom.

“Here ya go.” He set me on the vanity of a surprisingly spacious and clean bathroom. The place didn’t actually look lived in. The main area was a little messy, but the bathroom was near spotless. “There’s a bench in the shower. Sit there and wash until you feel better. I’ll be just outside if you need help. Don’t fall.” He delivered his instructions in a crisp, no-nonsense voice.

“Are you always this bossy?” The second I said the words, I regretted them. I opened my mouth to apologize, but Hawk only chuckled.

“Yeah, Killer. I’m always this bossy.”

“You might want to get that looked at,” I muttered, which got another laugh out of him.

“Tell you what. When Pain comes to look you over, if you don’t give him too much shit and let him make sure you’re OK physically, I’ll see if he’ll look at my bossiness while he’s here.”

“I really am sorry I got you guys involved. I didn’t intend to. I was just trying to get out of the area and got lost in the fog.”

“Don’t worry about any of that. Get clean. Take a few minutes to sit in the hot water and just be. I’ll leave you some clothes outside the door, then I’m going to see what Knight finds. I’ll come check on you in an hour.” He moved to a wooden cabinet in the corner of the bathroom. “Towels and washcloths. Use all you need. Knuckles says his woman is gettin’ you a few things together. I’ll have her set them just inside the door. Throw your dirties in the corner and I’ll take care of it later.”

My gaze snapped to his. “Will everyone be able to get in here?”

“No, honey. I have a key. I’ll give that key to Hannah, who will give it back to me once she gets your shit together. You’re not gonna be locked in or anything, but I wouldn’t advise leaving without an escort. You saw how pushy the club whores can be. Hannah or Gunnar’s woman, Pippa, will be happy to take you wherever you want to go.”

I tried not to wince at the term “club whores” but wasn’t sure I pulled it off. “They’re here because they want to be. Right?” Of all the questions I needed to ask, that wasn’t any of my business.

“Yeah. Every woman here knows the score before she comes in.”

My stomach clenched and I took a step backward. “I didn’t agree to anything like that.” My heart pounded in my chest. Had I made a huge mistake? Had I escaped one bad situation only to fall into a worse one? I was under no illusion I’d fare as well

with this man, or any of the other men I'd seen on their property. Every single one of them looked sturdy, strong, and more than a little mean.

"Relax, Carrie. You're not here for the same reasons they are, and this is not a permanent situation for you. Now, if you decide you want to live here, that's different."

OK, that was funny. If it weren't for the fact I actually needed a home, his words might have been amusing. But the fact was, I was desperate. It's how those guys had found me in the first place. Because I wasn't very good at finding safe places to sleep, and they'd tried to take my last five bucks. When they'd realized that was all I had, they'd decided to take other things from me.

"I see," Hawk said, sounding like he really did see. "It's like that is it?"

"Like what?" My whisper was soft. I wasn't even sure I could speak louder.

"Do you have a place to stay, honey?"

"Sure." I tried to smile.

"Don't lie to me, Carrie. You're shit at it."

"Yeah. So I've been told." I took a breath. "No. I don't have a place to stay. I was sleeping in one of the warehouses and apparently didn't hide well enough."

"All right. Enough of this. I will take care of everything. I'll help you get back on your feet."

"I can't pay you. And I'm not sure what being a club whore entails, but I'm betting it's just what the name says. I don't judge, but I can't do that."

“Never said you had to.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. Probably exasperated with me. “Do what I told you. Take a long shower. When you get done, if you want to, lie down and take a nap. I promise no one will bother you. And, Carrie...” He waited until I met his gaze and held it. “I don’t expect payment. Just let me help. That’s payment enough.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:24 am

Hawk

I was in so much trouble as to not even be believed. I think I'd rather go back to prison than have to deal with the shit show in front of me. And I didn't mean cleaning up the dead bodies. I mean that fucking girl and her fucking big eyes and trembling lips with an apparent streak of badassness that was off the fucking charts. My cock was so hard right now the fucking room was spinning. And I felt like a fucking giant-ass prick.

Carrie was... ethereal. In some ways, she was so very innocent and timid, but after watching that fucking video feed Knight showed us? That woman was lethal. And a huge fucking question mark.

"Ain't never seen nothin' like that in my whole Goddamned life." Tiny sounded equal parts awed and terrified. "You found the third guy yet?"

"Yeah." Knight did something on the tablet in his hand and we watched as the third guy she hadn't mentioned stumbled through the fog. She'd sliced a wide arch over his abdomen with the knife she'd taken away from his buddy but hadn't been able to finish because one of the others had grabbed her again. He made it about a hundred yards before he was grabbed by someone out of the mist, his neck quickly and efficiently broken.

"Guy's done that a fuckin' time or two," Knuckles muttered. "Were you able to identify the bastard?"

Knight sighed. "I managed to blow up one image. Luckily, it was on the one HD

camera in this whole place other than ours.”

“That’s a good thing. Right?” I didn’t like the look on Knight’s face. It meant whatever he found we weren’t gonna like.

“You’d think, huh.” He shook his head as he tapped on the tablet again. A picture of the guy pulled from the cameras popped up. “Guy’s a ghost. Not in any database I’ve run it through. And I got access to the FBI and INTERPOL.”

“How’d you do that?” Noose sat up straighter, taking interest when not much ever made him look up from whatever handheld video game he was playing. Guy had spent the majority of his childhood in juvie before finishing out five years in a federal prison for the big boys. Once he got out and came to us, he buried himself in technology. Specifically, anything that made whatever game he was interested in at the time run faster and better.

Knight gave him a look. “Not for you, Noose. Fucked up as the system is, I like the world in a semi-stable place.”

Noose narrowed his eyes. “What’re you tryin’ to say?”

“That I’m not letting you anywhere near anything where you can cause havoc.” Knight pointed at Noose. “Got my eye on you, brother.” Knight was only half joking. The rest of us chuckled. I thought the whole thing served as a way of breaking the tension. I couldn’t be the only one wondering what kind of killer we’d brought into our midst. Suddenly, the nickname I’d given her earlier wasn’t nearly as funny. Hadn’t really been funny then, but sometimes you just gotta poke fun.

Knight continued. “Anyway, the point is, his image isn’t in any criminal database. On Torpedo’s orders, I reached out to Bones. Data, Zora, and Suzie were all over it, just like Prez said they would be.”

“And?” Torpedo crossed his arms over his chest, his feet apart. He looked every inch the grizzled biker president. Torpedo had earned his respect with me and everyone else when he’d first come here. He was hard but fair, and had a vicious streak when it came to protecting those he considered family. But he wasn’t my president. For me, Knuckles would always be the leader of Kiss of Death MC.

“And, they got a hit. I didn’t ask where or how, but the guy you see on the screen there doesn’t exist on paper. Anywhere.”

“Shit.” Gunnar scrubbed a hand over his face then the back of his neck. “Ain’t likin’ this.”

Knight looked from Knuckles to Torpedo. “Data suggested we talk to Rocket at Grim Road MC.”

“Black ops.” Bohannon muttered. “Rocket might be able to help. Every one of those fuckers was black ops.”

Bohannon and Torpedo stared at each other for a long time. The rest of us shifted nervously. I thought they’d make the call themselves, but, surprisingly, they both turned to Knuckles.

“What do you think, brother?” Torpedo’s gaze was steady on Knuckles.

There was a pause before Knuckles shook his head and took a breath. “Never hurts to have all the information.” He nodded to Knight. “Follow Data’s instructions. Let him put you in touch with Rocket. Were you able to find this guy before he took out the third attacker?”

“No.” Knight didn’t look happy about that either. “Not even a shadow.”

“Fog?”

Knight shrugged. “Maybe. Or the guy’s just that good.”

Knuckles looked at me. “I want your girl to see this guy. And I want to be there when you show her.”

That got my attention. “She’s not my girl, Knuckles. I just met her. Same as you.”

Knuckles snorted. “Right. She chose you and you let her. Now you’re stuck with her.” That got some chuckles all around.

“Look, I’ll protect her while she’s here. I’ll help her get on her feet or get somewhere she’s safe. I’ll even be her guard if you think it’s necessary. But I don’t think she’s a threat, Knuckles. She wants to feel safe, and I’m a big fucker.” I shrugged. “That’s why she chose me.”

“You ain’t as big as me.” Tiny grinned at me. “And I was standin’ pretty close to you, Hawk.”

“No one is as big as you, Tiny.” More chuckles.

“Look,” Knuckles continued over the ruckus. “I’m not telling you to hurt her, Hawk.” He gave me an exasperated look. “Make her feel safe. Let’s find out what happened to her. See if we can help her.”

“Hawk, in order to keep her safe, we need to figure out why a professional killer was tailing her. Seems like a hell of a coincidence that three random thugs attack her and a ghost appears to keep them from hurting her.” Torpedo’s voice was uncharacteristically soft, but I knew it was because the man was trying to manage me. To get me to do what he wanted. Truth was, I hadn’t considered Carrie might still be

in danger. “You think she’s being followed?”

“I think it’s worth finding out,” Knuckles replied. “Because if she’s got trouble on her tail, I want to know what kind before it lands on our doorstep.”

I nodded, understanding his concern. This wasn’t just about helping a woman in distress anymore. If someone was after Carrie, it could mean trouble for the club. “I’ll talk to her,” I promised. “After she’s had time to clean up and rest.” I kept my face neutral, despite the fact that my brethren were eyeing me with varying levels of amusement.

“Get back to her. Make sure she’s comfortable. If she’s homeless like she indicated, she’s probably in need of a meal and some actual rest.” Knuckles gripped my shoulder. “Also, I’m pretty sure she is your woman.”

“Knuckles --” I stopped myself. There was no point in arguing, especially when I wasn’t entirely sure he was wrong. Something about that girl had gotten under my skin immediately. I couldn’t explain it, and I didn’t like it. I also wasn’t entirely sure I could fight it. “I’ll get her settled and find out what I can.”

Gunnar laughed. “Man, you should see your face right now. Like you swallowed something sour.”

“Fuck off,” I muttered, which only made him laugh harder.

Knight tapped the tablet again. “I’ll update you when I hear from Rocket. In the meantime, maybe we should increase security around the compound. Just in case this ghost decides to pay us a visit.”

“We have to be careful here.” Bohannon glanced at Torpedo. “I’ve already doubled the prospects on guard, but this place isn’t secret. Every parole officer in the state

knows about this place.”

“The local authorities seemed to like that we’re keeping to ourselves.” Noose shuffled uncomfortably. “No one else wants us and no one from here has ever been rearrested.”

“I’ll keep a lid on everything,” Knight offered. “Main thing is to keep the noise down and control the camera feeds. I’ll keep an ear out on the dispatch center. If anyone is headed our way, I’ll know about it in plenty of time.”

“Go take care of your girl, Hawk. Get as much as you can before she goes to bed. Maybe while she’s eating.” I could tell Knuckles didn’t like having someone interrogate a woman who’d been hurt, but the fact was he had a whole club of people to worry about.

“I’ll get anything important from her, and I’ll be careful doing it.”

Knuckles gripped my shoulder. “Come with me.” Odd, but I followed him inside. Where the party had been in full swing before, now the place had quieted and all the club whores had gone to the basement of this building to the panic room. All the security, the compound, all the shit we had for Kiss of Death and ourselves -- all of it -- was because of Knuckles. Even from prison he protected us as best he could. The club had taken a dark turn those first few years, but Knuckles came through for us.

He led me to his office, and I took a seat in front of his desk. Knuckles braced himself on the edge and stared at me. He was the one who’d brought me here, so I wasn’t breaking the silence.

“Look, man. I’m sorry.” Knuckles popped his neck, looking uncomfortable.

“What for?”

“I’m going to need you to look after Carrie’s best interests until we’re sure of what happened and who that fourth man was.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not cruel, Hawk. Not unless someone really deserves it. But my instinct is to protect the club. I need you to make sure I consider Carrie in any decision I make after we get all the information.”

That surprised me. “That’s why you said she was my woman.”

Knuckles shrugged. “Fewer complications if there are problems. I don’t like deceiving my family, but I’m pretty sure I’m not far off the mark, so I’m not gonna feel too bad.”

“And if Knight finds something on her? If she’s deceiving us for some reason?” I was surprised at how much my heart rebelled at the mere thought of Carrie betraying us. Not for the reasons I thought, though. Much as I loved my brothers, we could take care of ourselves and our women. Carrie didn’t seem to have anyone. And a betrayal of my brothers would forfeit her life. I wasn’t sure if I was capable of sitting back and letting that happen.

“You think he will?”

“My gut led me to her, Knuckles. That instinct has never let me down. Not in prison. Not in life.”

“And?”

“My gut says she’s exactly what she says she is.”

“That’s good enough for me. She gets every benefit of the doubt. But I still want you to watch out for her. Don’t let any of us run over her if there’s trouble.”

“ If there’s trouble? You know Goddamned good and well there’s gonna be trouble.”

“You got me there.” Knuckles held out his hand to me, which I stood and took immediately. “Go take care of your girl. Let her know she made a good choice of a protector.”

“All over that, brother.”

“Hey. Before you go, I need your opinion.”

“Name it.”

“How would you feel about being sergeant at arms again?” That got my attention.

“How should I feel?”

Knuckles shrugged. “Completely up to you. Just know that you’re one of the few men left here I know and trust. You were exactly what we needed then, and I believe you still are.”

“You takin’ the reins back?”

“Up to Torpedo. That was the deal. But I don’t think it will be long.”

“Put me where you need me, brother. This is my family. I’ll go where you tell me to go.”

He clapped my shoulder and grinned. “Get on with you. Be careful with that one. I

don't think she'd stop at takin' your balls if you got fresh and she didn't want you to."

"I know it makes me more than a little crazy, but watching her kill those guys tipped me over the edge, Knuckles."

"You mean it wasn't her being covered in the blood of her enemies?"

I winced. "Heard that, did you?"

"It was a memorable exchange all around." I wanted to wipe the smug look off the bastard's face but was on the verge of grinning my own damned self.

"Are we all gonna take our women the second we see them?"

"Kinda looks that way, but my advice is to not fight it. Roll with it. Make her want to keep you around."

"I'm all over that shit."

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:24 am

Carrie

I stayed in the shower until the water ran cold, scrubbing my skin raw trying to remove every trace of blood. The hot water had helped ease some of the tension in my muscles, but my mind was still racing. I'd killed two men tonight. Two human beings who had lives and families and... I shook my head, trying to dislodge the thoughts.

They would have killed me. Or worse.

After drying off, I wrapped myself in one of the large, surprisingly soft towels and cracked open the bathroom door. True to his word, Hawk had left a small pile of clothes just outside the bathroom door. Women's clothes -- a pair of sweatpants, a T-shirt, underwear still in the pack, and socks. The sweatpants were a perfect fit, but the shirt was miles too big. After pulling it over my head, I inhaled deeply. Then I pulled the collar up to my nose and inhaled again. Definitely a man's. Didn't matter. I was grateful I had something clean. The soft fabric felt like heaven against my skin.

The bedroom just outside the bathroom was sparsely furnished but clean. A king-size bed dominated the space, with plain gray sheets and a black comforter. There was a dresser against one wall and a small desk in the corner. No personal touches that I could see. Was this Hawk's room? It didn't feel lived in.

My body felt like it weighed a thousand pounds as I sank onto the bed. It didn't feel right, sitting on someone else's bed without their express permission. Maybe he meant I should sleep on the couch? I left the small bedroom to a larger living room where an old sofa sat along one wall. There were no pillows or a blanket or anything,

but I honestly didn't care. I was too beat to care.

Since I had to get up anyway, I dug through the bag of stuff Hawk had left and found a toothbrush still in its packaging, so I took that and went to the bathroom to brush the gunk out of my mouth. The thought brought on a whole 'nother bout of anxiety.

I slumped against the vanity as I struggled to open the toothbrush and glanced at the mirror. Huge mistake. The face that stared back at me from the mirror was nearly unrecognizable. I was pale, with haunted, wild eyes. Lingering panic still had my pupils blown. My light brown hair was a tangled mess, but at least all the blood was out of it. I had avoided the mirror at all costs until now so I could only imagine what I'd looked like before.

"Oh God," I whispered, reality crashing down on me again. "What did I do?" I glanced at the clothes in the corner where I'd tossed them. They'd been torn and bloody and I'd tried not to look at them much before, but now I couldn't take my eyes from the pile.

I shook myself. "Get over it, Carrie. It's all over and done with. You'll never have to do something like that again because once you get home, you're never leaving." Except I didn't have a home. I'd left. And my father told me if I left, never come back.

A quiet sob broke free before I could stifle it. Two tears slid down my cheeks and I angrily dashed them away. This would not break me. It would not !

As the adrenaline continued to fade, exhaustion hit me like a ton of bricks. My body felt like it weighed a ton. I kept seeing the bloody clothes on the floor.

I gripped the toothbrush tightly in my hand, squeezing until my knuckles turned white. A faint voice rang in my head that sounded suspiciously like my father's

whispered, “Weak,” but I pushed it away.

“Bastard.” I didn’t hate my father, but he wasn’t an easy man. And he was definitely not easy on his children. Except for me. At least, that’s what he said. It never felt like he went easy on me, but I suppose, compared to my brothers, he had.

I shook it off. Had to. Just getting through the next few hours was going to be more than I could handle without hearing my dad’s voice in my head telling me how inept and disappointing I was.

Brushing my teeth helped me feel more human again, the mint taste replacing the coppery flavor still lingering. I shuddered, trying not to think about where that taste had come from.

When I finally made it back to the couch, I curled into a ball at one end, not even bothering to look for a blanket. Sleep claimed me almost instantly.

I jolted awake to the sound of the door opening. Disoriented, I shot upright, my heart hammering in my chest.

“Easy, Killer. Just me.” Hawk’s deep voice cut through the panic. He stood in the doorway, his massive frame blocking most of the light from the hallway. “Sorry I woke you.”

I blinked, trying to get my bearings. “What time is it?”

“Just after two a.m. You’ve been out for about three hours.” He stepped inside, closing the door softly behind him. The room was dim, the only lighting coming from the kitchen area over the stove.

I swung my legs over the side of the couch to sit properly. Not sure what to say, I

gestured over my shoulder to the bathroom. “I, uh, my clothes...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of them.”

“Do I...” I cleared my throat. “I mean, should I keep them? Like for evidence or something?”

Hawk snorted. “Nah. I can disappear those if you’d like. Probably the best idea anyway.” He crossed slowly to the couch and sat on the other side from me. “You up for a little talk?”

Instantly my hackles rose. I pulled my knees to my chest and focused my complete attention on Hawk. “Am I in trouble? Did you call the cops?”

“Honey, no one here is gonna call the cops on you. We avoid them at all costs.”

“Even if someone deserves it?”

“We take care of it ourselves.” He studied me for a moment, his gaze intense but not unkind. “You hungry? I brought food.” He gestured to a bag I hadn’t noticed before.

My stomach growled loudly in response, and I felt my cheeks heat with embarrassment. “I guess that’s a yes.”

Hawk’s lips quirked in a half-smile as he stood and moved to the small kitchen area. “Hope you like burgers. Not much else available at this hour.”

“Anything sounds amazing right now.” I watched as he unpacked the food -- two large burgers, fries, and some cans of pop. The smell made my mouth water. “Thank you.”

He brought the food over, setting it on the coffee table between us. “When’s the last time you ate, Carrie?”

I shrugged, unwrapping my burger with trembling hands. “Yesterday morning, I think? Maybe the day before.” Time had become a blur lately. I’d been focused on simply surviving to pay too much attention to anything else.

“Eat up, honey.” He set a pop on the coffee table in front of me. “I can get you something else to drink if you want.”

“No.” I grabbed the can and popped the top, chugging a good portion before swiping the back of my hand over my mouth. I started to set it down, but thought better and chugged the rest. Which was followed by an impressive belch.

I clapped a hand over my mouth, mortified. “Sorry,” I mumbled. I cringed and ducked my head. I wasn’t typically this rude. At least, I didn’t think I was. But I was so hungry, and the food smelled amazing, and the caffeine in the soda had gone straight to my head.

Hawk just chuckled, the sound rumbling deep in his chest. “Don’t apologize. Nice to see you’ve got an appetite.” He sat back in his seat and rested one ankle on the opposite knee. “Impressive range. Better out than in.”

I couldn’t help the surprised laugh that escaped me. “That’s what my brother Zach always says.” The memory made my chest ache. Despite everything, I missed my family. Well, my brothers, anyway.

Hawk pushed the container of fries toward me. “Eat. Then we’ll talk.”

The burger was like ambrosia, greasy and perfect. The fries were hot and salty, the best thing I’d ever tasted. I devoured the innocent sandwich and deep-fried potatoes

with embarrassing speed, barely pausing to breathe. When I finished, I wiped my mouth with a napkin and eyed the second burger.

“That’s yours too,” Hawk said, gesturing to a second wrapped burger. “I already ate.”

“You sure?” My stomach growled again, making the decision for me. I reached for the second burger without waiting for his answer and the big oaf grinned but stayed silent. I got the feeling he had something to say, but was holding back.

As I ate, Hawk watched me with a calculating expression that made me nervous. “What?” I asked around a mouthful of food.

“Just trying to figure you out, Killer.” He leaned back, his massive frame making the couch look small. “Where’d you learn to fight like that?”

I swallowed hard. “Told you. Six brothers and a hard-ass dad.”

“That explains some basic self-defense, but not the skill you used on the two men we found. Also, Knight found the footage and we’ve all watched you fight. You gave those guys every opportunity to run. It looked like you were begging them to leave. Even after you’d already handed them their asses.”

“Yeah. The harder I pleaded with them to leave, the less likely they were to go. I knew that, but I kept asking them to just walk away.”

“Also, there was a third guy.”

I started and I felt my cheeks heat. “Fuck. I forgot about him.” Yeah, my dad would be laughing at me so hard right now. Then he’d tell me how a girl was useless to him.

Knuckles raised an eyebrow. “Forgot? How do you forget a third combatant?”

I couldn't help but cringe and all the food I'd just consumed threatened to come back up. Typically, what would have followed would be a lecture to do any drill sergeant proud. After that, an epic beating disguised as training.

"I was focused on the two guys in front of me," I admitted quietly. I put my chin up because I would not cower in front of this guy. I couldn't afford to. Because, while he was being nice now -- they all had -- I didn't know these people. Also, this guy talked just like my dad. He used the same words. I could almost recite the coming beratement word for word. I knew better than to lie, though. He already knew I'd lost sight of the third guy, but he didn't know the full breakdown. I cleared my throat, trying to choke back bile. "I'm not sure I realized there was a third guy. It's all a blur, really."

Hawk nodded slowly. "That happens in a fight. Tunnel vision. But here's the thing -- that third guy? Someone else took care of him."

My head snapped up. "What?"

"Yeah. Knight found footage of a fourth person who snapped the third guy's neck after you wounded him. Clean, professional kill." Hawk leaned forward, his eyes intent on mine. "Any idea who that might have been?"

"No," I whispered, genuinely shocked. "I swear, I had no idea anyone else was there."

"You being followed, Carrie?"

I shook my head. "Not that I know of. I mean, I've been on my own for a few weeks now, moving around, trying to stay under the radar."

"Under the radar from who?"

I hesitated, looking down at my hands. I wasn't sure how much to admit to this guy. My whole life had been about secrets. It was drilled into me from the time I could talk that I didn't ever talk about family secrets with anyone. Ever. Under any circumstance. Now that I'd made a break from my father and my brothers, did that rule still hold?

"I..."

"You don't have to tell me everything if you're not ready. But I do need to know if there is a possibility someone's comin' to the compound after you."

I bit my lip, weighing my options. I didn't want to put these people in danger, and I didn't want to lie when they'd shown me nothing but kindness, but the ingrained secrecy had me hesitating to say much. "My father might be looking for me," I finally admitted. "He's... not a good person."

"What kind of 'not good' are we talking about?" Hawk's voice was carefully neutral, but I could see the tension in his shoulders. When I didn't immediately answer, Hawk asked another question. "Your dad. The one who taught you to fight like that?"

"Yeah." I shifted uncomfortably. "Look. You're going to have to bear with me. My whole life has been about secrets, Hawk. I want to tell you everything, but my entire being is telling me to shut the hell up and leave so I don't have to tell you anything."

"Just because you don't want to spill secrets you've kept your entire life doesn't mean you have to leave. But I need to know if there's a threat on your heels. A simple yes or no is fine. For now." There was a measure of kindness in his voice and expression, but also an underlying insinuation he'd expect more later. Either when trouble showed up, or when I trusted him more. I had a feeling the former would happen before the latter.

I took a breath. I'd left the family. While I didn't want my brothers in trouble, they hadn't exactly tried to help me. OK, so they had. Kind of. They always looked out for me and hadn't allowed our father to spar with me if they could help it. If Father was trying to teach me a lesson, one of my brothers would insist on doing the teaching. Unfortunately, Father stopped giving me his "lessons" when my brothers were around a few years ago. I owed my father nothing. Anything I'd gained in being able to defend myself, I'd more than repaid in sweat and enough blood to fill an ocean. No tears. Never tears. "My dad is... intense."

"If he's the one who taught you to fight, then yeah. I'd say he's intense."

"There is a possibility he'll come for me. I don't think he'd hire someone to kill me. He wouldn't trust my brothers to bring me back. Says they're too soft on me. No, if he decides I'm worth the trouble, if there is something he needs from me, he'll come to get me himself."

Hawk handed me a photo. It was a closeup of a man as he broke the neck of the third attacker. My breath caught. The photo was a bit pixelated where it had been enlarged, but there was no denying the man in the photo was my brother looking up at the camera. "You know that man." It wasn't a question because my expression, once again, gave everything away.

"Yes. That's my oldest brother, Victor." My heart pounded. "Did he follow me here? Did you see him?"

"This is the only image Knight found, and no one has been near the walls that anyone has seen."

"You might not see him," I said quietly. "All of them are good at not being seen. It surprises me you got this photo."

“Wouldn’t have except Knight pulled footage from cameras way the fuck away from where your brother was.”

Slowly, Hawk reached over and put his hand over mine. “You’re safe here, Carrie. No one’s getting to you unless you want them to.” The certainty in his voice was comforting, even if I wasn’t sure I believed him.

“You don’t know my father,” I whispered. “When I left, he let me. That in itself surprised me, but he also said if I left, I couldn’t come back. I thought that meant he’d leave me alone. I don’t think he thought I could make it by myself and the shit of it is, he was right.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“No, Hawk.” I took in another deep breath, my chest tightening with anxiety. “You don’t understand.”

There was a knock at the door. The knob rattled as someone tried to enter. They knocked again. “Hawk? You in there?”

“Christ.” Hawk scrubbed a hand over his face as he stood. He stomped to the door and jerked it open. “What.” The word was bitten out with anger and annoyance. I’d heard the tone many times throughout my life.

The man at the door glanced in my direction before turning his attention back to Hawk. “We’ve got a situation. Knuckles and Torpedo want her in Church. There’s been a development.”

“Church?” I squeaked out the word before I could stop myself. This wasn’t the time to draw attention to myself. I guess my dad was right. I was a complete failure. I couldn’t even keep my mouth shut when it could mean life or death. Because, as I’d

already told myself multiple times, I didn't know these guys.

"Club meeting," Hawk explained tersely, then turned back to the man at the door. "What kind of development?"

"Car pulled up, then disappeared. Knight says whoever it was knew exactly where our cameras were. Also managed to take a route that avoided other cameras away from the area like we caught the guy who killed her third attacker. We've got nothing except a glimpse of a dark sedan and the fact that there are no plates."

Hawk turned to me, his expression grim. "Looks like we're headed to Church. Can you walk, or do you need me to carry you?"

I stood quickly, swaying slightly as my head rushed from the sudden movement. I thought I hid it, but the look Hawk gave me said otherwise. Yeah. Complete failure. "I can walk."

Hawk nodded his head crisply and took my hand. "Stay close to me."

"What's Church?" I whispered to Hawk as we briskly walked from the room down the hall.

"Club meeting room. Usually just for members, but this is an exception." His voice was low. "Nothing for you to worry about. They have questions and will want answers. I'll be with you the whole time, but if there are any surprises, you might want to let me know now."

"Surprises." My chuckle sounded as bitter as I felt. "That pretty much describes my entire family, Hawk. My life."

We descended two flights of stairs and went through a series of hallways before

going down one last set. There was a man at the door. He glanced from Hawk to me, then nodded back at Hawk and opened the door.

Sounds of men talking filtered through the room as we walked in. Hawk still had my hand firmly in his as he took me to a seat at one of the tables in the room. Other than big, solid steel folding chairs and several folding tables, there was nothing else in the enormous room. We sat in silence. Several of the men glanced in our direction but said nothing. A group of men were off to themselves looking at a tablet one of them had, murmuring softly.

Finally, they all moved toward one long table at the front of the group and sat. “Carrie? Do you remember me from the gate?”

“You’re Knuckles,” I answered. “Hannah is your, er, old lady?”

“That’s right.” The corner of his lips lifted in a slight smile. “Good. Hannah told me not to give you my growly face and scare you off, so I’ve instructed Hawk to be your advocate since you seem comfortable with him. I tend to look at the overall picture instead of how my decisions might affect everyone and not just the club.”

“I don’t want to cause problems for you.” I looked around at the men in the room. “Any of you.”

Knuckles gave me a nod of acknowledgment. “We’ll get to the issues facing us in a bit. Right now, let me do some brief introductions.” He indicated the men sitting at the table with him. “This is Gunnar.” This man wasn’t as big as Knuckles or Hawk, but was every bit as intimidating. All these guys had the same hard look about them. It was kind of like my dad and brothers but more... feral? They didn’t seem at home in this setting for some reason, like they were uncomfortable with the windowless walls around them, even though the space was brightly lit. “He’s Hannah’s brother and my closest friend. Torpedo and Bohannon” -- he indicated two men on his other

side -- “are our president and vice president respectively.”

Torpedo picked up when Knuckles stopped. “Knuckles is in charge of the situation as it stands.” He addressed everyone, looking around the room. “Any questions, problems, solutions... anything regarding this matter, Knuckles will address.” Obviously, there was more going on than I was aware of, but I knew enough to realize the less I knew the better.

My insides twisted with nerves. These men were likely getting ready to discuss my fate and I was at their mercy. I was grateful they were at least letting me sit in to listen. Hawk still hadn’t let go of my hand and he squeezed harder under the table. Encouragement or a warning to keep quiet? I looked up at him and, though his expression didn’t change, he winked at me. I nodded at him, deciding my best course of action was to take my cues from him.

“Knight, our intelligence officer, has some questions for you.” Knuckles gestured to a younger man with a tablet sitting next to Gunnar at the head honcho table, as I thought of it.

“Carrie, I need to know about your brother Victor.” His voice was smooth and pleasant. It belied his full beard and shaggy hair, to say nothing of all the tattoos. His face was covered in them as was most of the skin on his arms I could see. Even the whites of his eyes looked like they’d been tattooed or colored in somehow. He looked eerie as hell.

“What about him?” My voice was barely a thread of sound.

“Did you know he was following you?”

I glanced at Hawk, who gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. “I... I don’t know for sure that he was. I didn’t know he was there until you showed me that picture.”

“But you’re not surprised,” Knight said flatly. It wasn’t a question.

“No,” I admitted. “Victor and Zach always looked out for me.”

Hawk stirred beside me. “More than your other brothers?”

I shrugged. “Victor was the most obvious. As the oldest he made it his responsibility to look after us all. Kind of like Father was the general, but Vic was the one leading the troops into battle. The others helped me, too, but they were more subtle. Things would just break in my favor and one of my brothers would always be there. Most of the time they still looked disapprovingly at me, but they still helped me in whatever way they could. Zach is seven years older than me, so we were kind of kids together. What little childhood we had. The others were teenagers when I was born.” I stiffened, sitting up straighter and snatching my hand from Hawk’s grip. That got me nowhere as he just reached over and snagged my hand again.

“Woman.” His tone brooked no argument, so I didn’t continue to try to get free of him. “Settle. We’re not gonna use anything against you. You’re not in danger from us.” He rubbed his thumb over the back of my hand under the table. The gesture seemed out of place for the big man, but if he was trying to calm me, that touch was working. The tenderness of it made my heart ache when I knew there was nothing to read into the innocent touch. I had to blink back tears because how sad was it I practically melted under Hawk’s simple caress?

I nodded and whispered, “OK.” He squeezed my hand again but didn’t let go like I thought he would. “I’m sorry.” Panic was beginning to overwhelm me and before I realized what I was doing, I shifted my hand and Hawk’s so I could grip his big hand in both of mine. I cringed to think about how sweaty my palms were. Another visceral reaction to my environment my dad would be disgusted about. “What I just told you about my family is more than I’ve ever told anyone. We don’t... share.”

“How about we start simple.” Knight smiled at me. With the tats on his face and the bright red of his eyes, he looked more than a little deranged. “What’s your last name.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “You’d think that would be simple, huh.”

“It’s not?” Hawk raised an eyebrow at me.

“No.”

When I didn’t elaborate, Knuckles spoke again. “Why not?” The demand in his question was clear.

“Because, I don’t have a last name.”

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Hawk

I couldn't help it. I barked out a laugh. Which wasn't the smartest move because everyone except Knuckles and Knight looked at me like I'd lost my mind. Carrie flinched. She tried to let go of my hand, but I held onto the one I had laced my fingers through.

"Not helping, Hawk," Gunnar muttered.

"You don't believe me." Carrie still tried to twist her hand out of my grip, but I held on tight. No way I was losing this silent war we waged under the table. If I was going to convince her to be mine, I had to make her understand I was on her side. Even over the club. That thought was so much of a surprise I nearly allowed her to slip out of my grip. Her hands were clammy, so she was hard to hang on to, but I managed.

"Sorry." I adjusted my hold on Carrie's hand, trying to reassure her. "Just not what I was expecting you to say, Killer." The second I uttered her nickname, I knew I'd shown my hand to the brothers. They'd know Carrie was mine without me saying a fucking word. I'd have to eventually make a loud and proud statement to the fact -- like getting her a property cut -- but for now, the silent meaning would work.

"Everyone has a last name," Knight said, his voice neutral but his expression skeptical. "Birth certificate, social security card, driver's license..."

"I don't have any of those things," Carrie replied quietly. "At least, not with a real last name on them."

The room fell silent. I could practically hear the gears turning in everyone's heads. Carrie's shoulders hunched slightly, as if she was bracing for an attack.

"Explain," Knuckles said, his voice surprisingly gentle.

Carrie took a deep breath. "My father is... well, he's paranoid about leaving paper trails. I was born at home. No hospital records or anything. I don't know if it was the same with my brothers, but I'm pretty sure it was. He taught us to be ghosts. To hide in plain sight. I shouldn't have been near the warehouses because there's always so many security cameras, but it was raining and cool and I didn't want to sleep in the woods again."

"Any idea why he had you living like that?"

"Only that he said last names and medical records and such are for people who need to belong to a system. He wanted us to be self-sufficient." She looked down at our joined hands and took a deep, trembling breath. "Saying it out loud sounds so fucked up."

"Why teach you to fight like you do?"

I shrugged. "He said it was for when society crumbled. That we'd need to know how to defend ourselves and our territory, but there was more to it than that."

"How much more?" Knuckles had his full attention on Carrie, and I wanted to slide her behind me for some reason. Knuckles wouldn't hurt her. He detested harming women for any reason.

"I know he's sent my brothers to kill people for him." She imparted the information so quietly I barely heard her.

“You’re gonna have to speak up, darlin’.” Gunnar kept his voice gentle but insistent. “We only want to know what we’re facin’ if they come our way.”

“I know --” she broke off and a small sob escaped her. “God, I’m so stupid,” she muttered as she wiped angrily at a tear tracking down her cheek with her shoulder. It made my chest puff up a little that she hadn’t tried to let go of my hand. In fact, she held on tighter.

“Look at me, Carrie.” We needed this information, but I didn’t want her to feel threatened or bullied. When she looked up at me, I reached out and brushed a tear from her other cheek. “I’ve got your back. With these guys. With the club. With your family if you need it. I will not let anyone hurt you because of information you give us. You’re not your father or your brothers. We’ve all been judged at one time or another, so we’re not gonna automatically say you’re guilty by association.”

“My father would kill me if he were here now,” she confessed softly.

“He’s not here. And if he was, I’d eliminate the threat.” My reply came without hesitation. Not only did I want Carrie to understand I meant business, but my brothers needed to understand as well. And pass it on to any motherfucker who’d fallen in love with her when she’d walked out of the fucking fog covered in the blood of her enemies. I nearly smiled at the memory. She’d liked the phrasing then, but I didn’t think she’d appreciate it now.

Her eyes widened. “You’d kill him for me?”

“Without hesitation. You say he needs killin’, I’m all over that shit.” I saw Knuckles shift, but a quick glance in his and the other officers’ direction told me they were all hiding smiles. Yeah. They knew. Killing wasn’t something we took lightly since every single one of us had done time and had no desire to go back, but they weren’t laughing at that. They were laughing at me. Because I’d laughed at both of them, and

had done the exact same thing I'd made fun of them for. I'd fallen in love with a woman at first sight. Yeah. That wasn't going away any time soon.

Carrie was silent for a long moment, then she nodded. "I believe you."

"Good." I smiled at her. "Tell me what I need to know."

She took a deep breath, seeming to gather her courage before taking the plunge. "My father trained me since I could walk. I don't know how long he did my brothers, but I'm pretty sure it was all the same. All his kids are trained to kill. He has connections. Scary connections. I don't know who they are exactly, but they're all the kind of people who can, and do, make others disappear on the regular, including my father. Especially my father. My brothers are his soldiers. Victor is the most independent of the bunch. He doesn't always follow orders blindly and the others will usually follow his lead. He's protective of all his siblings and always weighs his chances of success against the risks. I've heard him and my brothers planning to make changes to the strict protocols my father tried to make them follow on a mission. Vic puts the team above the mission."

"Which is why he might be protecting you instead of dragging you back," Knuckles mused.

"Yes. Maybe." Carrie's voice trembled slightly. "But if my father decides he wants me back, he'll come himself or send a couple of the others. And they might not be as gentle as Victor or Zach."

"Your other brothers hurt you?" I couldn't keep the question back any longer. I had to know exactly how many of these fuckers I was gonna have to kill.

She shrugged. "Only during training, and never very much. They always pulled their punches. At least, that's what Father accused them of. They'd get rougher on me

when he pushed like that, but they still held back.”

“So Goddamned many people to fuckin’ kill,” I muttered. Carrie stiffened. This time, she yanked her hands away from mine, meaning it. Yeah. I knew she didn’t really want free earlier. If she had, it wouldn’t have mattered how hard I tried to hold this woman; she wouldn’t be touched by anyone she didn’t want touching her. Now, I got to see her temper in the flesh.

“You’re not killing my brothers.” Her gaze was fierce as she stood. I watched her quarter the room, assessing the men closest to her. I’d seen that look so Goddamned many times in the yard just before a fight.

Knuckles saw it too. “You’re good, woman.”

Carrie’s brow ruffled her brow in confusion. “What?” She shook her head. “I didn’t do anything.” She took another step back but hit the table behind her.

“Hey, honey,” I soothed, raising my hands so she could see them both clearly. “No one’s accusing you of anything.”

“Well, what am I good at? What did he mean?”

I smiled. “Well, not that you’re trying to deceive us, if that’s where you were going. He was complimenting the way you assessed the room. You were going to go for Tiny first. Then Pain. After that, I’m not sure who you were gonna hit, but I’m guessing me, since I’d be less likely to hurt you than anyone else. What I want to know is why Tiny first?”

She eyed me warily, like she sensed a trap but was ninety percent sure the bait was a free meal, but was still skeptical. Her gaze flickered from me to Tiny and back. “Because I can’t win this fight. He’s big. Like really big. Perfect name, by the way.”

She gave a nervous laugh, likely trying to deflect her nervousness.

Tiny grinned, not offended in the least. “Size matters, little lady.” That got a round of chuckles from everyone. It seemed to put her more at ease and she continued.

“Anyway, if I went low, I could take out a knee with a good solid kick inside. He’d go down and everyone else would hesitate just because of our size differences. The shock value would only be a couple of seconds, but I’m betting I’m faster than everyone here other than maybe him.” She pointed to Knight. Though still heavily muscled, Knight was leaner and not quite as tall as the rest of us. “But I’m also betting that, though he can fight, I can take him if it doesn’t matter if he’s dead or alive. So, get free of the compound, disappear into the fog if it’s still as thick as it was. If anyone catches me, Tiny is probably the only one here I can’t take one on one.” Carrie sounded so confident I had to grin. She might be timid, but she knew what she was about. “Unless I got a good jump on him, that is.”

“You decide you can’t handle her, Hawk, I’ll take the little lady.” Tiny had his arms crossed over his massive chest. The man really was huge. Like fucking huge.

“I can’t kick your ass hand-to-hand, but I can stab the shit outta you.” I let go of Carrie’s hand to drape my arm around her shoulders. That got a roar of laughter from my brothers. I felt her exhale a relieved breath and leaned in to kiss the top of her head. I was afraid she might flinch at the memory of her killing the men she had, but if it bothered her, she didn’t let on. At least, not much. Her hand went to her stomach just below her breasts, like she had a cramp right before she needed to hurl again but fought it back.

“All right,” Knuckles said with a slight grin. “Settle back down. Your woman’s a badass, Hawk. Get used to brothers tryin’ to coax her away from you before you put your property cut on her.”

“So, bottom line,” Knuckles continued once everyone had settled back down, “is that your brothers and father are badasses, and we’re not exactly sure what your brother, Victor, is up to but we should assume he’s here to either take you or kill you.”

“You’d know it if Vic was here to kill me.” Her softly spoken declaration sent chills down my spine. She believed what she was saying. “Vic is his right hand. The others are all good at what they do, but Vic is the one he sends when he wants someone to speak on his behalf and either doesn’t want to go himself, or if he believes there would be a threat to him.”

“And what about you?” Torpedo’s question was soft, and I didn’t think he was judging her, but I shot him a look just the same. He merely gave me a challenging glance before he turned his attention back to Carrie. “What did your father expect you to do?”

She shrugged. “Not much of anything, I don’t think. What I mean is, I never met his expectations. If anything, I think he planned on marrying me off to one of his associates.”

“To make an alliance.” Gunnar drummed his fingers on the table even as he frowned. “Doesn’t sound like something a man with so many secrets would want to do. Especially if you could give that associate information on him. What’s your father’s name?”

“His name’s Flagg. At least, that’s what I’ve heard people call him. We were never allowed to call him anything other than Father or sir. Flagg is all I’ve ever heard anyone else call him.”

“I’ll get that information to Data,” Knight said, tapping on his tablet. “I’ve got Rocket’s contact info. Do you want me to go to him directly or keep Bones in the loop?” He addressed this question to Torpedo.

The other man curled his finger over his lip, obviously thinking hard about this. "From here on out, cut Data off. Ain't tried to stifle your game, Knuckles, but I'm not comfortable getting Bones too involved with Kiss of Death."

"You knew what we were about when you agreed, Torpedo." It surprised me that Knuckles was talking about this in front of Carrie. We weren't talking about anything sensitive, but his willingness to pick this up with Carrie here told me he expected she'd be around for a long time. Manipulative, maybe. But it was yet another way my president was looking out for me. If he accepted Carrie, the others would too.

"I did. And as long as you ain't hurtin' innocents, I could give a good Goddamn what you do. My only concern was that you not fall into the same pattern Slash and Rat Man fell into. You guys are vicious to your enemies, but you don't kill or harm needlessly." He shrugged. "I can respect that. Bones has done its share of killin', too. They've done things on the wrong side of legal, too. But with ExFil getting bigger and coming under closer scrutiny, it's best if Bones goes the other direction."

"You afraid this is gonna come to a boiling point?"

"I'm afraid there's gonna be a lot of killin'. I'll be right there in the middle of it with you. But I'd prefer not to bring the fuzz to Ice and Cyclone's front door if I can keep from it."

Knuckles nodded in acknowledgement. "Understandable. Always believed in cleanin' up my own mess."

"Now, having said all that..." Torpedo grinned. "I'm pretty sure Grim Road MC is the club you want helpin' on this."

"I hear ya." Knuckles chuckled. "Spooks to catch spooks."

I glanced at Carrie. She looked like she was deep in thought, so I leaned in. “What’s goin’ on, Killer? Somethin’ buggin’ ya?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know what.”

“Tell me.” I put my full attention on her while Knuckles, Torpedo, and Knight did their thing. I could hear a few of the others offering input but I tuned it all out and focused on Carrie.

“Grim Road. I’ve heard that name before.”

“Good or bad?”

She shook her head. “I’m not sure. I wish I could tell you.” She frowned, trying to remember where she’d heard the name before. “Father wouldn’t have mentioned them unless they were a potential threat or ally.”

“Grim Road MC is a motorcycle club made up of mostly former black ops soldiers,” I explained quietly. “They’re extremely dangerous and extremely loyal to their own. If Knight can get their help, we’ll be in a much better position.”

Carrie’s eyes widened. “Wait. I remember now. Victor mentioned them once to Father. He said they were off-limits. Completely. Father was furious, but Victor wouldn’t back down.” She leaned closer to me, her voice dropping to a whisper. “That’s the only time I ever saw Father back down from one of my brothers.”

That was interesting. Very interesting. I caught Knuckles’s eye and gestured for him to come over. When he approached, I relayed what Carrie had just told me.

Knuckles’ eyebrows shot up. “Well, ain’t that something.” He turned to Knight. “When you contact Rocket, Knight, ask him if he knows either Flagg or Vic.”

Knight nodded and tapped at his tablet, his fingers flying over the screen. “Already done. I’ve sent him an encrypted message with the names and a brief summary of the situation.” He glanced back up at Knuckles. “Headed to my office to do this. I’ll give you an update as soon as I have it.”

“Good.” Knuckles stood. “I want round-the-clock lookouts by patched members. Keep the prospects already assigned guard duty with you. We sleep in shifts until this is over. Though, honestly, if he’s half as good as Carrie says, I expect he’ll get in without us knowing much.”

“I’ll know.” Knight gave an arrogant lift of his chin.

“Good.” Knuckles turned back to me and Carrie. “For now, you stay with Hawk. If your brother Victor is still watching, we want him to know you’re protected.”

“I really don’t think Victor would hurt me,” Carrie insisted. “He’s the only one who ever really stood up for me.”

I exchanged glances with Knuckles. Neither of us was convinced, but pushing her on this wouldn’t help. “Maybe so, but until we know his intentions, we play it safe.”

Just as he’d turned to leave, Knight’s tablet pinged. He glanced up at Knuckles who sat back down.

“What is it?”

Knight frowned at his tablet. “Rocket.” He looked up, his expression serious. “He wants a video call. Now.”

“Do it,” Knuckles ordered, gesturing to the tablet. “Can you put him somewhere we can all see him?”

“Yeah. Give me a second.”

Knight tapped out a few commands and the big screen TV along the wall flickered to life. Followed soon after with the image of a man with a closely cropped dark beard appeared. His eyes were sharp, assessing. I got the feeling he didn't miss much. The plain black T-shirt he wore molded his powerful arms and shoulders. Over his shirt, he wore his colors with his name and rank as president on the chest. Beside him, a fierce-looking blonde pixie stood with her hand on his shoulder. I noticed she also wore a vest, but instead of something like “Property Of” and the name of her man, the patches said, “Lemon” and “Vice President.”

I gave Rocket a questioning look. The other man raised an eyebrow and practically dared me to say something. Right. Not on my life.

“You're on the big screen, Rocket.” Knight held the tablet up so he was looking into the camera as he spoke. “Everyone can see and hear you.”

“Understood.” He sat back slightly, ready to start the conversation. “This is my vice president, Lemon. Any time there's a woman involved, Lemon is in on the conversation. While I know Flagg and Vic, I'm not familiar with Carrie, though I know of her.”

“Will you tell us what you know?” Knight was soft-spoken and delicate as ever. He had an arrogant streak with us, but he was always respectful when dealing with another club. He always said his job was to make them comfortable. Despite his appearance, Knight was an expert at putting people at ease.

“First, let me meet the young woman, Carrie.”

Knight brought the tablet to us and I took it from him, holding it so Carrie and I were both in frame. “I'm Carrie's protector,” I said by way of introduction. “This is

Carrie.” Carrie gave a small wave but said nothing.

Rocket stared at us for several seconds. Then his expression changed subtly. Had I not been watching so closely, I doubt I’d have seen the slight widening of his eyes or the tightening around his mouth. “Well, shit,” he muttered. “You’re Flagg’s daughter.”

“Yes.” Carrie’s chin went up and she put her shoulders back slightly. An expressionless mask fell over her face as she met Rocket’s gaze calmly. “I am.”

Rocket took a breath, closing his eyes as he held it in. Then he exhaled and put his hands flat on the surface in front of him. Lemon glanced his way before putting her hand over his. Rocket turned his hand over and grasped her hand in his. That told me I wasn’t going to like what he was about to say.

“Carrie, did you know your mother?”

I didn’t want to take my eyes from Rocket, but I needed to see Carrie’s face. That mask was still firmly in place, giving nothing away when before she’d been an open book. “No. She died shortly after my birth.”

“Your mother was the daughter of a mafia boss named Seth Miles. Flagg made a deal with him years ago that was supposed to unite his army and the Miles Syndicate. I knew her when my father was still alive and a patched member of Grim.” He glanced at his VP and she nodded at him. “One of my first missions as team leader was with Vic.”

“You know my brother.”

“I do. But your father doesn’t know. If he did, he’d be furious. Vic was supposed to kill me on that mission. Something about closing a trade route and rerouting it to

another port to shift the flow of money. I honestly didn't pay much attention past he was supposed to kill me." Rocket shook his head as he chuckled. "The point is, I don't think Vic is there to hurt you, honey. I also don't think your father knows where you are or Vic wouldn't have let anyone catch even a glimpse of him."

"I did think it was odd Vic got caught." Carrie's expression still gave nothing away. This was the woman who'd been so open before. Now it was like she'd closed herself off.

"It's exceptionally odd," Rocket agreed.

"Unless he intended for you guys to see him and show me."

"Carrie trusts her brother, Rocket," I said. "Should she?"

Rocket nodded his head crisply. "Absolutely. He might not show himself if her father was on to where she went, but he would always look out for his sister."

"What does she need to do?"

"I suppose that's up to you, Hawk." Lemon took over the conversation. "You said you're her protector. What's your gut tell you?"

I shook my head. "Well, I'm not gonna meet him on neutral ground. If half the shit Carrie's told us about Vic and the rest of her brothers is true, I'm not sure I'm comfortable meeting him at all."

Lemon raised an eyebrow, a grin tugging at her lips. "But?"

The chuckle bubbled up from my chest. I liked this woman. "But I think it's better to meet him now and figure out what the deal is."

“It’s what I would do.” Rocket leaned back once more. “I’ll reach out to him, assuming my information’s still good. I’ll tell him to show himself at the front gate, if that’s OK?”

Knuckles nodded. “Yes. We can work something out from there.”

“Good. If there’s anything else we can be of help with, let me know.”

“Appreciate it, Rocket. Good to meet you.”

“Same, Knuckles. Torpedo, Tell Venus and Piston we said hello when you see them.”

“Will do. Venus said to tell you she’ll call you in a few days, Lemon. Something about getting a ride together for the women from Evansville to Lake Worth and back.”

“Bitchin’!” The smile that split Lemon’s face was just shy of maniacal. “Pink Harleys unite!”

Everyone groaned. “Pink” and “Harley” should never be mentioned in the same sentence. Unless it had to do with pussy. Then they could be in the same sentence.

Knight broke out laughing as he ended the call. “I bet she creates more than a little havoc.”

“All right.” Knuckles stood again. “Got a feelin’ it won’t be long before we have company. Hawk, do you want a buffer between Vic and Carrie?”

“Might be nice. She’s not had much sleep. I could use a few Z’s myself. I’d like to be on top of my game when we face him.”

“Fine. Assuming he contacts us in the next couple of hours, me, Torpedo, and Bohannon will talk to him before we get you and Carrie. I’ll send someone for you when we’re ready. Until then, I suggest the two of you decide what you’re gonna tell him when he gets here.”

“What do you mean?” Carrie looked from me to Knuckles and back.

“If we tell your brother I’ve claimed you, I’ll need to get you a property vest ASAP. If you don’t want to do that, we need to come up with an excuse for you to stay here.”

She gave me a thoughtful look. “Yeah. I guess we need to get that straight.” Kid looked almost resigned, like she wasn’t sure her new life was going to be better than her last. I had news for her. If she let me make her mine, I’d treat her like a fuckin’ princess. And kill any son of a bitch who tried to take her from me. Including, but not limited to, her father and brothers.

Her willingness to discuss the topic was more than I expected. I kind of thought she’d balk at telling her brother she was going to be a biker’s old lady, and she might still. Also, she needed to know what I’d done to earn my place in Kiss of Death. We’d get to that. First, she needed sleep. And I needed to really think this through. Because if she decided she wanted to be my old lady, it had to be all the way. I’d done things in my life I wasn’t proud of, but I prided myself on keeping my word. If I pledged myself to her, if I took her as my old lady, I wasn’t letting go. I couldn’t. Because, for some fucked-up reason I couldn’t even imagine, the few hours I’d known Carrie were enough for me. This woman was my destiny, and I didn’t want to fight it. I wanted her to be mine. Once she was, I’d fight to the death to keep her.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:24 am

Carrie

As Hawk led me back upstairs, it felt like we were descending into chaos rather than rising from the basement. And yeah, my metaphors were all over the fucking place, but, dammit, none of this had been on my fucking BINGO card. I thought I was entitled to be a little discombobulated.

My hand was firmly in Hawk's as we headed into the main room. I let him lead the way and I retreated into my own thoughts. Which was my first mistake. Never take my mind off my surroundings unless I was sure I was safe. And definitely not when I didn't have both my hands free. So when the big-titted bleached blonde stepped up to me and lashed out with a stinging slap to my face, her long, pointed nails raking my flesh more than the blow, it caught me completely off guard.

I sighed, closing my eyes in humiliation. "My father was right."

"What the fuck, Kat?" Hawk was immediately between me and the other woman. The next thing I knew, he had his hand around Kat's throat as he slammed her against a nearby steel column. The other woman cried out, her eyes wide with shock and fear, her hands around Hawk's thick wrist as she struggled to keep her feet under her. Hawk turned his head to find me. I knew he was looking for me specifically because his gaze was wild until the second it collided with mine. "Are you hurt?" His tone was gruff and more than a little urgent. Like he actually cared if I was OK or not. Like I mattered. I'd never mattered before. Though some of them were protective of me, I always knew I was a weakness in the family. I never mattered to them. Not really. Certainly not to my father. The only reason he kept me around was in case he needed to trade my body to gain something he wanted.

“Only my pride,” I grumbled. I pointed at Kat. “You get that one for free. I blame myself for not paying attention.” I touched Hawk’s arm and pushed, needing him to stop touching the other woman. When he refused, his grip remaining stubbornly around Kat’s neck, I gave a huff. “If I’m gonna be your old lady, I’m gonna have to insist you not fucking touch other women .”

“She hurt you,” he bit out. “She dies.”

“Goddamnit, Hawk,” I snapped. “If you don’t stop touching her, you’re gonna be the one I stab.”

That worked. He dropped her like he’d been scalded, stepping back several paces. It was the only thing that cooled an ire I’d only been faking moments before. Yeah. Seemed I was a possessive bitch and I hadn’t even been sure I wanted the life he was offering, especially since I knew absolutely nothing about my surroundings other than the men here were all fucking huge. Seriously. If there was a place on earth that grew men this big, I had no idea where it would be.

The second Hawk moved away from the bitch, I stepped forward. “Hi, Kat. My name’s Carrie. I’m told my name suits me. Something about a movie and a woman named Carrie. I’ve kind of lived in a movie void most of my life so I have no idea what they mean. But it had something to do with me being... How’d you put it, Hawk? Covered in the blood of my enemies?”

“You’re full of shit, bitch,” Kat snarled, but I noticed she took a step to the side along the way and away from us. She rubbed her throat where Hawk’s hand had been, letting me know he had been serious about killing her.

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “But here’s the thing. I’ve had a really long day. I killed two men tonight. I stabbed them and broke bones and I even bit off a couple body parts.” Not completely accurate, but sometimes it’s the implication. “I’m tired, hungry, and

not a little bit horny. All of which add up to me not being in the mood for bullshit of any kind.” I stepped closer, lowering my voice. “I understand territorial behavior. You thought you’d mark what you considered your territory. I respect that. Since it was my bad judgment to not be aware of my surroundings, I’d go as far as to say I fucking deserved the attack. Unfortunately for you, even if he was yours to mark, he’s mine now. And I promise I’m a bigger fucking Alpha than you are.” When she swallowed, I took a step back. “I don’t repeat myself, Kat.”

Hawk’s hand settled on my lower back, a possessive touch that sent warmth through my body despite the confrontation. “Kat, you’re out. Go pack your shit.”

“What?” Her voice went shrill. “You can’t do that!”

“Already did.” Hawk’s voice was cold. A crowd gathered, watching the drama unfold.

“Goddammit,” I muttered under my breath, not believing what I was about to do. As the seconds ticked by, I decided maybe it wasn’t the worst idea. “Hawk. Stop.” I turned so that I faced him directly. “Don’t throw her out.”

“Give me one good Goddamned reason why not.”

“Because I don’t have a fucking property... thingie .” I glared over Hawk’s shoulder when I heard snickers from the men and women watching on.

“Property thingie.” He looked startled, like he was in a daze or something.

“Yeah. The thingie you guys said I needed so the club would recognize me as yours. This would have been avoided if we’d done something like that. Right?” More snickers.

“Thingie.”

“I think you broke him, Killer.” Knuckles gripped Hawk’s shoulder, chuckling as he pulled us away from Kat. I looked over my shoulder to find the other woman hurrying away. I honestly didn’t care if she left or not, as long as she didn’t touch Hawk.

“Jesus, honey.” Hawk picked me up so that I had to wrap my legs around his waist. He stomped to the stairs and didn’t break stride as he went up them, taking a few of them two at a time the closer we got to our destination.

He took me down the hall, back to the same door as before. I was surprised when he shoved the door open, marched inside and kicked it closed behind him. Then he turned with me still wrapped around him and pressed me against the door.

“A thingie.” His lips curved up in a smile that had my stomach doing flips. “I’ve got a thingie for you, all right.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but his lips crashed down on mine. The kiss was fierce, possessive, and had me melting against him. His hands gripped my thighs, holding me up as he deepened the kiss. I moaned into his mouth, my fingers tangling in his hair.

When we finally broke apart, both of us breathing hard, he pressed his forehead against mine. “You claimed me,” he whispered. “In front of everyone.”

“I did.” My voice was breathless even to my own ears. “I don’t know why. I barely know you.”

“You know enough for now. Besides, does it really matter?”

I found myself smiling. “You know what? No. It doesn’t matter. But there is something I need to tell you.”

“What’s that, Killer?”

I sighed. “That’s not going away any time soon, is it?”

“Honestly, Killer or Carrie. Either one will strike fear into the hearts of your enemies.”

“You’re laughing at me.” I tried to scowl at him but I couldn’t really commit. Had I ever had fun like this? This was the lightest conversation we’d had. Hell, it was the lightest conversation I’d ever had with anyone. Any small talk I’d done in the past had been to the benefit of my father and it hadn’t happened often. Because, as he said, I was shit at small talk and just made everything more awkward.

“Nope. I’m laughing at how fuckin’ much you turn me on.” He fastened his mouth on my neck, sucking until I squealed, squirming against him. The shock of the sensation made me thrash, and I tightened my legs around his waist.

“Fuck!” I sucked in a shocked breath. This was... unexpected.

“Carrie?” Hawk rumbled his question vibrated against my lips. “Tell me what you need, baby. You know I’m not gonna hurt you. Right?”

“I know.” My fingers in his hair clenched and unclenched, my body so tight with tension I could barely control myself. “I’m not scared. I wasn’t lying when I told Kat I was horny. But the thing is, while I know how to please a man, I’ve never had sex myself.”

“Your father intended you to be a virgin until he decided what to do with you.”

“Pretty sure I was supposed to be a negotiation tool.”

“You know we don’t have to have sex if you don’t want to. Right?” Hawk continued to feather his lips up and down over my neck. “Just let me taste you.”

“Oh, no, mister.” I moved my hands to frame his face and forced him to look at me. “You’re gonna fuck me. Because you’re who I choose.”

Surprise flared in his eyes. “I’ve got an insane attraction to you, Carrie, but if it doesn’t go the other way --”

I cut off his shit with a kiss, thrusting my tongue into his mouth and taking what I wanted. One hand slapped against my ass before he gripped and kneaded both cheeks with both hands. Then he slapped the other hand down on the other cheek.

“Fuckin’ perfect ass,” he growled against my mouth as his hands gripped my buttocks in a tight hold. “Can’t wait to fuck it.”

I was so fucked. I’d known Hawk would be more than I could handle, but I hadn’t counted on how much the difference would turn me on. He knew all the words to say to make me mindless and could be using it shamelessly to humiliate me or get something from me, but the sad fact was, I simply to God did not give a fuck . If Hawk could make me feel like this with just his kiss, the brush of his lips, and a bit of dirty talk, when he got down to business I was going to lose my fucking mind. Worth it. Totally worth it.

He carried me to the bed, laying me down with surprising gentleness given the fire in his eyes. The mattress dipped under his weight as he crawled over me, his massive frame caging me in a way that made me feel safe rather than trapped.

“You sure about this?” His voice was rough, strained with restraint. “Once I start, I

don't think I'll be able to stop." In answer, I pulled my shirt over my head, then unfastened the front clasp of my bra, baring myself to him. His sharp intake of breath sent a thrill through me. My nipples pebbled to tight peaks under his gaze and a glaze of sweat erupted over my skin. "Fuckin' perfect," he murmured, his gaze devouring me. He lowered his head, his mouth finding my breast, and I arched off the bed with a gasp.

It seemed like his hands were everywhere, rough and calloused yet gentle as they explored my body. Each touch sent sparks of pleasure racing through me. I tugged at his shirt, wanting to feel his skin against mine, and he pulled back just long enough to strip it off.

The sight of him, all muscle and tattoos and raw masculinity, stole my breath. That phrase had always seemed stupid ridiculous to me, but I understood now. When he let his weight settle over me and the light dusting of hair on his chest abraded my already sensitive nipples, my body clenched and I actually cried out, arching against him.

"Shhh, I've got you," he whispered against my breast before taking my nipple into his mouth. The wet heat of his tongue made me whimper. I'd never known I could feel this way. Desperate. Needy. Like I would die if he stopped touching me.

He held me to him with an arm around my back while he feasted on my breast. I loved the feeling of being tied to him, as if by keeping me so tightly against him, I could never get away from him. The strength with which I wanted this man was at once intoxicating and so very frightening I wasn't at all sure I should let him continue. But the sad truth was, even if he killed me or, worse, ridiculed me later or hurt me in some other way, there was no way I was missing out on what my body hinted was yet to come. No fucking way in hell. I wanted this, even if it was just this once. I was going to take this memory and cling to it as one perfect moment in my life.

Hawk slid his hands down my sides to the waistband of the pants. “Let me see all of you,” he murmured, his eyes dark with desire as he slowly peeled them down my legs. I lifted my hips to help him. The look of hunger in his gaze as it traveled the length of my body was strangely powerful despite my vulnerability.

When I was completely naked beneath him, he sat back on his heels, just looking at me. “Christ, you’re beautiful.” His voice was reverent, almost awed. Then he frowned, tracing his fingers over a sore spot on my side, and I glanced down my body. A reddish bruise was darkening my skin, but aside from a slight soreness there was no pain. “Can’t say I like this sight.” He leaned down and kissed the discolored area, trailing his lips all over it before moving back up my body. “Or this.” Hawk moved his lips over the scratches on my face. I had no idea how bad they were, but there was a slight sting as he brushed my cheek.

“They’re nothing, Hawk. I swear.” I arched my neck, wanting him to kiss me there, to lick and suck me. And yeah, I was a total pushover because the thought of Hawk putting his mark on me for everyone to see made me all kinds of hot. “Please don’t stop.”

I reached for the button of his jeans, suddenly impatient. “Your turn.” I fumbled with the button, brushing his cock. It jumped against my fingers and I jerked back, looking up at him, afraid I’d done something wrong.

He chuckled but didn’t move to help me. “Eager, aren’t you?”

“Of course I’m eager! You aren’t?” It was a stupid question, but the second I asked it, I had to know. Did he want this encounter as much as I did? “I told you I was horny,” I reminded him as I went back to fumbling with his zipper. My inexperience made me clumsy, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“Oh, I’m definitely eager, Killer.” Hawk moved to his knees and shoved his jeans

down his hips. He gripped his cock and gave it a couple of strokes. Moisture beaded on the head, and I knew I needed a taste. I had never actually had sex, but I'd learned what men liked. Usually in the form of porn. It was one reason I'd made the decision now to leave instead of earlier. My father had decided I needed more hands-on training, and I wasn't interested in going through anything like that. "So fuckin' eager I'm afraid I'm gonna blow before I even get inside you."

The gruffness in his voice and the way his gaze roamed over my body so possessively brought me back to the here and now. I licked my lips, my mouth going dry at the sight of him. He was huge, his cock standing proudly from a nest of dark hair. Nothing I'd watched to learn about sex could possibly have prepared me for the raw masculinity of Hawk's body or the way my own responded to him.

"I need you." My whispered plea was filled with an urgency I didn't even try to disguise. "Come here," I whispered, reaching for him, trying to make him cover me with that deliciously muscled and heavy body of his.

Hawk shook his head, a wicked smile playing on his lips. "Not yet, Killer. First, I'm gonna to taste you."

Before I could process his words, he moved down my body, his mouth trailing hot kisses across my stomach. My muscles jumped under his lips as he settled between my thighs, pushing them wider with his broad shoulders.

"Hawk --" My protest was cut off abruptly on a gasp as he pressed his mouth against my pussy. The first swipe of his tongue across my clit had me arching off the bed with a startled cry.

"That's it, baby," he murmured against my flesh. "Let me hear you."

His tongue circled my clit before flicking across it, sending jolts of pleasure through

my body. I'd never experienced anything like this feeling. The sensations were overwhelming, making me whimper and writhe beneath him as he devoured me like a starving man. His large hands gripped my thighs, holding me open and in place as his tongue worked magic between my legs.

"Oh God," I gasped, the tension coiling tighter and tighter in my belly. "Hawk!"

He hummed against me, the vibration adding to the intense pleasure. When he slid a thick finger inside me, I nearly came off the bed. He worked it in and out slowly, stretching me even more by adding a second finger while his tongue continued its relentless assault on my clit.

"So fucking tight," he growled. "Gonna feel so good around my cock."

The combination of his words, his fingers pumping in and out of my pussy, and his mouth on my clit sent me hurtling over the edge. My body convulsed as waves of pleasure crashed through me, my inner walls clenching around his finger as I cried out his name.

Before I could fully recover, Hawk was moving up my body, positioning himself between my thighs. The blunt head of his cock kissed my opening and rested there as Hawk kissed me over and over, sharing the taste of my weeping pussy with me as he thrust his tongue inside me over and over.

I grabbed at the bed sheets, needing to anchor myself against the onslaught of sensations. When he slid deeper inside me, the burn of invasion so intense it bordered on pain, I stiffened slightly, waiting for the pain I knew would come.

"Oh God, oh God," I chanted, my hips moving of their own accord, meeting him as he slid inside me with shallow pumps. The pressure building inside me again was unthinkable. I'd thought my first orgasm had sent me soaring. The one building

inside me now threatened to permanently tweak my gray matter. My entire body tightened, straining toward an all-consuming pleasure just out of reach.

“That’s it, Killer. Let go for me,” Hawk urged, his lips at my ear so his breath tickled my sensitive skin. “Come for me again. Let me have you.”

The orgasm hit me like a freight train. I screamed, my body convulsing as waves of pleasure crashed over me. Hawk didn’t let up, continuing to fuck me through it until I was trembling and sweating in his arms.

“Hawk,” I gasped, not even sure what I was begging for.

“I’m gonna fuck you now, Carrie. Gonna put my cum inside you. Then you’re mine. No going back.”

“I don’t care! Take what you want, just please don’t stop.” I hated how out of control I sounded. No doubt my father would add it to the long list of failures on my part, but I couldn’t find it in me to care very much. The only thing that mattered was taking as much as Hawk would give me. And doing my level best to make him feel as good as he was making me feel.

He pushed forward, burying himself to the hilt in one powerful thrust that had me gasping and gripping his shoulders, my fingers denting the corded muscles I found there. The momentary pain faded quickly, replaced by a fullness that made every nerve ending in my body sing. Hawk stilled above me, his massive frame trembling with the effort of restraint.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice strained.

Was I? I took stock of my body. There was still an intense burn, but there was no real pain. Besides, the little bite made the pleasure all the more intense. I nodded,

clutching his shoulders. “Yes. It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. Please don’t stop.”

That was all the encouragement he needed. He began to move, slowly at first, then with increasing urgency. Each thrust sent sparks of pleasure radiating through me. I wrapped my legs around his waist, urging him deeper by digging my heels into his ass. I wanted everything he had to give.

“Fuck, you’re perfect,” he groaned, his face buried in my neck as he pounded into me. “So fucking tight. So fucking mine.” God, he sounded so out of control and consumed in his own pleasure! Was there anything sexier than a man who’d just rocked your world taking his own pleasure from your body? If there was, I was hard pressed to think of anything.

The possessiveness in his voice triggered something primal in me. I raked my nails down his back, marking him as he was marking me. “Yours,” I said hoarsely. “And you’re mine.”

His rhythm faltered at my words, and he lifted his head to look into my eyes. The raw emotion I saw there stole my breath. “Never seen anything so fuckin’ sexy as the look on your face when you confronted Kat. I wanted to kill the bitch, but it was worth it to see her back down. You looked like a fuckin’ biker’s old lady.”

I wanted to smile but was sure it was strained. “That’s exactly the look I was going for.”

“Fuckin’ hot as hell, woman.”

I nodded, unable to form more words. Any lingering discomfort was already subsiding, replaced by that fucking ever growing need that seemed to have taken up residence in my body and refused to leave. I rolled my hips experimentally and we

both groaned.

“Fuck,” Hawk hissed through his clenched teeth. Sweat dotted his brow, and he shook his head with a growl. “You fuckin’ do that again and this’ll be over, woman.”

I grinned, feeling powerful despite being pinned beneath him. Tilted my hips this time, resting my feet on his calves. “Then fucking move, Hawk! I want all of you. I want your cum inside me like you said.”

That was all it took. Hawk growled deep in his throat and began to move in earnest, his powerful hips driving his cock into me with a force that had the headboard slamming against the wall. I clung to him, unable to do anything else, my body building toward another release.

“Fucking hell,” he groaned, his movements becoming more erratic. “I can’t... fuck, Carrie!”

I felt him swell inside me, and then he was coming, his hot cum flooding me as he buried his face in my neck with a guttural moan. The feeling of him pulsing inside me triggered yet another orgasm, and I shattered beneath him, my inner walls clenching around his cock as I cried out his name.

He collapsed on top of me, his weight a comforting blanket as we both struggled to catch our breath. We lay tangled together, both of us trembling and panting as we came down from our high. I wrapped my arms around him to keep him close when he would have moved off me. He nuzzled my neck, pressing gentle kisses to my sweat-slicked skin.

“You okay?” he murmured, his voice rough with spent passion.

“Better than okay,” I whispered back, trailing my own kisses over his neck and

shoulder. I loved his weight pressing me down after what was the most intense experience of my life. Even more than the killing I'd done earlier. Probably because there was nothing negative about this experience. The way Hawk was looking down at me now, like I was the love of his life and he never wanted to let me go, was a heady high.

"You're fucking amazing," Hawk murmured against my skin, his weight shifting slightly to the side so I could breathe easier, but he didn't roll off me completely and I didn't want him to. "Never felt anything like that before."

I laughed softly, running my fingers through his hair. "I'm pretty sure that's my line. You're the one with experience."

"Experience doesn't mean shit when it comes to this." He propped himself up on one elbow, his eyes searching mine with an intensity that made my heart stutter. "What we just did? That wasn't just fucking, Carrie."

I swallowed hard, suddenly nervous. "What was it, then?"

"Something I can't explain." He traced my lips with his thumb. "But I know I'm not ever lettin' go. Not lettin' you go. Not ever."

The conviction in his voice should have terrified me. We'd known each other less than twenty-four hours. This kind of instant connection only happened in movies or books, not in real life. Certainly not in my life. But instead of fear, all I felt was a bone-deep certainty that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

"Good," I whispered. "Because I don't want to go. Not ever."

Hawk smiled down at me, leaning in once more to kiss me. "I think that about covers the proper thingie, then."

I groaned, burying my face against his chest. “Are you ever going to let me live that down?”

“Not a chance, Killer.” He laughed, the sound vibrating through his chest. “Not a chance. That’s a story I’ll be tellin’ the grandkids. All fifteen of the little rug rats.”

“Fifteen grandchildren?”

“Yep. Gonna have at least five or six kids, by the way.”

“Do I get a say in this?” I couldn’t help but laugh, the thrill of this new life he dangled in front of me enough to sweep me up into a fantasy I wasn’t sure could last. Not that it mattered. I was going to hold on to the fantasy until it evaporated.

“Sure. It’s my job to get you to say yes.”

“And you think you can get me to say yes to six kids?”

He frowned down at me, but there was mischief in his eyes. “Hell no! What woman would actually agree to that right off the bat?” He shook his head. “Nope. My job is to get you to beg me to come inside you.” A slow smile spread his lips and the man looked positively wicked. “Over and over until you can’t help but get knocked up.”

I laughed until tears streamed from my eyes down my temple. Hawk had this satisfied smirk on his face like he’d won the best prize in the world. I cupped his face in one hand, stroking his beard. Hawk, the big gruff biker, leaned into my touch, practically purring in contentment.

“Never get tired of that sound,” he murmured as he kissed me once more. “Get some sleep.” He did a slow roll and brought me on top of him, his cock still firmly inside me. “I got a feelin’ Knuckles will send someone for us sooner rather than later.”

There was so much to think about, so much to plan. I needed to think about what I wanted to say to Vic. Would he try to take me home? Would he try to kill me? Those are the things I needed to consider, but all I found myself thinking about was how wonderful Hawk smelled. About how I loved those strong arms holding me tightly against him.

Fuck it. The future would take care of itself. I was living in the moment. That meant cuddling with the biker beneath me. Were the words “biker” and “cuddle” even supposed to be in the same sentence together? I had no idea. But this biker cuddled the hell out of me.

And I cuddled the hell out of him.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:24 am

Hawk

I held Carrie against me as she slept, keeping her tucked securely against my chest. Her breathing had evened out quickly after our lovemaking, and now she slept deeply, occasionally making little sounds that tugged at something primal inside me. My woman. Mine to protect. Mine to cherish.

The thought should have terrified me. I'd never been the settling down type, not even before prison. But something about Carrie felt inevitable. Like I'd been moving toward her my whole life. I still had to tell her about my prison stint. I admit to being slightly nervous when I'd always given a big ole "fuck you" to anyone who'd looked down at me for my past.

My cell phone vibrated on the nightstand. I reached for it carefully, trying not to disturb Carrie.

Knuckles: We got company at the gate. Your woman's brother is here .

I glanced at the clock. We'd been asleep less than an hour. Shit.

Me: Need 10. She's sleeping .

Knuckles: Take 15. But no more. Dude's making me nervous standing out there .

Me: Pussy

Knuckles: Asshole

I set the phone down with a grin and gazed at Carrie's sleeping form. She looked peaceful, vulnerable in a way she hadn't allowed herself to be since I'd found her. I'd be a Goddamned liar if that thought didn't make me feel ten feet tall and bulletproof. This woman trusted me. Me . I was determined to prove myself worthy of her faith. No matter who I had to kill.

Carrie stirred against me, her eyes fluttering open. For a moment, she looked disoriented, then recognition dawned. She smiled sleepily. "Hi."

"Hi yourself, Killer." I brushed her hair back from her face. "Your brother's here."

That woke her up. She sat bolt upright, her eyes wide. "Vic? He's here now?"

"At the gate. We need to get dressed." I watched her carefully, trying to gauge her feelings, but she'd closed herself off. At least, partially. I thought I saw a hint of anxiety in the tight line of her mouth. She couldn't lie worth a damn, but there were times when she was very adept at guarding her expressions. "Honey, if you don't want to do this, I'll take care of him."

"No." She sat up and smiled over her shoulder at me. I couldn't resist brushing my fingertips up and down the line of her back just to feel her tremble, and watch the chill bumps pebble her skin. The woman was the most responsive lover I'd ever had. "I'll talk to Vic." She hesitated a second, looking like she was debating with herself whether or not to say something else. "I admit, I'm more than a little nervous. I don't believe Vic would harm me unless he thought I was a threat to the rest of the family, but I also don't know what my father told him or what he believes."

"You mentioned you were the youngest of your siblings. How old are you, Killer?"

"Twenty-three. Older than I should be to be a virgin." Her smile was soft and full of amusement. "Thank you, Hawk."

I shook my head, frowning. "For what, honey?"

"For making my first time so wonderful. You can't imagine how long I've dreaded that act. But I chose you. And you let me." She stood then, not trying to cover herself. "It was glorious, Hawk. More than I ever imagined it could be."

My chest swelled with a satisfaction so deep I'd never felt anything like it. I'd gone from an angry, grizzled ex-con to a love-struck idiot in the span of a few hours. I knew my brothers would razz me unmercifully, but I couldn't give a fuck. Let them laugh. I was the one with this incredible woman in my bed. Besides, Knuckles and Gunnar knew. They'd gone through the same sprint to the finish line with their women. So, yeah. Fuck 'em. They'd get theirs. If they were lucky.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, Killer. Because that was just the beginning." I rose from the bed and pulled her into my arms, kissing her deeply. When she pushed me back, we were both breathing hard.

"Shower first," she said with a wide, satisfied smile. "We both smell like sex."

"Part of me likes that idea." My grin was unrepentant. "Let your brother know you're mine."

"Are you sure about that? All you know about my brother is that he's a better killer than me. What I've told you is the watered-down version. Mainly because that's what Vic gives me. Whatever he does I don't know about, you can bet your ass he's in a league all his own.

"Fine." I sighed dramatically. "Shower it is." Her merry laughter was the sweetest music I'd ever heard.

I followed her into the bathroom, unwilling to let her out of my sight. If this was all a

dream, I was playing it out until she called off. The bathroom was small but functional. It did have a large, comfortable shower. Most of us refused the bigger, fancier top floor apartments simply because we didn't trust too much comfort, but large, private showers were a luxury none of us had on the inside and swore never to do without on the outside. Personally, I found myself rethinking not wanting one of the bigger, fancier apartments. I wanted to give Carrie every comfort I possibly could, even if I was an ex-con with nothing to his name. Literally. I turned on the water, letting it heat up while I watched her move around the space, gathering the towels and shampoo Hannah and Pippa had thought to bring. God knew I didn't have that girly shit. Give me some good, clean Irish Spring or something and I was more than good.

"You're staring," she said without looking at me.

"Can't help it. You're fuckin' beautiful."

A blush spread up her neck to her cheeks. When she turned to look over her shoulder, I saw that the blush painted the tops of her breasts almost to the nipples. I had a moment to wonder if her skin would be hot to touch. "I'm not used to compliments."

"Get used to it." I stepped into the shower and pulled her in after me. "Because I'm not gonna stop telling you how perfect you are."

"I thought we were in a hurry?" She raised an eyebrow, a teasing smile playing on her lips.

"We are. That's why I'm offering to wash your back." I gave her my most innocent look, which probably wasn't very convincing.

To my delight, her face brightened into a glorious smile. "I think I'd like that." Instead of turning around, however, she stepped into my arms and laced her fingers behind my neck. With those absolutely magnificent breasts mashed against my chest,

her body mashed against my cock as she leaned up to kiss me, I was about to come against her soft belly. “How long do we have?”

I groaned. “Not fuckin’ long enough.” I wrapped my arms around her and urged her to kiss me again. “Knuckles said fifteen minutes, but I can probably push it to thirty.”

“You cannot push it to thirty, you asshole.” Knuckles’s voice boomed from outside the bathroom. Carrie squealed and let me go, taking up a defensive stance on instinct. I moved my body in front of hers as I stuck my head around the glass enclosure of the shower.

“The fuck, Knuckles? I told you we’d be down!”

“Fifteen minutes,” Knuckles repeated. “You have three left.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. Carrie looked like she wasn’t sure if she should be angry or amused. “Guess I can’t push it to thirty.”

“Damned straight you can’t! Move it!”

“What crawled up your ass, Knuckles?”

“Your woman’s brother. Water’s still runnin’. You’re down to two and a half minutes.”

“I never pegged you for the mother hen type, Knuckles.” Carrie raised her voice to be heard over the water and through the door, but I could almost see Knuckles’s face as if he were standing right in front of us.

There was a long pause and I thought Knuckles had left, then I heard him grumble, “That was cold, woman. Really fuckin’ cold.” Then his heavy boots thudded as he

left our apartment.

“Tell me I’m wrong and I’ll apologize!” she called out again, louder this time.

Knuckles hollered back, “Nobody likes that person, Carrie.”

Carrie burst out laughing as she turned me so I faced her. Her lips found mine, and she kissed me again, continuing to laugh.

I chuckled against her lips. “You’re gonna fit right in here, Killer. Come on, let’s get rinsed off before Knuckles comes back with reinforcements.” When we stepped out, I wrapped her in a towel before grabbing one for myself.

“I don’t have any clean clothes,” Carrie said, suddenly looking uncertain.

“Hannah must have sent something with Knuckles.” I nodded toward a small pile on the bed that hadn’t been there when we got up.

Carrie’s cheeks flushed again as she picked through the clothes. Simple jeans, a black T-shirt, and underwear. And her property vest. “Are you sure?”

“You ain’t backin’ out on me now, woman. I’ll still honor your decision if you don’t want to put this on, but I will do everything in my power to change your mind. Even if I have to crawl on my knees through broken glass.”

Her smile softened and she looked up at me. “That was beautiful.” Then that same, gorgeous, intoxicating smile turned positively wicked. “I can’t wait to tell Pippa and Hannah how poetic you are.” She leaned in on her tiptoes and kissed me once more before rushing to get dressed.

“I ain’t fuckin’ poetic. What the fuck, woman?”

I dressed quickly in clean jeans and a fresh T-shirt, pulling on my cut over it to the sound of Carrie's laughter. The familiar weight of the leather vest with Kiss of Death MC patches settled on my shoulders, grounding me. As I watched Carrie dress, a sense of possessiveness washed over me. I needed everyone to know she was mine.

I picked up the cut Knuckles had brought for her. I'm not sure how he'd got it made this fast, but I was grateful. "Turn around, honey." She did and I helped her into the vest. "This will let everyone in the compound know you belong to me. It'll also clue the club girls into the fact I'm taken.

"So this is what Kat was talking about."

"Yes. This is the property thingie."

"Revenge for the whole poetic comment?"

I just grinned.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:24 am

Carrie

I'd spent the majority of my life hiding behind baggy clothes and an invisible persona, so the idea of wearing something that so blatantly proclaimed my connection to Hawk made my stomach flutter with equal parts excitement and terror. The vest was black leather with "PROPERTY OF HAWK" emblazoned across the back in bold white lettering above the Kiss of Death MC patch. The front had my name on one side with "OLD LADY" on the other.

"How does it feel?" he asked, his voice rough with emotion.

"Like armor," I replied honestly. And it did. Despite the possessive wording, wearing this vest made me feel protected rather than owned. It was a declaration to the world that I belonged somewhere, to someone, and that I wasn't alone anymore.

"That's my girl." Hawk beamed at me like he was the proudest man in the world. And he was looking straight at me.

"When this is over, remind me to thank you."

"For what, honey?"

"For that look." I reached up and stroked his beard.

"Not sure what look you're referrin' to, but I'll do my best to give it to you all the time if I figure out what it is."

I couldn't stop the smile tugging at my lips, but it faded slowly. "Hawk."

"What is it, baby?"

"Please tell me you're real? That this shit between us is real?" I hated how small I sounded. I wasn't as good as my brothers or as smart as my father, but I wasn't weak. I could hold my own in a fight, I could think on my feet, and I was generally a decent person.

"Honey, what's this?" He brushed his thumb over my bottom lip. "We take a property cut seriously. You don't get one unless a brother's serious. I'm dead fuckin' serious, Killer. You're my woman. I will protect you with every fuckin' thing in me." Hawk framed my face with his hands, his eyes dark and intense. "You're mine, Carrie. Ain't lettin' your father or your brothers take you away from me."

"It's just gonna suck really hard if you decide this is more trouble than I'm worth and kick me out." I tried to smile and be flippant about it, but the thought really hurt.

"Never, baby. And I see it now."

"See what?"

"The false humor. How you keep your face blank when you're facing someone you're unsure about." He shook his head. "You don't do it with me, though."

"I don't?"

"Don't look so puzzled. I noticed it when you first came to the compound, but you were pretty quick to let me in. Once you did, you didn't try too hard to hide from me."

“I did, actually.” I shook my head. “Yet something else my father would be disappointed in me for.”

“Honey, I’m telling you, there’s a difference. When you’re facing someone other than me, your face is completely blank. There is nothing to read because you lock everything down. You look almost serene, but when it’s just us, you’re an open book.” Hawk kissed me once more. “Now. Let’s go meet your brother.”

Hawk took my hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze as we headed downstairs. Each step felt heavier than the last. My mind was a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. Part of me was desperate to see Vic, to know he was safe. Another part feared what his presence might mean for my newfound happiness.

The main room was oddly quiet when we entered. Men stood around, their postures tense, eyes alert. Knuckles approached us first, his expression grim.

“He’s waiting outside the gates,” he said to Hawk. “Says he’ll only talk to Carrie.”

“Not happening,” Hawk growled, his grip on my hand tightening.

“I expected as much,” Knuckles replied. “Told him you’d be with her.”

I swallowed hard. “What did he say to that?”

“He laughed.” Knuckles’ mouth twisted into a wry smile. “Said he’d anticipated that. He’s willing to come inside unarmed.”

“He doesn’t have to have a physical weapon, Knuckles,” I said softly. “He is a weapon.”

“Yeah. I know. It’s an inside joke.”

I frowned. "Inside joke?"

"Honey, your brother's not here to hurt you. He's here to make sure you're OK."

"You know Vic?" Now I was confused.

"Yep. Didn't know I knew him until I saw him outside."

"He's not mad?"

Knuckles shook his head. "I don't think so. Your call, Killer." Knuckles cleared his throat. "Do we let the bastard in or meet him at the gate?"

"Shit," I muttered. "Little above my pay grade." I looked up at Hawk. "But no. Until you're absolutely sure what Vic is here for, don't let him in unless you're prepared to fight him to the death. Because that's what you'll get if he doesn't get what he wants."

Knuckles snorted a laugh, then looked over his shoulder. "You hear that, Torpedo, you pussy? You owe me fifty bucks!" That got hoots and high fives all around while various items exchanged hands around the large room.

"The fuck?" I looked up at Hawk. "What just happened?"

"It appears you surprised more than a few of the guys." Hawk leaned in to brush a kiss over my temple before raising his voice. "That's my woman!"

"Y'all are crazy." What the fuck else was I supposed to say?

"You get used to them." Pippa hurried to my side with Hannah following close behind. "They're all pretty gruff and wouldn't hesitate to kill a motherfucker, but

they have a code.”

“Which is basically, leave our family alone and we let you live,” Hannah added with a smile. The guys were still talking over each other and settling bets. Apparently, more than one of them had faith in me. The ones who didn’t have that faith were taking their ribbing good-naturedly. “Family consists of everyone inside this compound. When you told Knuckles not to let your brother in, you proved you’d protect us the same way we’d protect you.”

“Was it really a test?”

“No.” Hannah laughed. “Knuckles knew before he asked you what your answer would be. He was just proving a point to Torpedo.”

I lifted a hand to stop her. “Not my business. I’d just like to talk to my brother, find out exactly why he’s here, then go back to bed.”

“I’m sure you’re tired, considering everything you’ve been through last night.”

“I mean, yeah. A little. But that’s not what I meant.” I gave the women what I hoped was a serious look. “I’ve discovered that I really, really love sex. The last place I want to be is here talking to my brother when I could be upstairs in bed with Hawk.”

Hannah choked on air while Pippa burst out laughing. “Oh my God, Hawk has his hands full with you, doesn’t he?”

“I sure hope so,” I replied with a wink, enjoying their reactions. It felt good to joke with them, like I was part of something. Like I belonged. This place was warm and welcoming while my own home had been cold and hostile.

Hawk came up behind me, wrapping an arm around my waist. “You ready for this,

baby?”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah. I’m ready.”

We walked to the gate as a group. Knuckles led the way with Gunnar on his left and slightly behind him while Hawk kept my hand firmly in his as we followed behind the other two men. The rest of the brothers hung back, but I could feel their watchful presence. They were ready to move at a moment’s notice if things went sideways.

As we approached, I saw him. Victor stood just beyond the gate, looking exactly as I remembered. Tall, broad-shouldered, his dark hair cut short, his face expressionless. But I knew him well enough to see the tension in his jaw, the careful way he held himself. The men acting as guards didn’t let Vic inside. Instead, Vic stood on the other side of the fence, waiting patiently.

“Vic,” I said, my voice steadier than I expected.

His eyes found mine instantly, and for just a moment, relief flashed across his features before he adopted a fierce mien. “‘Bout fuckin’ time, Knuckles.” He turned his gaze back to me. “You good, Carrie?”

“Yes.” I didn’t offer any more than strictly necessary, just like I’d been taught. I could tell Vic was frustrated, but wasn’t sure why.

“I said I needed to talk to her alone, man. You don’t keep your word?”

“Ain’t up to me.” Knuckles jerked his head in my direction. “She’s wearin’ Hawk’s property patch. He gets a say in her safety.”

Vic scowled. “She’s my baby sister, Knuckles. You know I ain’t gonna hurt her.”

“I know that because I know you, Vic. Seems your sister isn’t as sure of you.” When Vic opened his mouth, probably to tell Knuckles to fuck off, the other man cut him off. “She wants to trust you. Even told us how you watched out for her and that you wouldn’t always follow your father’s instructions if he ordered you to do something you didn’t agree with.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice when she and Zach were little. Our relationship is complicated, but I would never hurt Carrie, or allow her to be hurt.”

“She told me some about her training growing up.” Hawk sounded pissed as hell. He’d let go of my hand but stayed as close to me as he could with his body between Vic and me, a barrier to what he saw as a threat.

“Did I need to be as hard on her as I was?” Vic snapped. “No. But if I hadn’t pushed her, Flagg would have. Anyone he brought in wouldn’t have pulled anything and Carrie would have been seriously hurt. I taught her what she needed to know while appeasing our father.” Vic turned to me. There was real anguish in his gaze, something I’d never seen before. “I’m sorry, Carrie,” he said, taking a step forward until he gripped the iron of the gate separating us and him. “You deserved better than you got.”

“Father never wanted a girl. Girls are weak.”

Vic shook his head. “Not you, honey. I saw what you did. How you handled yourself. You gave those fuckers more opportunities to attack you than you should have, but I know you. You were trying to give them every opportunity to leave you alone and walk away.”

“Father says compassion is a weakness. If you let an enemy live, you’re inviting him to attack again.”

“I think you know Flagg is a fuckin’ dick.”

A small smile tugged at my lips. “Yeah. He is.”

“He wants you back, but I think I can convince him to let you walk away. If that’s what you want.”

“I don’t want to go back to him, Vic.” My voice cracked at the mere thought. It wasn’t that I was afraid of my father, though that was part of it. “I can’t lose what I’ve found here. This is what a family should be.”

To my surprise, Victor nodded. “I know Knuckles. He was one of my contacts inside the prison in Terre Haute. His word is unquestionable, Carrie. If he tells you something, you can bank on it. And if you’re claimed by a man in his club, Knuckles will make sure you’re protected. And you’re right.” Vic gave me a sad smile. “That’s what family should be.”

“I’m sorry, Vic. How mad do you think Father will be? I don’t want you to take the brunt of his anger.”

To my surprise, my brother snorted a laugh. “Don’t worry about me, honey. I’m actually counting on him being angry with me.” For some reason, that sent a chill up my spine. No one wanted to deliberately incur the wrath of Flagg.

“What have you done, Vic?”

“Nothing you need to worry about, Carrie.” Then Victor looked over my shoulder and addressed Knuckles. “In return for not razing this place to the ground because you kept my sister locked in here, I’m gonna need somethin’ from you.”

“You’ve lost your Goddamned mind, Vic.” Knuckles actually chuckled, though it

didn't sound pleasant. "I don't owe you anything."

Victor kept going like Knuckles hadn't said anything. "You can pay me back by providing a place for my brothers to lay low if they need it in the next few days."

Knuckles stepped closer to the gate. Hawk gently moved me away and stepped in front of me.

Knuckles crossed his arms over his chest. "Ain't lettin' the enemy inside the gates like some Goddamned Trojan horse."

"On my honor, Knuckles." Victor stuck his hand through the gate, offering it to Knuckles. "I only want a safe place for my brothers if things get too hot with Flagg. I'm getting ready to bring the house down on him, and I don't want them to get the blowback. If all goes as planned, you'll never know anything's going on."

"And if things go sideways?" Hawk took a threatening step forward.

"Then the city may get a little nuts until the power void is filled. Either way, no one will be looking in your direction. No one knows about our association other than me, you, and anyone you told."

"Which is exactly no one, until today," Knuckles said.

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it was necessary, man. And only for my brothers. No matter what, I will need to stay as far away from anyone I don't want scrutinized as I can."

"When do you expect things to start happening?" Knuckles reached out and accepted Vic's hand.

“Forty-eight hours.”

“The only phones and shit we have stays inside the compound. Give Knight your contact info. Any communication will need to go through him.”

“I’ll take it. Expect a call from me in the next three days. If I don’t, then things really went to shit.”

Knuckles stepped back. “Carrie’s safe here. If you need to send your brothers, they’ll be safe too as long as they don’t try anything funny to get Carrie to leave.”

“Unless she wants to leave,” Vic added before looking at me again. “Are you sure this is what you want? I’d feel better if you let me take you somewhere I know you’ll be safe.”

“If you could do that, Vic, you’d have done it years ago.”

Vic didn’t even try to hide his wince. “Yeah, kid. I’m so fuckin’ sorry for that. If I could have taken you away from him, I would have. But I was afraid he’d find you, and we wouldn’t be there to protect you.”

“We?”

“Come on, Carrie.” Vic gave me a pleading look. “You know we all love you. You’re our baby sister.”

“You and Zach, yes. I was never so sure about the others.”

“Flagg pitted us all against each other, but we older boys learned early on to pretend to be adversarial in front of him. But we’re all really tight. We tried to keep you out of Flagg’s notice as much as we could. The best way was to pretend to be annoyed

with you so you stayed out of his way. The downside was, you never learned to trust us like you should have been able to.”

“Father never really knew what to do with me.”

“Oh, he knew. He was saving you to marry one of his rivals. To make an alliance.”

“Yeah, not on board with that.” I gave him a cheerful smile I didn’t feel at all, but my sarcastic attitude sometimes got the better of me.

“Never figured you would be.” With a heavy sigh and one long look at me, Victor finally addressed Hawk. “You don’t treat my sister like the fuckin’ princess she is, I will end you.”

“You don’t think she can take care of herself if I’m not good to her?”

“I trained her. I know she can.”

“Then let me just tell you, when she came here late last night, she was covered in blood and was spitting out the remains of one of those bastard’s ears she’d bitten off in the fight. Trust me when I tell you, your sister can take care of herself when it comes to me. Anyone else she needs rid of, I’ll be the one to do it.” Hawk offered his hand to my brother. “I’ll guard your sister with my life. You have my word.”

“His word good, Knuckles?”

“He was my SAA before I went away. He did his time on the inside like the rest of us, but he’s solid as they come. All my men are solid or they wouldn’t be here.”

Vic took Hawk’s offered hand. “I’m holding you to this, Hawk.”

“You take care of your father. Then come back and let your sister know you’re OK.”

I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to feel, but I had the sudden urge to hug Vic, though I’d never done so before.

I stepped forward, ignoring Hawk’s attempt to keep me behind him. “Vic.” My voice broke on his name.

Vic’s eyes widened slightly. He glanced at Knuckles, who nodded almost imperceptibly, then at Hawk, who reluctantly stepped aside. The gate creaked as Knuckles unlocked it, opening it just enough for me to slip through.

I didn’t hesitate. I threw my arms around my brother’s waist and pressed my face against his chest. For a moment, Vic stood frozen, as if he didn’t know what to do with this display of affection. Then his arms came around me, holding me tight.

“Be careful,” I whispered against his shirt. “I just found a family, but I don’t want to lose my brothers.”

His hand came up to stroke my hair, the gesture awkward but sincere. “I’ll be fine, Carrie. I’ve been planning this for years.” He pulled back slightly to look down at me. “You know how Flagg always said I was his best student?” There was a glint in his eye I’d never seen before. “He was right.”

I nodded, not exactly understanding what he meant, but I knew whatever was going on, Victor would win.

Victor kissed the top of my head, and I knew it was time to let go. “Will I see you again?” The question slipped out before I could stop it, and I hated how childish I sounded.

“Count on it, honey. You’ll see all of us again. Soon.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:24 am

Hawk

Something in the early morning air... shifted. Every instinct I had in me said to hit the ground, but I couldn't see a threat. "Everyone inside. Now." I snarled the command before I thought better. I wasn't the SAA of Kiss of Death anymore, but the sense of urgency was so strong I couldn't stop the order.

As I turned my head, I reached out for Carrie. Her eyes widened in shock right before she launched herself at her brother. Carrie hit Vic hard enough for him to stumble back a full step. The steel post of the chain link gate next to where Vic had stood pinged with the sound of a ricochet.

"Sniper!" I wasn't sure who yelled out the warning, but everyone scattered. Vic rolled with Carrie through the gate while three prospects scrambled to shut and barricade the entrance. There hadn't been even a delayed retort so whoever was doing this had a suppressor.

Another shot hit the other side of the gate, almost like the first shot had missed intentionally when I was certain it had been meant to take out Vic. Once fully inside the gate to our compound, there was camo netting covering the alley-like streets between our warehouses. It wasn't where we needed to be, but it made it harder for our attacker to pick us off one at a time.

"We need better cover." Victor had Carrie pinned beneath him, his body shielding hers completely.

"A hundred yards behind you. Get Carrie inside the clubhouse." The interior of the

compound went dark a second later.

“The fuck!” Vic crawled over the pavement and dirt deeper into the canopy cover. “Did they cut the electricity?”

“No.” I led the way to the clubhouse entrance. “We did.” I knew Vic would understand it was to take advantage of the darkness. Once at the clubhouse entrance, I shoved Carrie inside. “Stay here. I’ll be back shortly.”

“You’re going hunting.” Carrie looked up at me with a mixture of shock and anger.

“I am. Stay here with your brother.”

“You know the sniper is Flagg, right?” Vic leveled a look at me.

“That’s what I thought, too, Hawk.” Carrie moved into my arms, and I couldn’t help but pull her close. She’d been so close to where the bullet had hit it took my breath. I hadn’t planned on holding her yet because I knew the urge to take her to the basement of one of the warehouses, wrap her up in my arms, and hide us both away from the world and any possible harm would be too strong to ignore. Spoiler alert! It was.

“We’ll know soon,” I said as I squeezed Carrie to me tightly. “Because I intend to bring whoever this motherfucker is back to kill him.”

“Not before me, you’re not.” Vic’s voice was calm, but his eyes were like steel. I’d seen that look on enough killers to know this wasn’t a debate we were having. Vic would do what he Goddamned well pleased, and I honestly didn’t blame him.

I hurried deeper into the clubhouse to the bar where Chains was readying weapons we kept locked away in a hidden locker. Several of them, actually. There was a weapons locker on every floor of every warehouse, all tucked away where they were safely

hidden. All of us were ex-cons, so guns were a hard no, but we had plenty of knives and blunt instruments we could legally have on the property and not go back to prison for. And, of course, we did have guns; we just controlled when they were brought out and who had access to them. Again, that had been my job and it was hard not to fall back into that role when it wasn't yet mine again. I picked a large hunting knife as well as brass knuckles, then turned back to Carrie.

"I want to go with you," she said, picking her own knife as well as two push daggers she tucked into the straps inside her vest put there for just this purpose.

"Not a good idea, honey." I motioned to Knuckles who was shouting orders as he stomped through the big front room. "Let me take care of this. It's what I do. I'll be distracted if you're with me."

"We've got to go now," Knuckles said. "Knight says he has him, but he's not sure how long he can keep from losing him." He tossed me a radio. "Prospects are gettin' our bikes. Me, you, and Tiny. Bohannon too. The rest will stay here to keep the women covered."

Knuckles looked Vic up and down. "You gonna turn on us if we let you go with us? If this is your old man --"

"He's a fuckin' prick," Vic bit out. "He's getting old and it's showing, but he's still dangerous. I can, and will, help you take him down."

"I've never known him to miss a shot," Carrie said, her eyes still wide. The lights were still out in the compound, but with the blinds pulled, there were a few emergency lights we had on while we prepped for a fight. "And he used a visible red laser guide. It's why I shoved you, Vic. I saw him target you. Why would he do that? And why would he want to kill you, Vic?"

“Because I’m the glue holding the others together. If I leave him, our brothers will follow me. He sent me to find you and bring you back, Carrie. He’d still have you even after he killed me.” Vic shook his head. “I led him right to you. It never even occurred to me he might follow me here.”

“I’m so over that bastard,” Carrie muttered. “Are you guys coming or what?” She stomped toward the door and I was helpless not to follow.

“Got your hands full with that one, mate.” Griffin was one of the most upbeat men I’d ever met. He’d also been through shit. I’d been the one who’d sent him to Kiss of Death after his stint in Terre Haute. I’d been with him in the same block, but a different wing. Guy had a knack for picking fights without even trying.

“Yep.” I clapped him on the shoulder and hurried after my woman.

As I stepped outside and situated the earpiece for my radio on my ear, I watched Carrie as she mounted my bike like she meant to take the fuck off. Jogging the short distance, I took the handlebar. “I got this, honey.”

She snorted. “Got your ass in gear, didn’t it?”

I barked out a laugh as I climbed on my bike. A prospect tossed us both helmets. We put them on and fastened the straps. “Remind me to spank your ass for that later, woman.”

“Only after we put this fucker down.” Yeah. Carrie was good and pissed now. I knew the feeling. But under the anger, there was a fear so bone-deep it brought me to my knees. Flagg had been aiming for Vic, but he could have just as easily hit Carrie when she lunged to push her brother out of the way.

I followed Knight’s directions as we sped through alleys surrounding our property.

There were several warehouses besides ours in the area. Knight had found the bastard at the far end of the warehouses next to the shipping yard on the Cumberland River. I knew the place well because I'd told Knuckles years ago when we'd first picked up this property it would be the perfect place for a sniper ambush. He'd agreed but then life went sideways and we weren't able to build a defense against it.

"There!" Carrie pointed to a figure sticking to the shadows. "What the hell is he doing?"

We were on the guy before I could answer. I couldn't positively ID the man in front of us, but if Carrie said that was Flagg I was taking her word for it.

Just as I was about to run him down, something hit the front wheel of my bike. The machine jolted, then the back end tumbled over the front. Me and Carrie both went flying.

I hit the pavement hard, rolling to try and minimize the impact. Carrie landed a few feet away, her body tucked into a ball as she rolled smoothly to her feet, taking up a fighting stance as she tossed her helmet to the ground. The training her father had put her through was showing its value.

"Carrie!" I shouted, scrambling toward her. Blood trickled down her temple, but her eyes were clear and focused.

"I'm fine," she called back, scanning the area. "Where is he?"

A sharp crack split the air and chunks of concrete exploded near my feet. I dove for cover behind a dumpster, pulling Carrie with me.

"He's got help," Vic's voice came through my earpiece. "Looks like Gage."

“My brother.” I glanced her way and saw a deep sorrow etched into her face. This was hurting her in ways I couldn’t imagine.

Knuckles and Vic continued on after the man on foot while Bohannon stopped to help us. The vice president fired his pistol back in the direction the last volley of shots came from. “Either of you hit?”

“We’re good.” I leaned around the dumpster, peering over the edge to get a fix on our attacker. Movement on the rooftop of the warehouse to our left caught my eye. A figure in dark clothing moved position to take another shot. “East side by the river. The weak spot, Knuckles.”

“I see him.”

“Don’t hurt him!” Carrie screamed. “Not yet!”

“Fuck,” I muttered. I’m sure Carrie needed answers, and I was going to give her everything I could. “Don’t kill the bastard yet, Knuckles. We need to know who it is. Carrie will have questions.”

There was a pause on the radio before Knuckles came back with, “No promises.”

“Carrie!” Our attacker addressed her directly. “It’s me! It’s Gage!”

“Vic said it was you.” Carrie’s voice was shaky. “You were always the rogue. Father always muttered about you being the only one he couldn’t predict. But I never thought you’d try to kill me for him.”

“Wasn’t trying to kill you. I was pushing you guys away until I could get your attention.”

“You shot at us!” Carrie yelled back, sounding as mad as she looked. “I’d say that’s trying to kill us!”

“If I’d been shooting at you, I’d have hit you. You know that.”

“What do you want, Gage?”

“Flagg wants you home.”

“I am home.” Carrie didn’t hesitate with her answer which made me more fucking proud than I could have imagined.

“OK.” He stepped into the light, his hands out as he slowly lowered his gun to the pavement. “That’s all I wanted to know.” I glanced at Carrie. Her jaw was tight. I could tell she wasn’t convinced of her brother’s change of heart. Gage seemed to know she wasn’t going to take his word at face value. “I swear it, Carrie. I knew Flagg had plans to get rid of Vic because he couldn’t control him. He thought he could control the rest of us if Vic wasn’t around.”

“Then who’s the sniper on the roof?”

“That’d be Flagg’s brother, Zeb Randall.” Gage stood there with his hands raised and out to his sides. “It’s him who wants you. Flagg’s just trying to get back in his brother’s good graces.”

“Randall.” I muttered. “Flagg and Randall.” Then added, “And Carrie.” I let the grin tugging my lips free. “Seems to fit.” If you know, you know.

“I got the bastard on the roof.” Torpedo’s voice over the radio surprised me. He was supposed to be back at the clubhouse, but I should have known the man wouldn’t sit this one out.

Knuckles and Vic approached us dragging an older man with them while he hurled obscenities and threats at both of them. Obviously, this Flagg wasn't happy with the situation. His mood wasn't likely to improve over the next few hours either. They'd zip-tied Flagg's hands behind his back so he was already hampered. It didn't take much to stifle his efforts to get away. Knuckles shoved Flagg to the ground. Vic kicked him over so he lay on his front with his hands at the small of his back.

Knuckles snagged his radio. "I ought to kick your ass, Torpedo. I might still if you didn't bring help."

"Griffin here. I got his back, boss. We can bring our guy to the cage if Tiny's got room."

"Always got room for one more." Tiny's voice held a wealth of humor. He'd brought an old Bronco for anyone we needed to bring back. Tiny was always ready when anyone left the compound.

"Vic." Carrie stepped toward her brother. "You got him?"

"Yeah." Vic spat on the ground next to the man on the ground. "Knuckles? Got someone who can take this piece of shit back to your compound? I'd prefer to just kill him, but this is your territory. Besides, I'm sure Carrie has questions for everyone."

"She does." I moved to stand next to Carrie, putting my arm around her shoulders. I didn't miss the slight tremor running through her body. "You okay, Killer?"

"Yeah. It's time to face my monster."

"Little whore," Flagg snapped. "You had one job and you failed. Should have strangled you when you were born, just like your mother."

“That’s enough.” Knuckles motioned for Tiny to help Vic get Flagg in the back of the vehicle. “We can sort everything in a bit. Is anyone hurt?”

“I think everyone’s good, boss.” Tiny heaved out a grunt as he tossed Flagg into the back. The older man yelped but Tiny didn’t apologize, a sure sign of how irritated he was. While the big man was a terror when he had to be, he was unfailingly careful of anyone smaller than he was. Well, except when he’d been my muscle on the inside. He’d killed more men on the inside than he ever would have on the outside and he’d had zero remorse.

“Meet us around the corner, Tiny,” Torpedo ordered over the radio. “You know where.” Everyone knew where the blind spots were on the security cameras. We were always careful.

“On it, Prez.” Tiny confirmed the order as Vic jumped into the back with Flagg along with Knuckles. “This oughtta be fun.” Tiny slammed the tailgate shut, then stomped around to the driver’s side, climbed in, and took off.

I turned to Carrie. She looked shell-shocked. Like none of this was what she was expecting. I wanted to get her home and away from everything to let her process, but I knew she wouldn’t want to wait. Less than a fucking day and I was already in tune with her. “We need to get back. You ready to ride?”

“That was... disappointing,” Carrie mumbled. “Not sure what I expected, but I thought it would be harder than this to catch him.”

“Christ, baby,” I pulled Carrie into my arms and held her tightly. “You took a header off the bike and you’re complaining the chase wasn’t exciting enough?” I kissed the top of her head. “Ain’t sure I could take your brand of excitement.”

Gage cleared his throat. He’d been standing on the edge of the group watching,

scowling at Flagg the whole time. “Father’s having a difficult time accepting that his control over us is slipping. He’s been making increasingly erratic decisions.” He looked at Carrie. “When you disappeared, he lost it. Started raving about traitors and how he’d kill anyone who helped you escape.”

“I didn’t escape. I left.” Carrie’s voice was firm, but I could feel her trembling against me. “There’s a difference.”

“Not to him,” Gage replied grimly. “Look, I know you don’t trust me right now, but I swear I wasn’t trying to hurt you or Vic. I was trying to get you to move out of Flagg’s line of sight so he wouldn’t take another shot at your man. He’s slipping, but I don’t see him missing a shot like that twice.”

Carrie was still for a moment before she nodded slowly. “I believe you, Gage.”

“I’m not asking you to trust me, Hawk.” Gage’s expression remained neutral, but his eyes were sharp, like he was assessing every movement I made. “You don’t know me. But Carrie does.”

Carrie looked up at me, her expression conflicted. “Gage was always... unpredictable. Father never knew what to do with him.” She addressed her brother. “Why? Why betray him now when you haven’t all these years?”

“Honey, as hard as you had it, it was worse for us boys. We all learned to cope and avoid a beating in different ways. I went along with him, doing what he asked when I had to. Other times, I mitigated the damage and worked out something I could live with.”

“We need to get back to the compound,” I said, not wanting to be out in the open too long. “Knight will have the place locked down tight, but I don’t want to take chances if there are more of your father’s men around.”

“There aren’t.” Gage said.

“Get in the back with Knuckles and Vic,” I told him.

“No.” Gage shook his head. “I’ll get in touch with Vic later, but I’ve got to let my brothers know what’s going on. There will be a power void in the city if we don’t move to shore everything up.” He paused. “I’m assuming Flagg won’t leave that compound.”

“No clue.” He absolutely would not be leaving that fucking compound. “Come with us and find out.”

“Let me check with Vic first.”

“Tiny.” I spoke into the radio, hoping the road captain could answer me. Should be an uneventful drive to pick up some passengers, but things were always easy until something went to shit.

“Yeah, Hawk.”

“Give Vic your radio.”

“Stand by.”

A few seconds later, I heard Vic’s voice. “What is it, Hawk?”

“Do you want Tiny to swing back by and pick up your brother?”

“No.” The response was immediate. “He needs to prepare for what happens next. Otherwise, it’s going to fuck with everyone’s business.” I knew Vic was being deliberately vague and I approved.

“He said as much. He’s leaving now unless you have instructions.”

“Gage knows what to do.”

“Copy that.”

Gage reached for Carrie, but I stepped in front of her, not wanting him near her. Carrie put a hand on my arm and stepped around me. “It’s all right, Hawk. I see it in his face. Gage isn’t going to hurt me.”

“You’re too trusting, honey.” But she still moved past me and into her brother’s arms.

Gage heaved a big sigh and hugged her tight, kissing the top of her head. “I’m so sorry, Carrie. We should have taken better care of you.”

“You guys weren’t much more than teenagers yourselves. You helped me when it mattered. All of you, though, I admit I wasn’t sure what to think of you guys. Half the time it seemed like you hated me. The other half like I was an obligation you had to do right by for whatever reason.”

“That was to keep Flagg from using you against us. We all adored you. Still do. But if he knew he could control us by threatening you, things would have been so much worse.” He let her go and I felt like I could finally breathe again. “Go on. Your man there looks like he’s about to lose his shit.” I growled but Gage just gave me a half smile. “Take care of my baby sister. I know where you live.”

“With my life,” was all I said. Then I urged Carrie to climb on Knuckles’s bike. Tiny would come back for mine and Knuckles wouldn’t want to leave his here in the meantime.

The ride back was short and uneventful. Thank goodness too because I wasn’t sure

how much more I could take. My protective instincts had kicked in big time. I wanted to hole up in a dark room with her for several days until I was sure nothing was coming for her again. Unfortunately, I couldn't hide us away. Not yet anyway. There was the matter of her father and uncle to deal with. And I sincerely hoped I got to kill at least one of the bastards myself.

Carrie

My father glared at me from the chair the guys had tied him to. The man next to him looked bored. There was no denying the resemblance. They looked exactly alike. They could be twins. Flagg was gagged and screaming angrily behind the cloth they'd stuffed in his mouth.

"God, what a whiner," Torpedo muttered. That surprised me. He had been more of an observer the few times I'd been around him. Of course, only one day here didn't really make me the leading authority. But the lessons my father had taught me stuck more than he probably realized. I might lack physical strength, but I wasn't stupid. My intelligence was a very strong weapon. I'd learned to read people. Just like Flagg had taught me. So, I knew Torpedo was angry as fuck without looking at him. His voice was just that little bit tight, and his tone had bite where I'd never heard him anything other than calm and even.

"You're not in a position to be a dick, Flagg." Knuckles went to the restrained man and backhanded him before taking out the gag. "Before you die, we have some questions. And by we, I mean Carrie. Whatever she wants to know, you're gonna tell her. You don't, then you piss every last motherfucker in here way the fuck off."

"Do you have the least comprehension of who I am?"

"I know exactly who you are. Zeb Randall. Partner of Seth 'The Hammer' Miles." Knuckles leaned against one of the steel posts embedded in the concrete basement floor. "What I don't get is how you don't know who we are."

“You’re a bunch of thugs! I own this city !”

“No. The Hammer owns this city. He’s had you running things here, but even if you were going to leave here alive, that’s changing as of about twenty minutes ago.”

“Nothing’s changing, Knuckles. I’ve already called Mr. Miles. He’s on the way and he’s not pleased.”

“Oh, I know he’s not pleased.” Knuckles cleaned one nail with the top of his knife. “Not pleased with a lot of things.”

“Knuckles? What the fuck’s going on?” A man who looked to be in his sixties descended the stairs to the basement. He was impeccably dressed, his silver beard short and neat. His demand was delivered without heat. In fact, there was an ice-cold look in those glacial blue eyes that gave me the fucking creeps.

“I’ll tell you what’s goin’ on, Seth. This dumb biker has kidnapped Carrie and is holding her against her will.”

“Which dumb biker?” Seth “The Hammer” Miles turned his gaze on me. This was the man who was my grandfather?

“That’d be me.” Hawk stepped solidly in front of me. He was always doing that when I was perfectly capable of taking care of myself.

“And you, Carrie? Are you here when you don’t want to be?” He sounded so reasonable when it was obvious I’d better answer correctly or there was going to be trouble. What I couldn’t figure out was how he was so confident when he had no muscle with him. Even if Miles was armed, this wasn’t a fight he could win. There were too many younger, stronger men, and he was in their lair.

“I’m exactly where I want to be. With Hawk.”

“He’s good to you?”

“I wouldn’t be here with him, wearing his property patch, if he wasn’t. And if he ever stops being good to me, I’ll leave his ass. Until then, though, I’m not going anywhere.”

Miles stared at me for a long time. He wasn’t as big as the men here, but he was tall and broad-shouldered. His appearance was striking enough that it was its own intimidation factor. A muscle ticked in his jaw as he looked down at me. “You’ll forgive me, my dear. I wasn’t aware of your existence until a few years ago.”

That got reactions out of Flagg and Zeb. Flagg was angry, but shiftier than I’d ever seen him. The more I watched him, the angrier I got. Just not for the reasons I probably should be angry.

“You’re lying!” I shouted, moving to stand in front of Flagg. Both Hawk and Miles moved to stay between me and the old bastard, but I managed to still be able to look him straight in the eyes. “You’re fucking lying, you son of a bitch.”

“I am not, you little whore!” He snarled. “You’ve ruined everything!”

“I’ve ruined everything?” The fucking nerve! “What exactly have I ruined?”

“He was going to dangle you in front of me for control of the air and seaports out of Knoxville, and with it about seventy percent of the cocaine and fentanyl traffic.”

Flagg’s mouth opened, but before he could say anything, Miles nodded. Knuckles swung one huge fist, connecting with Flagg’s jaw. That’s when I noticed the brass knuckles. Because, of course. When Knuckles stepped back, Flagg’s jaw was askew.

I'd never heard my father make that particular sound before. I found I liked it far more than I should.

Zeb Randall looked on in shock. Where he'd been so arrogant before, now he was sweating and trembling. "Oh, God."

"God can't help you now." Knuckles grinned as he cracked his knuckles. "And I doubt he'll be the one welcoming you where you're going."

"What did you mean when you said you didn't know about me until a few years ago?" The question was out before I could censor it, but once free I knew I had to have the answer.

Miles brought his attention to me, and I actually saw warmth there. Sorrow too. "A man I had working for Randall so he could report to me what was really going on, learned of you one of the times Flagg had to send for a doctor to see to your injuries. It took me some time to confirm you were my daughter's child, but I finally did. The same as I finally confirmed what really happened to my daughter."

Neither Flagg nor Randall bothered to say anything. I doubt they could do more than moan at this point. It was funny. My father, the man who was universally feared by his enemies and allies alike, who buried himself and his children so deep in anonymity and trained them to be assassins and elite soldiers, was whimpering, drooling and, I thought, might have pissed himself.

"You're nothing like what I built you up to be," I mused out loud.

"He's a shadow of his former self," Miles told me. "For three decades he's been my muscle. After my daughter passed, I never fully trusted him but could never figure out why. He gave me no reason not to trust him, but I blamed him for Margaret's death."

“Wait. Stop.” Chains held up a hand, like a kid in school asking for permission to speak.

“Yes?” Miles raised an eyebrow, an expression somewhere between amusement and annoyance.

“Her mom’s name is Margaret? You’re shittin’ me right now. Right?”

“Why would I make that up?”

Chains looked more uncomfortable than I’ve ever seen a man look. “Uh, no reason.” He scrubbed the back of his neck. “I’m just gonna, ah, I’ll be in my apartment, Knuckles. I gotta...” The man was actually pale.

“Yeah,” Knuckles sighed. “Go on. Superstitious little shit.”

Everyone roared with laughter. Well, everyone but Miles, Flagg, and Randall. The latter two were in misery while the former just looked confused.

“I’ve really got to watch that movie.”

Miles stiffened. “Movie?”

“Yeah. Apparently, there’s a movie named Carrie . Chains is freaked out by it or something. I’ve not watched it yet.”

To my utter surprise, Seth “The Hammer” Miles, criminal kingpin in charge of the region, burst out laughing. In fact, he laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks and someone had to get him a chair. He actually wheezed with laughter.

When he finally calmed down, Miles sat with his head down for several minutes.

When he looked up at me, it was with such grief and pain, but also a love so heartbreakingly deep it brought tears to my own eyes. “Your mother would have loved this story. I know how you came to Kiss of Death. The men you killed. All of it. I couldn’t get to you, so I drove you this way by putting people in your path who would help you get here. To these men.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because, when you left, I knew Flagg would be close behind you. What I didn’t know was how he’d started to lose his mind. He was always a mean son of a bitch, but I’ve been getting reports he was becoming worse.”

“Why would you just... give him your daughter?” I was on the verge of shattering. If this man had been so cruel as to force my mother into marriage with a monster, I wasn’t sure I could handle it. The thought was too much to contemplate.

“Carrie, I swear to you, I didn’t. Margaret told me she was in love with him. She begged me to allow it. I didn’t want her to marry him, but I wasn’t going to deny my only child what she wanted most.”

“Then what happened?”

Miles looked over at Flagg, then nodded at Knuckles again. Knuckles grinned, then hit Flagg again, this time on the other side of his jaw. Flagg tried to scream, but it came out more of a strangled gurgle. His jaw now hung loosely. Next to him, watching the whole thing with dawning horror, Zeb Randall looked like he was going to be sick and was pleading with Knuckles not to hit him all at the same time.

“She had a difficult pregnancy with you. Looking back, it was probably stress and anxiety. I didn’t know it at the time, but the abuse started a few months after Flagg found out Margaret was pregnant. She told me she was fine, that she was just tired

from all the vomiting and swollen feet and just being pregnant.

“Two days after she was ordered on bedrest, I got called overseas to... arbitrate.” He sidestepped whatever his reasons were, but that was OK. I didn’t want to know about his businesses or whatever. I only wanted to know about my mother. “Are you sure you want to talk about this here?”

“Why wouldn’t I? If you’re trying to get me to go with you somewhere to talk in private so you can take me away, you can try something else.”

“Honey, no.” He shook his head. “I just want you to have the option to hear this in private. Family matters are often sensitive.”

I thought about that. “Yeah. They are. But this is my family. They’re the ones having to live through it with me now.”

To my surprise, Miles nodded. “I suppose you’re right.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “He waited until he knew I was gone. Then he called in a doctor he paid to deliver the baby, then kill Margaret and make it look like an accident. He chose insulin.”

“Why didn’t the coroner rule her death a homicide?”

“Because they didn’t check for insulin since she wasn’t a diabetic, and her doctor was at her bedside when she died. I wasn’t there and no one questioned the doctor’s account of what happened.”

“What about me?”

“He told me you’d died with Margaret during the birth. Then he paid the funeral director and the doctor to file all the appropriate paperwork for a stillborn death, had

a closed casket for the child, then buried both side by side with a nice headstone and everything.” The longer he spoke, the more fury filled Miles’s face. He nodded at Knuckles again who punched Flagg in the crotch with those brass knuckles with what looked like all his considerable strength.

My father squealed over and over, crying and begging. I really should have felt bad, or been uncomfortable with seeing someone so obviously suffering, but I couldn’t really muster the energy to care.

“Took me years and years to find out differently, Carrie. The second I did, I reached out to Vic.”

That got a gasp of outrage from Father’s brother, Zeb Randall. “Vic? You betrayed us!”

“That’s rich. Coming from you.” For the first time, Vic joined the discussion. He reached out his hand to Knuckles who handed over one brass knuckle. Vic put it on his right hand, then hit Randall across the as yet uninjured side of his jaw. He now looked similar to Flagg. Sounded about like him too. “It was your idea to get rid of Margaret so you could groom her child to be the perfect pawn in your game. You could marry her off to create an alliance. She’d be wife and bodyguard in one. You’d program her to be subservient and obedient. Then you’d gain an ally as well as a spy in the home of your new friend.”

“After Vic and I had our little discussion, we put a plan in place to get you to safety.”

“Which we did.” Vic grunted as he punched Randall again. “Worked pretty good too, except I lost track of you just long enough for those punks to assault you. By the time I found you, you were already fighting them. I killed the one attacker you lost track of and did it where I knew Knuckles’s people would see me.”

“I don’t know you.” Knuckles took a threatening step toward Vic. “And you didn’t lead with the fact you were here with Mr. Miles’s knowledge.”

“I wasn’t sure what your relationship with him was, and thought it better to get Carrie to safety than to play nice before I was ready.”

I felt like I was in some sort of bizarre dream. All these men, killers, criminals, whatever they were, all plotting and planning around me, for me, because of me. I looked at Miles, my grandfather, then at Hawk, the man I’d chosen, then back at the pathetic creatures who’d made my life hell. “So what happens now?” I asked, my voice steadier than I expected.

Miles looked at me with those piercing blue eyes. “Now? That’s entirely up to you, Carrie. These men hurt you. They killed your mother. They stole your childhood. What do you want to happen to them?”

Everyone in the room went still, waiting for my answer. I felt the weight of their expectation, but also something else. Power. Real power, not the illusion of it I’d been chasing all my life.

“I want to say kill them, but I’m not sure I can do that. It’s one thing to not mourn their passing, but to actually say that’s my wish and wait for you to make it happen isn’t something I’m sure I can live with.”

Miles smiled at me. “Sweetheart, you don’t have to. They killed your mother, but they also killed my daughter.”

I thought about that for a long moment. My grandfather simply stood there waiting patiently. Then, finally, I made my decision. “If they’d do this to my mother and me, they’ll do it again. Maybe to someone who doesn’t have anyone looking after her like I did. Though...” I turned my gaze to Vic. “I didn’t realize I’m not your full sister.”

Vic shrugged. “Honestly, who your mother was didn’t matter to me. You’re our sister. We protected you the only way we could until we were able to get you out.”

“Where are the others?”

“Taking care of business back home. Gage went to help, but it will take all of them to put us in a position to take over for Flagg and his brother. They worked together, since they looked so much alike. No one knew they were dealing with identical twins. The family were the only ones who knew we were their private army. We kept the other families in Nashville in line for them. We also had to protect them both, so there was no keeping it from us.”

“Any other questions, honey?” Hawk was behind me, one arm around my waist, the other at his side within easy reach of that big-ass knife he had strapped to his thigh.

“Yeah, but not for them. I’m done with Igg and Ook.”

“What is it?”

I lifted my chin. “What’s your relationship with Knuckles, Mr. Miles?”

“Before things went sideways for him, Knuckles and Kiss of Death MC were my muscle. He helped me keep the city running smoothly, and I gave him the drug highway through the prisons in the area all the way to Terre Haute.”

“And this is where we take our leave.” Torpedo offered his hand to Knuckles, and Knuckles grasped it in a firm grip. “You’ve got your club locked down tight. You’re following the natural order of the land and helping keep the void filled so supply chains aren’t disrupted. Any killin’ you do is the same as all of us. You don’t kill innocents. Having said that, I don’t need to know your business now. I’m satisfied this will be what the city needs.”

Knuckles tilted his head. “Are you guys leavin’ then?”

“Yeah. You’re ready to take over and I hate the fuckin’ city.” Torpedo grimaced. “We’re only a phone call away if you need help, but we’re headed home.”

“I appreciate your help, brother.”

“Any man who’d go to prison to avenge” -- Torpedo glanced from Knuckles to Gunnar -- “or to protect his sister, is all right in my book. Because, sometimes, a man just needs killin’.”

“No arguments there,” Bohannon said with a grin as he extended his hand to Knuckles. “You’ve got a solid, loyal club. You’ll hear no complaints from me.”

Torpedo and Bohannon shook hands with everyone as they left. I felt like I should stay. See the end of these fucks, but I was done. I simply couldn’t handle any more.

I turned and wrapped my arms around Hawk’s neck. “I don’t want to be here anymore.”

Without a word, Hawk picked me up and headed toward the stairs. I wrapped my legs around his waist and buried my face in his neck.

“You’re not stayin’, Hawk?” That from Knuckles. “You’re SAA now, like we talked about.”

My heart sank. I couldn’t expect Hawk to step away from a duty he had in order to take care of my fragile emotional state.

“Yeah. I’m also Carrie’s man. She’s not up to the killin’, and I’m not sending her to our apartment by herself.” I waved a hand in the air. “Get Tiny to fill in for me. He

loves shit like that.”

There was a satisfying whimper from one of the brothers waiting to die. Don’t know which one. Don’t care.

“Go take care of your woman, you prick. She’s way more important than these sick fucks.”

“Yeah.” Hawk looked down at me. It was all I could do to keep from crying. This man loved me. It was there plain as day for anyone who could see. “She is.”

“You got a preference about these brothers of hers?” The question caught me by surprise, and I stiffened. Hawk rubbed his hand up and down my back.

“Yeah. They ain’t got no prison record, but if they want in, let ’em. Otherwise, put ’em in touch with Rocket. That’s my suggestion, for what it’s worth.”

“Any of your brothers who want to can work for me, Vic.” Miles held out his hand to Vic who took it without hesitation.

“Appreciate it. But I’m pretty sure we’ll all want to stick together. Once we get this mess cleaned up, we’ll sit down and have a long talk about what we want to do.”

“Talk to Knight before you leave,” Hawk said. “He’ll get you in touch with Crush and Byte at Grim Road. That way you know what all your options are.”

“Appreciate it.” Vic gave Hawk a courteous nod.

“Flagg’s territory is yours to run if you want it.” Miles waved his hand in a small gesture, like it made no difference to him what they did. “You can do so among yourselves, or join with Knuckles and work together.”

Vic shook his head. “We’re ensuring there isn’t a void left when Flagg leaves, but we have no designs on running anything. So if you want Kiss of Death to fill that opening, we’ll gladly assist with the transfer of power. I’ve got all the records and contacts organized. I can pass them to Knight for your officers to review when you’re ready, Knuckles.”

“You know my thoughts, Prez. But I’ll go with the majority.”

“Get on outta here, Hawk.” Knuckles waved his hand in my direction. “I’ll come talk to you in a few days. Get some rest. Both of you.”

“‘Bout fuckin’ time,” Hawk muttered as he took the stairs two at a time, me still clinging to him like a baby monkey. I might have looked ridiculous, but I didn’t fucking care. I needed out of that basement and the smell of blood, sweat, and urine. I needed a shower. Then I needed Hawk to make me forget my own name. “Hang on for a couple more minutes, baby. Then you can do what you need to.”

True to his word, two minutes later he opened the door to our rooms and kicked it shut. Everything inside me was suddenly free, and I cried out into Hawk’s neck. His hand came down on the back of my neck and pressed me against him while I raged.

When the storm passed, when all I could do was lie in his arms and let the tears slowly dry, I curled my hands in his shirt and took a deep breath. Then let it out slowly.

“I love you, Hawk. I love you.”

Hawk

Once the storm passed and Carrie settled into an exhausted heap against my chest, I picked her up and carried her to bed.

She looked so small, so vulnerable. The fierce, deadly woman who'd walked into our compound covered in blood was now curled up against me, her eyes red-rimmed from crying, her body trembling with aftershocks of emotion. The instinct to protect her, to shelter her from everything, was so overwhelming it felt like a physical ache in my chest. And I would absolutely answer that call.

"I've got you, baby," I murmured, stroking her hair as I settled us on the bed. "I'm not going anywhere." I held her close, letting her absorb my warmth, my presence, hoping it would ground her.

"It's so much," she whispered against my chest. "I don't even know how to process all this."

"You don't have to do it all at once." I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "We take it one day at a time. Together."

She lifted her face to mine, those beautiful eyes searching my face. "You're really in this with me? No matter what?"

"Carrie, honey, I was in this the moment you walked through our gate." I traced her cheek with my thumb, wiping away a stray tear. "Believe it or not, I love you, too, Killer." I tried to smile gently at her, but she was breaking my fucking heart. I never

wanted anything for this woman but laughter and complete happiness.

She gave me a watery smile that hit me right in the gut. “I’ve never had anyone who was all mine. Someone who chose me.”

“I choose you, Carrie. And I’ll keep choosing you every fucking day.” I leaned down to kiss her softly, wanting to convey with my lips what words couldn’t fully express. “I really do love you, Carrie. You’re it for me.”

Her eyes widened slightly, a fresh sheen of tears forming. “I didn’t think you’d say it back so soon.”

I laughed, the sound rumbling through my chest. “Baby, I think we both know this wasn’t exactly a slow-burn situation. When you know, you fucking know.”

“Yeah.” She snuggled closer, her hand finding its way under my shirt to rest against my skin. “I think I knew the moment you asked me if I was covered in the blood of my enemies.”

“For me it was when you spat out that piece of ear.” I grinned when she smacked my chest lightly. “What? It was fucking hot.”

That got a real laugh out of her, the sound washing over me like a cooling balm. “You’re a twisted bastard.”

“Damned straight. And I think you love it.”

“You know I do,” she murmured, her eyes holding mine for a long moment before she leaned up to kiss me softly. “I need a shower.”

“You want company?” I brushed her hair back from her face, searching for signs of what she needed most right now.

“Well, it wasn’t a request. I kind of expect you to just come with me.” She grinned. “You know. Like a good boy.”

Yeah. The sass was going to get her fucked good and hard. I got the feeling that’s what she needed and I was more than willing to provide.

I swooped her up into my arms, her weight a welcome burden. “I was just waiting for the invitation.”

She laughed, wrapping her arms around my neck as I carried her to the bathroom. “You never need an invitation for this. Never.”

“You don’t either, honey. I’m yours whenever you need me.”

“You’re going to spoil me.”

“Good.” I set her down on the bathroom vanity. “You deserve to be spoiled.” I turned on the shower, letting the water heat up as I helped her undress. My hands lingered on her skin, tracing the bruises forming from our tumble off the bike. “You’re gonna be sore tomorrow.”

“Worth it,” she murmured, her eyes growing darker as I touched her. “Every bit of it was worth it to get to here . To you.”

I stripped off my own clothes quickly, eager to feel her skin against mine. When I helped her into the shower, she hissed as the hot water hit her tender muscles, but then sighed as the heat began to work its magic.

I took my time washing her, my hands gentle as they moved over her body. This wasn’t about sex -- though my body certainly responded to her nakedness -- this was about care. About showing her that I would be there for all of it, not just the good times.

“Turn around,” I murmured, reaching for the shampoo. She complied, and I massaged the soap into her hair, my fingers working against her scalp. She moaned softly, leaning back against me.

“That feels amazing,” she whispered, her eyes closed.

“Good.” I continued my ministrations, rinsing her hair before applying conditioner. “Just relax. Let me take care of you.”

There was a bench along the back and part of one wall of the shower. Once I’d rinsed her hair, I moved us to the bench and sat with my back against the wall, one leg stretched out in front of me along the length of the bench, while the other foot rested on the shower floor. Carrie sat between my legs, resting with her back to my chest.

She pulled me down for a soft, slow kiss. I deepened the kiss, one hand coming up to cup her face. She shifted position so she straddled me, her slick body sliding against mine in a way that had my cock hardening instantly.

“I need you,” she whispered against my lips, her hips rocking against me. “Please, Hawk.”

I growled, my hands gripping her hips. “You sure, baby? You’ve been through a lot today.”

“I’m sure.” Her eyes met mine, clear and determined. “I need to feel alive. I need to feel you.”

That was all I needed to hear. I swiped my fingers through her pussy to find her already wet and needy. I lifted her slightly, positioning her over my cock before slowly lowering her down. We both groaned as I filled her, her tight heat enveloping me inch by inch until she was fully seated.

“Fuck,” I hissed, my forehead pressed against hers. “You feel so fucking good, Carrie.”

She began to move, slowly at first, her hands braced on my shoulders. I let her set the pace, watching her face as pleasure washed over her features. With her eyes half-closed, lips parted, cheeks flushed, she was the most exotic, sensual woman I’d ever known. And she was all fucking mine.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I murmured, watching her move above me. The water cascaded down her body, making her skin glisten. I couldn’t take my eyes off her, the way her breasts bounced with each movement, the look of pure pleasure on her face as she rode me.

Her rhythm increased, her breathing growing more ragged. I slid one hand between us, finding her clit with my thumb and circling it gently. She gasped, her inner walls clenching around me.

“That’s it, baby,” I encouraged, my other hand gripping her hip to help guide her movements. “Take what you need.”

“Hawk,” she moaned, her head falling back, exposing the elegant line of her throat. I leaned forward, pressing my lips to her pulse point, feeling it race beneath my touch. “I’m so close.”

“Come for me, Killer,” I growled against her skin, increasing the pressure on her clit. “Let me feel you squeezing my cock like you want my cum inside you.”

Her movements became erratic, her thighs trembling against mine. With a cry that echoed off the shower walls, she came, her body shuddering around me. The sight of her coming was the most erotic sight imaginable.

I gave myself the go ahead and pulled her to me, encouraging her to move faster until

I was slamming inside her to the sharp slaps of skin on skin. When she screamed again, I let loose, filling her pussy with my hot, sticky cum.

I held her close against me, both of us panting and shaking as the water continued to beat down on us. Her forehead rested against my shoulder, her breath hot against my skin. I stroked her back, savoring the weight of her in my arms.

“I needed that,” she murmured, her voice muffled against my chest.

“Yeah, I think we both did.” I kissed the top of her head, feeling more content than I had in, well, ever. “Water’s gettin’ cold. Let’s get you dried off and into bed.”

She nodded but didn’t move immediately, seemingly as reluctant as I was to break the connection we’d built between us. Finally, with a sigh, she lifted herself off me, wincing slightly as my softening cock slipped from her body. I stood and shut off the water, then grabbed towels for both of us.

After drying her off, I wrapped her in a fresh towel and led her back to the bedroom. She crawled into bed naked, her movements slow with exhaustion. I joined her, pulling her against me, her back to my chest. She fit perfectly against me, like she was made to be there.

We lay there in silence. I was too keyed up to sleep, and I thought Carrie was drifting but not really going under like she needed to.

“Hawk?” Her voice was quiet in the fading evening light shining through the open window.

“Yeah, baby?” I ran my hand along her arm, feeling her warm skin beneath my fingertips.

“Is it always going to be like this? Dangerous, I mean.”

I considered lying to her, telling her everything would be smooth sailing from here on out, but I respected her too much for that. “Sometimes. This life isn’t always easy, but it’s worth it for the family you get in return.” I pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “The club will always have your back, Carrie. I’ll always have your back. Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

“I’m not worried about me.” She turned in my arms to face me, her expression serious in the dim light filtering through the blinds. “I can handle myself. I’m worried about you.”

That caught me off guard. “Me?”

“You put yourself between me and danger without hesitation. Every time.” Her fingers traced the line of my jaw. “I don’t want to lose you because you’re trying to protect me.”

I captured her hand and brought it to my lips. “That’s what partners do, Killer. We protect each other. I know you can handle yourself. Hell, I’m pretty sure you can handle yourself better than me. But I’m still going to be between you and any danger if I can possibly help it.”

“I’ve heard...” She stopped and took a breath. “I’ve heard everyone here has served time in prison at some point in their lives.”

“It’s true, baby. Including me.”

“What happened?”

I knew this was coming and admitted to myself I’d been dreading it. I’d never been one to shy away from who I was, but with this woman, I didn’t want her to think bad of me.”

“Same as most of these guys. I killed someone. I was a young hothead. Got in a fight with some asshole in a bar. He got fresh with a waitress I had a crush on. She turned him down in front of his buddies. He smacked her.”

“Yeah, I don’t see you standing for that.”

“Nope. I slapped him back. Only he lost his balance and fell. On the way down he took the corner of the table to his eyeball, then hit his head on a concrete step. Took him a couple days, but he died. I was indicted for manslaughter.”

“Oh, my God! I’m so sorry!”

“I’m not. I learned two very valuable lessons. First, I had to get a handle on my temper. Second, don’t get crushes on waitresses unless you actually talk to them first.”

“Wait. What?”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yeah. I was a busboy. Right out of high school. Worked at a nearby garage too because I was a damned good mechanic, but the view at the restaurant was a sight better. Unfortunately, I wasn’t always the social butterfly you fell in love with. I was terrified of talking to her.”

“Wow. And you fought that guy for hitting her.”

I shrugged. “Wasn’t much of a fight.”

Carrie frowned. “I think I’m jealous of the bitch.”

That made me laugh. “Killer, you’ve got no cause to be jealous. Mainly because I’m so far gone on you, I turned in my man card the second I saw you. But also I saw you covered in the blood of your enemies. I’d rather you not be covered in my blood.”

She stretched as she giggled, the sound so content I wanted to puff out my chest. I'd done that for her. I'd made her happy.

Yeah. I was officially pussy whipped.

"Not something I planned on doing." She smiled and leaned up to kiss me again. "You're a good man, Hawk. I'm proud to be yours."

She nestled against my chest and her breathing gradually slowed and deepened as she drifted off to sleep.

The burner phone I kept on me in the clubhouse buzzed and I picked it up. Opening it, I saw a text from Knuckles.

Knuckles: All done .

So, Flagg and Randall were dead.

Me: Thanks .

I shut the phone and laid it back on the nightstand. Carrie mumbled something in her sleep and adjusted her position before settling back into a deep sleep.

I thought about what had happened over the last several hours. The club dynamic was about to change drastically. If we took over operations for The Hammer, it would mean more money for the club. There would be risks, but we'd use every resource available to minimize those risks.

There were lots of challenges ahead for Kiss of Death, but I knew we'd come out on top in the end. I also knew that we were gaining glaring vulnerabilities in our women. I also knew those vulnerabilities were in our having so much to lose. Not our women. They were all badasses. Carrie more than the others, but they could all hold their

own.

I thought it was fitting that the biggest warrior of our three old ladies was the woman of Kiss of Death's sergeant at arms. She was a fighter just like me. She'd be my biggest asset and my strongest supporter.

"God, I love you, Killer." I whispered the declaration against her hair. "So Goddamned much."

She tilted her head up and smiled at me. "I love you too, Hawk. I love you too."

I loved my life...