



Kingston (Angels Halo MC Next Gen #14)

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Category: Romance

Description: Demi stormed into my diner, nearly tore me apart, and then stomped away.

One look at that hissing little kitty and it felt like my heart was actually beating for the very first time.

Locking down the single mom wouldn't be an easy task. She was already beaten and bruised from a past that continued to chase her.

But I was going to prove to her that she could trust me with her heart.

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Chapter One

Kingston

Fighting back a yawn, I walked through the front door of Aggie's so bleary-eyed, it was a wonder I'd made the drive in one piece.

Morning shifts at Aggie's were something I avoided like the plague.

I normally worked lunch through dinner, cooking and prepping, then going over to Hannigans' and closing the bar with my dad, uncles, and cousin before dropping into bed.

I hadn't been asleep an hour when I'd gotten the call from my dad that our opening cook had called out and the guy who came in later in the morning wasn't answering his phone.

Which meant only one thing. My mom would be in there slinging hash, waiting tables, and a million other things to keep our diner running as smoothly as always.

But as long as there was air in my lungs, she wouldn't have to struggle.

Mom's needs outweighed everything else, including my own. Sleep was for the weak anyway.

Aggie's might look like a hole-in-the-wall, but we'd been voted as having the best food in five counties for the last two decades.

It was why we were the busiest food service business in town.

Tourists put us on their bucket lists when they did their cross-country drives, vlogging and TikToking, or whatever the fuck it was they did these days.

They kept us in the kinds of Yelp reviews that made Mom all giddy, so I wasn't going to bitch and complain.

"Don't rush or anything. Fucking starving here, but whatever," someone grouched as I stepped past the row of customers seated at the counter where Opal, our best waitress second to Mom, was pouring coffee for the old-timers.

They basically lived at the diner. Some walked in as soon as the doors were unlocked, coming and going throughout the day for another cup of Joe and whatever dinner plate was on special. Then they left when we locked up.

Those old men got information all over town before the local news could, before cell phones and the internet were a big thing, and they still did a better job of spreading the word than any social media site.

Lifting my eyes, I found my gaze catching on a heavysset man with a trucker hat pulled down low on his head.

His shirt was too small and didn't cover his ass crack as he leaned forward so he could try to stare at Opal's rack a little better.

He wasn't a local, but he wasn't unfamiliar either.

Otherwise, he wouldn't know that I was the cook.

Beside him, Fred, who I was sure was the oldest resident in Creswell Springs, sloshed

his coffee as he picked it up, spilling the hot liquid across the counter and onto the trucker's lap.

"Goddamn!" the trucker shouted, trying to stand as fast as he could, but that was hard to do, given the stools were bolted into the floor and his belly was bigger than Santa's on a cookie bender.

"Watch what you're doing, you stupid old fool. "

"Sorry 'bout that, young man. Parkinson's.

" Fred didn't sound all that apologetic.

It wasn't the first time I'd heard him use the Parkinson's excuse, usually to get out of trouble with a tourist who had wandered into the diner.

I wasn't sure if he'd accidentally—definitely on purpose—spilled his coffee on the trucker because of the way the motherfucker had been ogling Opal or for what he'd said about me hurrying.

Knowing Fred, it could have been either or both or something completely unrelated.

Old Fred was a wrong things for the right reasons kind of person, so I let him do whatever the fuck he wanted. Especially since he always looked out for my mom.

Opal unhurriedly mopped up the counter with her rag, pushing the liquid toward the trucker, who was still standing there.

Cursing half under his breath, he swiped at his clothes like that would magically alleviate the burning sensation, not seeming to notice the waitress was adding to the growing stain on his huge potbelly.

With her free hand, Opal poured a fresh cup of coffee for Fred, while his five friends continued talking as if nothing had happened.

It was still early, not even six thirty yet, but the booths and tables were starting to fill up.

It didn't matter what day of the week it was, we were rushed from opening to closing.

It was both a blessing and a curse to be the best of the best. Everyone wanted our food, and I was happy to feed them when I'd had enough sleep.

"Order up!" Mom called, placing two plates in the pass-through window that separated the kitchen from the serving area behind the counter.

Seeing her blond hair already coming loose from her ponytail, I picked up my steps. Her blue eyes widened then narrowed when she spotted me. "I told your father not to call you," she said with a huff when I entered the kitchen.

I crossed my hands over my massive chest, pausing long enough to attempt to give her one of those serious looks like she used to give me that made my skin feel all itchy and tight.

At five, fifteen, or thirty-five, I still felt like that whenever she turned that stern gaze on me.

But she was half my height, so dang tiny and precious.

There was nothing I wouldn't do for this woman.

I honestly didn't know how a woman so small had given birth to someone as big as I was and survived.

No one ever talked about why I was an only child, but given my size alone, I could guess that she'd had complications that had traumatized her.

And if not her, then definitely my dad. He loved her so fucking much.

If anything ever happened to her, it would kill him.

Maybe he'd begged her not to have more kids. I didn't know, because no one ever talked about it, and I'd never asked either of them before. Between work and all my cousins running around for me to play with, I was sure neither of them had minded that I was an only kid.

"If he hadn't and I'd found out you were in here all on your own, I would have been pissed, Ma."

Wiping her hands on her towel, she shrugged. "I've had to handle worse before."

Her answer only frustrated me more. Growling and grumbling under my breath, I shrugged off my jacket, tossing it onto the hook along with my other stuff and grabbing my apron.

"But you don't have to handle anything on your own now.

That's what I'm trying to tell you. You have me.

I'm here. Take a break. I'm going to start on the pancakes. "

"Fine. But only because I have to go potty." I couldn't help but smile at her when she said shit like that.

I was thirty-five years old, and she still used words like "potty" with me.

I helped my dad run a biker bar after I left Aggie's most nights and was a patched brother of the Angel's Halo MC.

Vulgar was an understatement for the kind of language we used at the club.

But my mother was a real-life angel, and no one could make me believe otherwise.

Pushing up my sleeves, I washed my hands and dived into the stack of orders waiting. I'd grown up in Aggie's kitchen, could walk around it with my eyes closed and still cook an entire meal without burning the place down. Aggie's brought me the kind of comfort home was supposed to.

"Hey Kingston," Opal called, and I looked up from the grill to glance at her through the window. "Demi is here."

I cocked a brow. "And I'm supposed to know who Demi is?"

"She's dropping off the pastries."

"Okay, cool." I flipped a row of pancakes before plating the next order for a platter with extra eggs. Setting the plate in the window, I called, "Order up!"

"Kingston," Opal muttered, looking annoyed as one of the other waitresses hurriedly grabbed the plate. "Demi is waiting."

"There's a display out there she uses," I dismissed, setting down fresh pancake batter. It was an endless cycle. I preferred cooking lunch and dinner to breakfast.

"She needs to be paid," Opal said as discreetly as possible, her face pinched.

My head shot up at that. "The fuck you say! She already got paid at the beginning of

the week. What kind of bullshit is this chick trying to pull?”

I was aware my mother had an arrangement with some single mother who needed a little extra cash.

She made decent-enough baked goods from what everyone who raved about the muffins said.

I’d never actually gotten to eat any of it, mostly because by the time I got to the diner, they were sold out.

Customers had been enjoying the extra goodies and they were aware those items weren’t made in-house, so I didn’t have an issue with it.

But I hadn’t thought much about it, really.

It was a mornings-only thing, and I didn’t work mornings.

What I did know of the situation was that Mom paid her suppliers and vendors on Mondays.

No matter what—and that included the single-mom baker.

That was something I was aware of because we were business partners, and I had to sign off on the books every month just like she did.

Since it was now Thursday, I knew that Demi, or whoever the fuck she was, had already gotten her money, and she wasn’t getting another penny until Monday.

Opal gave me a look like she was disappointed, shaking her head.

I didn't give two shits what she thought of me.

No one was going to take advantage of my mom.

“Tell her to take the fucking muffins and go if she wants to be a bitch about it. But she already got paid this week. This is a business, not a goddamn charity. And I sure as fuck won't be letting some cunt try to con my mom out of cash she didn't earn.”

Turning my attention back to the grill, I was just in time to save the eggs from overcooking.

Mr. Gregor was a grumpy bastard, and that only got worse if his eggs weren't perfect.

Eggs runny, bacon extra crispy but not burned, home fries heavy on the peppers and onions, toast light brown and not a shade darker.

Coffee as strong as an ox. It was the same order every morning.

I remembered him repeating it when I was five and pretending to take orders while I ran around the diner before school.

Aggie, who had been the original owner of the diner and the closest thing to a grandmother I'd had, used to tell me that it was the exact same order he'd had way back when the diner first opened eighty years ago.

“You're making a mistake, Kingston,” Opal hissed.

Without looking up again, I waved my spatula and then plated the eggs and bacon.

Turning with the plate in hand, I was about to grab the toast when something nailed me directly in the face.

Stunned by the surprise attack, I dropped the dishes in time to protect myself from the next foreign object that was aimed right at my head.

“Bitch?” Another missile was thrown at me.

“What the fuck?” I shouted, grabbing a frying pan and using it as a shield. “What the fuck! Are you crazy?”

“Con?” I got nailed in the chest. Whatever the hell-raiser was throwing didn’t hurt. I’d been shot more than once, and the impact of whatever I was getting hit with barely registered. But that didn’t mean it couldn’t, or wouldn’t, change.

“Jesus, you lunatic...”

Lifting the pan carefully, I took in my attacker. Her arm was already raised, what looked like.... Was that a muffin in her hand?

Once I was sure that it wasn’t a gun or a grenade or even a rock, I took in the woman herself.

Something uncurled in my chest, my heartbeat thumping in a way that suddenly seemed to vibrate through my entire body. All the air rushed out of me in a whoosh as a crackling of electricity lit up my veins.

Fucking gorgeous.

She was a little bitty thing, maybe five feet in shoes.

My mom was small, but even she had height on this woman.

In comparison, I was a giant to her, towering over her by at least a foot and a half.

Her long strawberry-blond hair, with its natural highlights of gold and red that caught the light, swung around her shoulders as she slung the pastries at me.

I batted away the muffin with the frying pan on autopilot.

Her pixie nose scrunched up, her lush lips twisting in anger as she grabbed another from the container she held in her free hand.

“Don’t worry, you piece of shit. I won’t be bringing my muffins back to this stupid diner ever again. I don’t need or want your charity, you fucking asshole. I just wanted to be paid what I’m worth.”

Her voice trembled as she launched another muffin at me, the sound causing an echo of pain deep, deep inside me. Between that and watching her lips move, I was so distracted that I didn’t duck in time, getting smacked in the face with a double-chocolate muffin. “I hope you choke on it, dickhead.”

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Chapter Two

Demi

Any other day, I would have waited when Opal said her boss was busy, but I'd left Iris sleeping in my car. In any other town, I never would have left my daughter alone. But this was the safest place we'd ever been, and she was sleeping so peacefully after having an earache the last few days.

My sweet little angel seemed to keep getting them.

No sooner did we get one infection cleared up, and I was searching for a new walk-in clinic to treat another.

It ate up what little funds I was saving, but my baby came first. Always.

From experience, I knew tubes would be the best route, but that cost money.

Or government assistance. But if either of our names or Social Security numbers showed up in the system, my ex and his family would find us in a heartbeat.

Staying off the radar was the only way I could keep Iris safe. She was all that mattered to me—she was all I had left.

After days of very little sleep and almost constant pain, she was finally comfortable.

My car was warm, the doors were secured, and I was only planning to be a few

moments.

Yet no matter how safe the place appeared, I was always watching—waiting—for my ex to pop up.

Seeing Opal, I'd asked if anyone else was around.

Everyone who worked at Aggie's was nice to me, with the rare exception, but Opal was a true gem.

I saw her most mornings when I dropped off my supplies, and I knew she was at least somewhat aware of my arrangement with Quinn, unlike the other waitresses.

Although we'd only spoken a few times in the months since I'd started my little enterprise with Quinn at Aggie's diner, Opal might have been the nearest thing to a friend I had.

We'd shared the random bonding moment over being single mothers, how the experience was like having your heart broken and mended back together all at the same time.

I loved being Iris's mommy, but it was pure hell every minute of the day.

A person didn't know fear until they were responsible for the little life they had grown inside their own body.

But then to constantly have to run and hide to protect that precious little life...

It was exhausting.

And I would continue to do it until the very last breath left my lungs.

With a grim smile, Opal had said Kingston was in the kitchen. I'd never met Quinn's son before, but she'd mentioned him and that he was her business partner. Opal had turned toward the kitchen, and I'd caught a glimpse of the man at the grill.

Everything around me had narrowed, turning fuzzy until all I could see was him.

Dark-blond hair that was shaved on the sides and several inches longer on the top pushed back from a face that was, without a doubt, the most amazingly handsome face I'd ever seen in the world.

And I would know handsome. Charlie Johnson was movie-star handsome.

His mother had been Miss Georgia before she'd become Miss USA, and later, she had been the second runner-up for Miss Universe before she'd come home and married a local politician.

Not long after Charlie was born, his dad became governor for two terms and was now running for the Senate.

But there were just a few loose ends the family needed to make sure got tied up to ensure the Johnson family continued their political dynasty.

Like keeping Iris and me a secret. Having a son getting his high school girlfriend pregnant out of wedlock was frowned upon, but it wasn't the darkest secret they needed to keep out of the public eye.

Like having that same son, who was an abusive addict, beating that girlfriend when she was eight months pregnant until she went into labor.

Or again a month later after she was released from the hospital...

Blinking away the bad memories of Charlie, I'd focused on the man in the kitchen, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip without realizing it.

His strong jaw had a little stubble on it, just a few days' worth of growth.

I wondered how it would feel against my palm.

Or my neck... Or my belly... Between my legs.

Pressing my thighs together, I'd shaken those thoughts away.

Men were bad news. The worst. Nothing good ever came from dealings with them.

Sex with Charlie had been blah at best. He didn't know what he was doing.

When other girls talked about getting wet, I always thought they were making shit up, because my ex had never gotten so much as a trickle from me.

But looking at the cook right then, an ache began to build low in my tummy, my panties becoming damp.

What the fuck was happening?

Then Opal told him I needed to be paid.

And that was when I'd kind of blacked out. My temper had taken over for the very first time in my life.

Even as I was pelting the giant blond cook with muffins I'd spent the previous night baking instead of getting much-needed sleep, I'd known it was going to cost me, but I couldn't seem to stop myself.

Shame was a hard pill to swallow, however, when you were running on two hours of sleep, a gallon of caffeine, and a hundred pounds of anxiety.

Hearing this gorgeous stranger with all his tattoos and muscles call me a con had pushed me too far over the edge, and there was no coming back.

This bridge was officially burned. It had been time to move on anyway.

If my ex stuck to his past patterns, he would have worked his way into a somewhat sober state and would come looking for us any day now.

Charlie had already chased us across the Southeast. California was a big enough state that I was hoping we could blend in.

As long as I stayed off the radar, kept our names and Social Security numbers off the grid, we could outrun him.

But that meant we couldn't stay still for too long.

Getting comfortable was dangerous. It was better to just pack up and move on.

I'd considered going as far north as Canada, but my car was a junker that I wasn't all too sure was legal.

I'd bought it at a junkyard with the money I'd secretly saved while I was pregnant with Iris.

It wasn't pretty or eco-friendly. But the brakes worked, and it had been a home more times than I could count.

That piece of scrap would get my baby and me where we needed to go just fine for a

little longer.

I hoped.

Grasping another muffin, I aimed for the giant's huge head, his careless words exploding in my mind like bombs.

We'd only been in Creswell Springs a few months, but it was the longest I'd spent in one place in the last three years.

I'd gotten comfortable, had even been able to save a little money for the first time ever, despite how often I had to take Iris to the doctor. That was all thanks to Quinn.

I'd taken a chance and offered her a business proposition.

If she could keep things hush-hush, not report my earnings, I could supply her with as many breakfast pastries as I could make in a night, and we could split the sales.

I wasn't going to fool myself; I'd probably reeked of desperation that day I'd walked into Aggie's with Iris on my hip, a container of samples in hand.

But Quinn had taken one bite of my banana chocolate chip muffin and moaned so loud her cheeks had instantly turned pink.

Quinn Hannigan must have known she was saving my life that day because she didn't blink over my whispered suggestion to keep this agreement off her books.

I'd drop off fresh goods every morning, she'd give me the cash from my share of the sales the previous day, and then I'd go back to the small house where I was the daytime caretaker for an elderly woman, Joy Lively.

Her son and daughter-in-law supposedly couldn't afford any kind of real home health care, and they worked all day.

My pay wasn't much, and as with the diner, I was getting paid off the books.

But they had an extra room they let me stay in with Iris.

As long as I kept the house clean and had dinner on the table when they got home, they left me alone.

With all the baking I did, I paid for all the supplies and kept them stocked in breakfast pastries.

If anything, they were getting the better end of the deal.

Joy was, in fact, not a joy to deal with.

She was a fucking headache. It didn't take long for me to realize that it wasn't actually because her family couldn't afford the home health care.

All the local nursing staff refused to deal with the old hag's bullshit.

Between the verbal abuse Joy threw at me, always glancing over my shoulder in hopes of staying one step ahead of my ex, and the constant fear of losing Iris, I should have known it was only a matter of time before something set me off.

Hurt and shame mixed together, adding the perfect ignition to the keg that was my hot temper.

I wasn't a con. I worked hard for what I had, for what I gave my daughter.

It wasn't much, but I wanted her to think that her mother was a strong woman who did everything she could to protect and love the most precious person in the world.

Life hadn't been the easiest for me, but I was doing my best to give my kid a different start.

Iris wasn't going to end up a statistic like I had. I wouldn't fucking allow it.

With each muffin I hurled at the giant man's head, I released a little more of the rage that had been building deep inside me.

Pain and fear. All the goddamn stress that was my constant companion tried to suffocate me late into the night, and the only thing that kept me tethered to the world was Iris snuggling so sweetly into my side. Trusting me to keep her safe.

If he hadn't pissed me off so much, it might have been cathartic.

"Whoa!" His deep voice vibrated through me, causing me to shiver in a way my ex never could, but I kept throwing, refusing to acknowledge that little additional awareness. Hate-lust was a thing, I was sure. I just hadn't ever experienced it.

He lifted his frying pan like he was a Viking in battle, making him look that much hotter. Damn him! "Hold on a sec. Hey. Come on! Give me a minute to?—"

"Kingston?" Quinn's soft voice barely registered just as I released the last of the blueberry muffins. "Oh, goodness. What have you done?"

The disappointment I heard in the older woman's voice was what finally calmed the storm inside me. She was the last person I wanted to let down. Quinn had given me a chance when no one else had. That woman saved me, and I'd just destroyed her kitchen.

Dropping the now-empty container, I glanced around in horror at the catastrophic mess I'd made of the industrial-sized kitchen.

The smell of bacon and other frying foods filled my nose while I took in the disarray of toppled-over pots and pans, food and broken plates on the floor.

Quinn stood in the open doorway, her pretty eyes wide as she took in the chaos I'd unleashed.

Opal was on the other side of the pass-through window, her mouth gaping open.

And the giant, with his chiseled, god-like beauty, lifted a brow at me, a smile teasing at his lips. "You done, hell-raiser?"

"Fuck you."

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Chapter Three

Kingston

From the flames in her eyes, she could have set my entire kitchen ablaze.

That spark of temper made me ache in a way I hadn't in a long-ass time.

Fuck, I couldn't remember the last time I'd had such an intense response to a woman, let alone one so fast. Definitely not with Avery or any other woman before her.

When my ex left, everyone had thought I'd be torn up, but I was more relieved than anything.

Maybe I'd loved Avery a little, but I'd never once been in love with her. Not like that all-consuming love my dad felt for my mom.

In my family, love was like a curse. Or a disease, a sickness. Something that altered us. My dad, uncles, and aunt. Even my cousins. Not a single Hannigan had escaped being afflicted by it, except for me.

Once a Hannigan found the love of their lives, something clicked inside them, and they became fucking possessed. Consumed by anything and everything involving the person they loved. At least, that was what it probably looked like to the outside world. To us, it was normal.

And for me, the odd one out, the only one left who hadn't found his one yet, I thought

maybe I was broken.

Wrong.

This little hell-raiser was dangerous—in more ways than one.

I shifted my pan to shield my face, in case she had another muffin I hadn't noticed while pressing my fist to my chest. What the fuck was she doing to me? "Peace, hell-raiser."

"Demi." Mom's soft voice floated to me as she came into view.

Out of instinct, I shifted, ready to put myself between her and any threat.

There wasn't anyone or anything more important to me than my mom.

On a list of priorities, my cousins River and Nova would have been next on the list, but it was first and always my mom.

Yet, my gaze went back to the tiny little beauty, my heart suddenly beating in a weird rhythm. Hesitation, even for a second, would get someone killed in the MC, and I was stuck looking between the woman I adored more than life and a woman I'd only set eyes on mere moments before.

But Mom made the decision for me when she walked up to the smaller woman, tucking her strawberry-blond hair behind her ear ever so gently. Demi's entire body seemed to tremble as reaction set in. "I-I'm s-sorry," she whispered brokenly. "So, so sorry, Quinn. Please forgive me. I don't know..."

Tears spilled down her face, and the bottom fell out of my stomach. "I don't know what came over me."

Mom's mouth quirked up. "Oh, trust me, sweetheart. I want to throw things at Kingston at least once a week. It's a normal reaction when he opens his mouth. He's ninety-nine percent Hannigan, so that's nothing unusual."

"I need to go," Demi choked out, swiping at her eyes.

I tightened my hand around the pan, fighting the urge to grab her and kiss away all the diamond-like tears spilling from those flame-filled eyes.

Everything inside me quaked, the need to get closer to her, touch her—smell her—almost too much to contain.

"Iris is... And I... I really am sorry. Thank you. For everything. You did so much for me and my baby girl. I owe you, but I can't... Bye, Quinn."

"No, Demi. Wait." Before Mom could call her back, Demi was gone. For someone so small, she was as quick as a rabbit.

I almost ran after her, but Mom stepped in my way. She sucked in a breath and gave me a glare, but it quickly turned into a disappointed shake of her head.

That was always worse. I'd take Mom's anger any day over letting her down.

Fuck.

"What did you say that upset her this badly?" she demanded, her voice low, a slight quaver in it, her chin trembling.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I tried to think back to what I'd said, but it was mostly a blur of dodging flying muffins and remembering those pretty, sparkling eyes. "Something about her being a con because she was here for more money?"

“Oh, Kingston,” she whispered, the disappointment only thickening in her voice, and I felt like I was five years old again. “I told you I have an arrangement with her.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t go into detail about it. The books say you pay her every week, just like all the other vendors. What was I supposed to think, Mom?” I tried to excuse, but it sounded weak, even to my own ears.

Glancing at the pass-through window, I saw Opal had returned to waiting on the customers.

From the chatter out in the dining room, they were already gossiping about the scene that had gone down and moving on to other local news.

“What is the arrangement anyway? Opal obviously knows, but I’m running blind here. ”

“You didn’t want to know, and until today, there was no need to tell you.

The fewer people who knew, the better. A girl that young, with a baby barely out of diapers?

She isn’t here with Sanctuary, Kingston.

She didn’t even know what the women’s shelter was until I explained it to her, but even then, she didn’t want to risk her name popping up in the system somehow. ”

Every word out of her mouth only made it worse. I felt equal parts sick and pissed off. Who the fuck was Demi running from?

Mom blew out a tired sigh. “I pay her every day, Kingston. She brings the pastries, I give her the cash. And to be completely honest, I slip her a little more than the

muffins actually earn. Because if things had turned out differently, I could have easily been her.”

I wasn’t going to go there. That was history that didn’t need to be dredged up. My parents had a rocky beginning, but I didn’t think my dad would have ever allowed Mom to get past the town limits before he chased her down if she’d actually tried to leave.

“Does Jack know about her situation?” I asked, but Mom shook her head.

“Like I said, I felt like the fewer people who knew, the better. Your dad is aware, because I don’t keep anything from him.

And while Opal knows a little of our arrangement, I didn’t fill her in on the full details.

Maybe I should have talked to Gracie, asked her to have a conversation with Demi.

Sanctuary has a lot of options, but she was skittish, Kingston.

I was worried the slightest wrong move would scare her away.”

Her shoulders dropped, a weight seeming to fall on her, driving home how much I’d fucked up in just a matter of minutes. “And I was right, but I still should have done something. Demi and Iris deserved for me to try harder. I let them down.”

“You didn’t let anyone down, Ma. I’ll fix it,” I promised, already running for the door.

Every head turned to look when I pushed through the swinging doors at a dead run, and no one so much as shifted a plate or scooted a chair back until I raced into the

parking lot.

But by the time I got outside, I saw her pulling onto the highway.

Cursing, I rushed back inside, tearing off my apron.

The chatter abruptly stopped again, but I didn't have time to roll my eyes at the small-town bullshit.

"Mom, where does she live?" I yelled, grabbing my keys.

She straightened from cleaning up the broken plate on the kitchen floor, the smell of burned pancakes filling the air.

But the ruined food was already in the trash, and fresh batter was on the grill.

Mom was back in survival mode, and I clenched and unclenched my fingers.

She needed me here, but she also needed me to fix the mess I'd made with Demi.

And more than that, I needed to see that little hell-raiser again.

To know if what I'd felt earlier was what I'd thought it was...

"She's staying with the Lively family." Using her forearm, she pushed a few strands of hair out of her face. "They live right over the county line, just past Mill Road."

"Fuck's sake," I muttered to myself, recognizing the family's name.

Jim and Felicia weren't the worst people, but they didn't do anything without a reason.

And they sure as hell wouldn't let a single mom live with them simply out of the goodness of their hearts.

After Jim's mother broke her hip, she couldn't keep a home health care nurse.

When the fourth one quit because of her verbal abuse, there was talk that Felicia was going to divorce Jim unless they placed Joy in a nursing home.

But I hadn't heard anything about that at the diner in months, which must have been when Demi had moved to town.

School buses were coming and going, making traffic a bitch.

I didn't catch up to the clunky car I'd seen Demi drive off in the entire drive, even though I was pushing limits that would have had the cops busting my ass, despite my cousin being married to the sheriff.

By the time I pulled into the Livelys' driveway, it felt like a lead weight was sitting in the pit of my stomach.

Despite knowing she wasn't there, I jogged up to the front door. After knocking loud enough to wake the dead, I turned the knob. It was unlocked, so I stepped inside. "Demi?"

"Who is it?" a shrill voice called out, and I turned to find Joy Lively sitting in a recliner in the living room. "Who are you? I don't know you. Get out of my house!"

She was at least seventy, her face showing every sign of her age and the hard life she'd lived.

Her hair had been gray for as long as I'd known her, maybe for as long as my parents

had known her too.

Her husband had been a nice enough man, which was probably why Jim wasn't a complete waste of human skin.

"Ma'am, my name is Kingston. I work at Aggie's, the diner in town.

" I adjusted my cut, trying to relax my shoulders so I didn't scare the old bat into a heart attack.

Thankfully, she seemed to relax. In Creswell Springs, the citizens looked to the MC to protect them, almost as much, if not more so, than the local police.

My gaze swung around the living room, hoping to see my little hell-raiser.

Demi had obviously gotten the old woman comfortable before driving over to the diner earlier.

Joy had everything within reach and a walker beside her chair.

There was a landline and a cell phone on a small table with a cup of coffee, water, snacks, and the remote control.

Other than use of the bathroom, Joy could have been there for a few days without a care in the world. "I'm looking for Demi."

"She isn't here," Joy huffed, turning her gaze back to the television, dismissing me. "She and the whining brat left earlier."

"Define earlier," I gritted out. As old as the woman was, earlier could have meant when Demi had first come to the diner. My stomach clenched. Or it could have meant

she'd come back and then left again.

She shrugged. "Few minutes ago. Maybe five, ten tops. Said she was done. Good riddance, I say. Damned annoying thing, if you ask me. I was tired of all that crying keeping me awake all night. Whine, whine, whine. Cry, cry, cry. Her ear hurts. Her tummy hurts. She doesn't feel good.

Everything makes her sick. Can't look at the little wretch without it screaming.

Day and night. Night and day. Cry, cry, cry?—"

"Demi left?" I confirmed, cutting her off. "She told you she was leaving?"

"That's what I said, didn't I?" she spat. "You Hannigans never listen. I know how you are. Knew your father, boy. Knew your grandfather before him. And his father before him. All the same. Those green eyes. You got something in you, something not right."

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered, already walking away, but making sure I closed the door behind me.

Her nearest neighbor was a half mile away.

There was a higher chance a bear would wander in and eat her than she would get robbed.

But I wouldn't have been opposed to a stray dog running in and pissing on her.

Goddamn it, I just wanted to find Demi and make things right.

For my mom.

And maybe to ease the growing ache in my chest with every passing minute I didn't know if Demi was safe.

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Chapter Four

Demi

Iris clung to my neck as I rocked her, trying my best to tune out the awful noise of the emergency department waiting room.

I shifted my eyes from one person to the next, attempting to keep those with the more dangerous ailments to my baby as far away as possible.

But that was hard to do when everyone was a potential threat.

Another shuddery sob left her, and she snuggled against me, seeking comfort and a little relief from the pain in her ear and attempting to sleep.

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head, fighting my own tears.

After the blowup at Aggie's, I'd been too scared that Kingston Hannigan would press charges against me for assault or destruction of property.

Getting arrested would not only get Iris taken from me, but place her straight into the system and directly into Charlie's hands.

I'd messed up so badly. My temper had never been an issue in the past. Fuck knew, I hadn't done much to fight back against Charlie.

Running away from him and the only life I'd ever known when I was seventeen was

my single biggest rebellion.

Yet, as terrified as I was of my ex finding us, Creswell Springs had become a kind of safe haven.

I'd been unable to travel too far from the area, even with the fear of Kingston potentially wanting to press charges against me.

Mostly, I'd been living out of my car for the past few weeks.

I would park in a wooded area during the day, a spot I'd found when I'd gotten desperate after three full days of zero sleep and I'd needed a nap.

I'd driven for miles to make sure no one had followed me, then rigged the doors just in case Iris woke up and I didn't hear her.

Cuddling her close, I'd wrapped a frayed blanket around us and fallen into a deep sleep for four hours.

When I'd woken up, she'd still been out, her sweet face relaxed in slumber, and I'd crawled outside the car for a much-needed cry.

Being homeless wasn't the worst thing in the world.

It wasn't my first time, and I doubted it would be the last. I'd faced bigger and badder situations.

It just felt like the weight of the world was on my shoulders at that moment. It was scary, but I'd find a way.

I always did because Iris deserved better.

We'd been doing fine. I'd found a small country store that was letting me work for them at night off the books.

I was baking and cleaning the kitchen while Iris slept in the corner.

No one was asking questions. I was keeping us fed and clean.

Iris had been happy and laughing all week, and she hadn't pulled at her ears once.

Then she'd woken up from her nap screaming.

Her ear was oozing, and she was burning up with a fever.

She kept tilting her head as if it weighed too much for her to hold it upright.

There was no way I was going to chance waiting to take her to a walk-in clinic.

I'd have to come up with something to tell the ER staff, a believable lie that wouldn't cause them to look too hard at our situation. I hoped.

Whatever happened, I'd live with the consequences, but my baby needed a doctor now.

Her ear infection wasn't a top priority, though, not even for a triage.

There were people coming and going much worse off than Iris.

The ambulance bay was busy, and the waiting room was overflowing with patients.

There weren't any chairs left, so I stood in a corner, rocking from side to side in hopes of soothing Iris to sleep.

Every time her eyes drifted closed and I felt her start to drift off, a loud noise would startle her. Her eyes popped open, filling with tears again. “Hurts, Mommy. Hurts!”

“I’m sorry, cuddle bug.” I tucked her golden hair back from her ear.

As I did, I saw the pus draining from her ear and swallowed back a distressed cry.

It wasn’t just an infection. There was blood.

Trying not to panic, I weaved through the other patients sitting in chairs and nearly tripped over one of them lying on the floor.

The man groaned, clutching at his leg, a makeshift bandage wrapped around what looked like a knife wound just above his knee.

“Excuse me?” I called to the nurse behind the window, slapping my palm on the glass.

Without looking up from a chart, he pointed to the sign-in desk. He’d been helping patients nonstop since we’d arrived. I knew he was busy and that some of those patients had been anything but kind to him and the other nurses I’d glimpsed through the small window. “Be with you when we can.”

“We already signed in an hour ago. She’s getting worse. Please. You have to do something. Her ear is bleeding.” His head snapped up at that, and I tucked Iris’s head closer to my chest. His concern heightened my panic, causing the world to go dark around the edges. “Please, help my daughter.”

A buzzer sounded, the door unlocking. He stepped through, waving me into the back. “Let’s get a look. It’s probably a ruptured eardrum.”

“Oh god,” I whispered, clutching Iris to me harder.

He gave me a sympathetic grimace as he guided me down a busy hall. We had to pass the ambulance bay where EMTs were coming in and out with patients, calling out stats to the nurses and doctors already waiting to assist.

Several men in familiar-looking leather vests stomped in behind one of the paramedics, and I gasped.

Ducking my head, I increased my pace, almost running into the male nurse’s back as he showed us into a curtained exam room.

But my fear of who was in the emergency room with us suddenly didn’t matter when the nurse closed the curtain on one side.

“It sounds worse than it is. She might actually feel a little better because the rupture relieves some pressure.”

“But will it heal?” Heart pounding, I tried to keep my voice from shaking.

A ruptured eardrum sounded agonizingly painful, even if it had given my baby girl a little relief.

It also sounded expensive. Very, very expensive.

Fuck. Panic tried to choke me, but I swallowed it down as best I could. “Will she need surgery to repair it?”

“No, Mommy. No. Want you!” Iris clung to me, shying away from the nurse when he stepped closer.

“In most cases, once the infection clears up, the drum heals on its own,” the nurse, whose name tag I noticed said Gary, informed me. He smoothly worked on getting Iris’s vitals while she remained in my arms.

She squirmed and cried, and I tried to soothe her, but she was scared and uncomfortable. “Hurts, Mommy. No. No touch. No touch!”

With every scream, my own tears fell faster. I held her tight, so we could get her blood pressure and pulse. Thankfully, all he had to do was swipe the thermometer over her forehead to get her temperature. It wasn’t as high as I’d feared, but it was definitely elevated.

I was such a bad mother. I couldn’t do anything right.

Iris was always sick, and she didn’t even have her own bed to sleep in.

Our only shelter was a piece-of-shit car that wouldn’t make it another thousand miles.

There was enough money to pay for Iris’s food, if I managed my funds right, and to get her the antibiotics she would need.

Panic pressed in on me. I was going to lose her. The doctor was going to come in, take one look at my screaming child, and call CPS. I was going to lose the one person who mattered. Iris was the only piece of happiness I’d ever known, and I was fucking up her entire life already.

Gary patted me on the arm. I flinched, instinct taking over, and he gave me a grim, knowing smile that only spiked the anxiety gnawing at me higher. He knew. It was written all over his face. Gary knew I was a domestic abuse victim.

“It’s going to be okay, Momma. Doc will be in as soon as he can, but we’ll get your

little one sorted out soon.

” His voice was low, attempting to calm me, but nothing he could say or do would ease the pressure building inside me.

My mounting fear. “I’m going to grab her something for the pain and that low-grade fever she has.

Any vomiting or other gastric distress?”

I shook my head, pretending like I wasn’t falling apart. “This one came on out of nowhere. She seems to keep them, but this has been the worst so far.”

“We’ll get you an ENT referral,” he promised, sliding the curtain back.

As he turned to go, my gaze shifted, black leather capturing my attention again.

Gulping, I squeezed Iris to me just as two men turned away from a trauma bay where emergency staff was shouting orders for CT scans.

They were both big men, well over six feet, their shoulders nearly as wide as any door.

The one on my left had short black hair and a nose ring glinting in his nostril.

He said something to the man at his side, but there were too many other noises for me to hear what he said.

There was no mistaking that the man on the right was related to him.

They had the same dark hair, the same blue eyes.

He was older than the other man, with the slightest shades of gray peppering his dark hair.

I'd seen them both before at Aggie's and around Creswell Springs, but only from a distance.

Every time, they had been wearing the same leather vests that they were currently sporting.

Or, as I'd been educated, their club cuts.

These two men were members of the Angel's Halo MC.

Despite not being able to hear what they were saying, I could tell they were upset.

The older man raked his hands through his hair, shaking his head at whatever the other man was saying.

A mixture of distress and anger clouded their faces, and my stomach knotted, wondering who was inside that room that they were so concerned for.

A zing of awareness climbed my arms, spreading along my entire body. Shifting my head slowly, I knew who I was going to see even before my gaze landed on Kingston Hannigan.

He stood by the nurses station, his hair disheveled, his face set in hard lines, but his green eyes were locked on me. Everything inside me froze as his eyes turned wild, scanning me from head to toe, turning even wilder when they brushed over the still-screaming toddler in my arms.

All those fears I'd had of Kingston pressing charges for attacking him that day

disappeared the longer I stood there.

Maybe if I hadn't panicked that day, things would have turned out differently.

I might have been able to talk him out of pressing charges, apologized for my actions, and continued with the arrangements I'd had going on with both Quinn and the Lively family.

Instead, I'd let my temper take over for the very first time, and I'd ruined everything.

But as I met those incredible green eyes that caused my stomach to dip and tighten in ways I'd only read about in fairy tales, I realized that maybe I'd been scared for more than one reason.

With each rapid beat of my heart, it hit me that he was more dangerous than I'd first thought.

Because for the first time in my life, I didn't want to run away from a man.

What I really wanted was to run straight into his arms, just like I'd wanted to that day at Aggie's diner once I'd seen his face.

I ached to run to him and beg him to make it all better.

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Chapter Five

Kingston

Everything that had been front and center in my mind shifted the instant my eyes landed on Demi.

After finding Sammy's smashed car earlier that day, leaving nothing behind but bloody airbags, the entire MC had been rushing to find her and Nishia. Finding the women had been our top priority.

Now that we had them back, anyone who wasn't cleaning up Clint Morgan's brains that were splattered around the cabin where he and his lackey had been keeping Sammy and Nishia was at the hospital.

I'd followed as soon as Uncle Hawk gave me the order, worried about both girls.

The EMTs had diagnosed them both with concussions back at the crime scene, but Sammy's had supposedly been worse than Nishia's.

I adored Sammy on the same level I did my cousins River and Nova, would have walked through hell for all three of them, and I was focused solely on her when I first walked into the emergency department.

My cousin Jack had gone with the women in the ambulance, while Elias and a few other brothers followed right behind.

As I walked toward Reid and Chance, I was about to ask for an update when I heard the screaming baby.

But from the moment I caught sight of that strawberry-blond hair, nothing and no one else mattered but her.

No. That was a lie.

Nothing mattered but them .

Demi and her little girl.

Shifting directions, I ate up the distance that separated us, each step closer to her relieving the pressure that had been building inside my chest from the moment she'd run from me weeks before. She watched me, unblinking, her chin trembling as I drew closer and closer.

Her face was paler than I remembered, dark shadows like bruises beneath her pretty eyes.

Admittedly, she'd been pissed as fuck the last time I'd seen her, but there was no mistaking the exhaustion that seemed to weigh her down as she struggled to hold on to the wiggling, crying little girl in her arms.

With effort, I unlocked my gaze from hers and focused on her daughter.

Tears stained her little pink face. Her hair, a few shades lighter than her mother's, was pulled into a cute, braided ponytail.

She tried to hide her face against her mom's chest, but she was obviously scared by all the noise of the emergency department and the strangers running around the place.

I wasn't a kid person. They didn't gravitate toward me naturally, and I'd done my best to avoid them for the majority of my life.

Even the ones I was related to. Being a dad hadn't been high on my list of priorities.

My ex had dropped hints about wanting a baby a few times, but the idea of being a parent with her had given me hives.

Which should have told me that what we had wasn't going to go anywhere.

If I felt for Avery what my cousins felt for their significant others, I would have wanted to put a baby in her just to lock her down.

Instead, I'd ignored the red flags that were waving at me that she wasn't for me and wasted both our time.

Avery was the last thing on my mind, however, as I looked down into those tear-filled eyes, brimming with so much fear and pain, my heart melted.

Paternal instincts I didn't know existed inside me came roaring to life, and I pressed my palm to the little girl's back as soon as I reached her and her mother.

Demi flinched at my closeness, causing another dormant monster I didn't know lived inside me to awaken. I grasped her shoulder, begging her with my eyes not to run, before speaking softly to her daughter. "What's wrong, princess?"

Her brow scrunched up along with her nose, reminding me of her mom in a way that only had me falling harder for both of them. She didn't answer me, but at least she stopped screaming, which seemed to cause Demi to relax a little. I stroked my hand over the kid's back. "Are you not feeling well?"

“Hurts,” she said with a little sob-hiccup that killed me. Dropping her head onto her mom’s chest, she tugged on her exposed ear. Lowering my head, I took a look. There was something draining from it, and with a sinking sensation in my stomach, I realized how much pain she was really in.

“I think her eardrum ruptured,” Demi explained in a small voice, heartbreakingly opposite of our first meeting. Seeing her so tired, so mentally and emotionally beaten up, was a kick to the gut. I wanted my fiery hell-raiser back.

Whatever was going on, I’d make it better for her.

Shit. Them . I’d make it better for them.

She lowered her lashes. I started to reach for her chin, wanting to see her eyes again, but I remembered how she’d flinched when I’d first touched her. Knowing that would scare her and not trusting how I’d react to her being afraid of me, I gave her shoulder a squeeze. “It’s going to be?—”

“I’m sorry!” she whispered emotionally, cutting me off.

“Please don’t press charges against me for what I did that day.

I have never acted like that in my life.

If I caused any permanent damage to the kitchen at Aggie’s, I can pay for it.

It might take a little time, but maybe... I don’t know.

Maybe you’ll allow me to work there to cover everything? ”

She spoke so quickly, her words were jumbled together, her anxiety heightening as

she glanced at something over my shoulder.

Turning my head, I saw that Ben had entered the ER with several local police officers.

Even without his sheriff's uniform on, he could be an intimidating motherfucker.

When he'd started dating my cousin Lexa, it had caused some tension in the MC, but that was before I'd patched in.

Having the law in the family offered a lot of benefits.

It sure as fuck made dealing with other cops easier.

Clint Morgan had been keeping Sammy and Nishia in a cabin several counties away from Creswell Springs. Cleanup would have been a lot rougher if Ben hadn't been there to smooth the way with the local law. Not impossible, but sure as fuck not as simple as it had been.

Realizing that Ben and the local cops were making Demi nervous, I shifted so they were blocked from seeing her. "Hey, what happened that day, that was nothing, okay? I tried to follow you afterward."

She tensed even more, and I rushed to continue. "To apologize, Demi. To say I was sorry for saying what I did. I was a di—" Cutting myself off before I could say the bad word, I grimaced. I needed to watch my language. "I was a jerk, and I hope you won't hold that against me. Please forgive me."

"This is kind of surreal. Maybe I'm the one with a fever," she muttered to herself.

"She has a fever too?" I touched the back of my hand to the kid's forehead. Blinking

her dark-blond lashes at me, she looked up at me curiously.

When she didn't shy away from my touch, I stroked my thumb over her cheek.

Her skin was flower-petal soft, even with the tear tracks.

She did feel warm to me, but it wasn't like I had a lot of experience with what a kid's body temperature was supposed to be.

For all I knew, they ran hotter or colder than an adult my size, but there was no mistaking how uncomfortable she was.

And I couldn't stop glancing at the blood trickling out of her tiny ear. "We're going to get you feeling better soon, princess."

A male nurse entered the small triage bay, adjusting the curtain with one hand, a small oral syringe in his other hand.

"Ibuprofen for the discomfort and fever. Doc shouldn't be much longer.

I put you at the top of the board." He wasn't fazed when he saw me, but the kid instantly started screaming again as he approached.

"No, Mommy. No. No. No," she cried, hiding her face again, wiggling around so much that Demi struggled to hold on to her.

"Iris," Demi pleaded in a voice hoarse with emotion.

"Just a little medication, kiddo. Not a shot," the nurse explained.

Which was definitely not the right thing to say to ease her fear.

“No shot!” Iris screamed at the top of her lungs.

Moving fast, I put myself between the other man and my two girls.

Keeping my back to him, I wrapped my arms around Demi and held them both to my chest, hoping the pressure of my hold would somehow soothe them both.

“Shh, shh. It’s okay, princess. No one is going to hurt you. I’m here now. You’re going to be okay.”

Demi shuddered but slowly started to relax, which helped us both to comfort Iris.

It took a minute before the kid finally stopped screaming, and then she lifted her head, unwrapping her death grip on her mother.

Grabbing hold of my cut, she kicked her legs, causing Demi to take a stumbling step back.

I tightened one arm on her, lifting Iris with the other.

Laying her head on my shoulder, she went limp almost instantly. Eyes wide in alarm, I gulped. “Is she okay? Did I hurt her?”

“She’s asleep,” the nurse told me. “Between the pain, fever, and sudden drop of adrenaline, she crashed. Which could be a good thing. I can get an IV started while she’s out. If that’s okay with you, Mom?”

“Um, sure,” Demi agreed with a hesitant nod. “I mean, if you think that is what’s best.”

“We can get her hydrated and start some IV antibiotics if Doc thinks that will speed

up the recovery time. Plus, we can do labs without having to do a second stick.” Gary—I read his name on his badge—was already pulling items out of a rolling cart beneath the heart monitor.

“Whatever helps Iris,” she whispered, her shoulders drooping.

Adjusting the sleeping toddler on my shoulder, I tucked Demi against me. “It’s going to be okay, babe. I got you.”

And now that I’d found her again, I sure as fuck wasn’t letting her go.

Not her or her little one.

They were mine now.

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Chapter Six

Demi

As nervous as I'd been when I'd first seen Kingston in the emergency department, now his presence oddly calmed me.

He'd taken charge of the situation with Iris and quickly got her the medical attention she needed.

After the doctor did a full exam, while Kingston still held her sleeping peacefully, we had to stick around long enough for Iris to get a full dose of IV antibiotics.

Hopefully they would speed up her recovery, but the doctor had also given me a prescription for oral antibiotics as well as ear drops.

I'd been worried about how I was going to get the medication filled at any pharmacy since I didn't have an address or a phone—or enough money for both prescriptions at the same time. But the nurse, Gary, had given me a small bag that already held the meds Iris needed when she was being discharged.

He'd given me a grim smile and patted my arm when I took everything from him, feeling like I was walking around in a dream.

Kingston hadn't left me once all night, not even when a few of his friends had come over to speak to him.

They were intimidating as fuck, all of them wearing the same black leather vests, or cuts—whatever the hell they were called.

Each of them had the same insignia on the back, proclaiming them members of the Angel's Halo MC, but some of them also had patches on their chests.

One said Sergeant at Arms, but the other man, the one with the nose ring, said Tail Gunner.

I didn't know what either title meant, but Kingston's said Enforcer, and I'd seen two other men with the same patch on their chest.

Still cradling Iris in his arms, Kingston had spoken quietly to the men, who gave me respectful nods in greeting but otherwise didn't speak to me.

I stayed quiet, nervous around so many men who were so big.

Everyone was tall compared to me, but Charlie had only been five foot nine, and all those bikers were well over six feet tall.

Literal giants stood around me, fierce expressions on their handsome faces, aggression and worry pouring off them as they had a whispered conversation with Kingston.

They hadn't stuck around long, all of them going back to the trauma bays where two patients were being tended to.

Kingston told me there had been a car accident involving his cousin's girlfriend, Nishia, and a family friend, Sammy.

They had a few injuries, but nothing life-threatening.

He didn't tell me much more than that because he didn't want to disturb Iris, and I wasn't sure I would have been able to process many details anyway.

My mind was too stuck on the reality that he was there, helping me.

Alarm bells should have been going off inside my head, but all I felt when I saw him holding my daughter was an overwhelming sense of relief that left me light-headed.

Maybe I had low blood sugar and that was why I was dealing with such an intense headache and brain fog, to the point of feeling like everything around me was moving in slow motion.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten.

Usually, I snacked a little while I was cooking, but since I hadn't worked the day before, there had been nothing for me to eat.

All the nonperishable foods I kept in my car were for Iris.

Ensuring my baby didn't go hungry was all I cared about.

My empty stomach was something that didn't register most of the time.

I was used to going without. As long as Iris was fed, nothing else mattered.

Kingston hadn't asked me many questions all evening. He'd seemed just as focused on Iris as I was. But when we left the ER, he'd carried Iris to my car and buckled her securely into her safety seat before holding out his hands. "You're asleep on your feet, babe. I'll drive us home."

Tears stung my eyes, because we were standing in front of my home at that moment.

Emotions choking me, I glanced around the parking lot, trying to avoid looking up into his masculinely beautiful face, shame and fear pressing down on me like thousand-pound weights. “What about your motorcycle?”

“One of my brothers will make sure it gets back.” He wiggled his fingers at me, encouraging me to hand over my keys. “Come on, beautiful. Our girl needs to get home and tucked into bed. We’ll get everything else sorted tomorrow once you’ve both had a good night’s sleep.”

“I don’t—” Before I could confess my living situation, he cut me off.

“You do now. Keys, Demi.”

Fingers trembling, I handed over the keys, and he opened the passenger door of my car.

Once I was inside, he bent, fastening my seat belt as meticulously as he’d done with Iris.

I flinched at his nearness. He might make me feel safer than anyone else had in my life, but I had too much baggage not to cower away from a man getting too close.

Charlie had programmed my body to instinctively fear touch.

Green eyes locked on mine, searching for all my secrets, but I lowered my lashes. I couldn’t share those memories with him. Not now. Maybe not ever. Some things were better left in the past.

His touch was gentle as he stroked his fingers along my arm. Goose bumps popped up on my skin, a shiver shaking my spine in a delicious kind of way that had never happened before. I gulped. Kingston Hannigan was a dangerous, dangerous man.

Straightening, he closed my door and then got behind the wheel.

With how big he was, he had to do a lot of readjusting of the seat, but somehow he fit inside the little tin box that was not only my transportation but had doubled as my home throughout the past several years.

That car had been my only constant source of security.

I wasn't sure what I would do when it finally died.

That was a worry for another day, I reminded myself.

At some point, I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew, Kingston was carefully nudging me awake and we were parked in front of a single-story home in a good neighborhood.

It was a nice place, from what I could make out in the darkness of the early hours of the morning.

A well-maintained lawn, a few shrubs on either side of the front steps, river rocks decorating the landscaping instead of mulch.

Head pounding, I followed Kingston into his house as he carried Iris. It was surprisingly tidy for a man who lived alone.

At least, I assumed he lived alone. Quinn hadn't said anything to me about her son having a significant other the few times she'd mentioned him in our conversations. But I hadn't given it much thought back then.

Glancing around, I tried to find any signs of another person living in the house.

There was a masculine couch in the living room.

Basic coffee table and entertainment center.

End tables were on either side of the couch, both with lamps, and only a few pictures, mostly of his mom.

One of them had Quinn standing between her husband and son, her bright grin so genuinely happy I couldn't help smiling at the sight.

A few other photos showed a couple of women who shared the same green eyes as Kingston, and the resemblance between them was too stark for me to think they were anyone but family members.

If another woman lived there, she hadn't put any feminine touches on the place. No soft or bright colors. No pillows or anything else that would make the space her own. Just white walls, dark cherry hardwood floors, and leather furniture.

It shouldn't have mattered to me, yet I felt something deep in my stomach unclench.

He wouldn't disrespect his partner by bringing some strange woman and her kid home with him.

I wasn't sure why or how I knew that about Kingston, but everything inside me screamed that he was the complete opposite of Charlie.

My ex and I had never lived together, at least not in the real sense.

When I'd found out I was pregnant, at first, my parents had been salivating over the idea of the former governor's son becoming their son-in-law.

But when Charlie's parents vetoed that plan—something I'd been thankful for—my dad kicked me out.

Charlie moved me in to his parents' house, and I mainly stayed in the wing of their mansion that was reserved for the staff.

He was only a few months older than my seventeen-year-old self, and he stayed in his own room.

But he didn't try to hide the other girls he brought home, fucking them in the same bed where he'd impregnated me.

I never once cared who Charlie was having sex with.

By then, I'd seen his true self too many times to feel anything but fear and hatred for him.

But I'd been broke and had nowhere else to go.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson had paid for my prenatal care, plus had given me a small allowance every week to ensure my needs were met, which I'd saved.

Just in case.

It hadn't been much, but that money had helped me escape from them with my baby.

Fighting back those awful memories, I shook off the brief territorial sensation trying to claw at me.

For a flash of a moment, I'd been jealous, imagining Kingston living with a woman.

Sharing his life with her. Loving her. Which was ridiculous.

He was being kind to my child and me, nothing more.

I'd never been jealous of Charlie's girls, and I sure as hell wasn't jealous of any potential person that Kingston was involved with.

Iris began to squirm in Kingston's arms as he walked deeper into the house.

Other than Jim Lively, who hadn't been around much at all, my daughter hadn't been exposed to many men.

It had been shocking how quickly she'd latched on to Kingston and then so effortlessly fallen asleep in his arms. I wasn't sure if kids could sense the good and bad in people, but she'd trusted this man to keep her safe more than me when she'd been terrified in the hospital.

Pressing a kiss to the side of her head, he shushed her quietly before stepping through an open door.

I paused on the threshold, his scent hitting me hard just as a lamp was switched on.

His bedroom. A few items of clothing were on the floor by a hamper, but otherwise, the room was as tidy as the rest of the house.

The bed was even made, a mixture of dark and light shades of gray patterned on the covers, pillowcases, and sheets.

Pulling back everything with one hand, he carefully laid Iris on the bed, shifting a few pillows in front of her so she wouldn't easily fall off the bed in her sleep. Tucking the covers up over her, he paused to brush her hair away from her infected

ear before straightening.

“Sorry, this place only has one bedroom. But I change the sheets once a week.” His lips ticked upward in a quick smile. “I kinda have this thing about fresh sheets. It’s always my favorite day, and I sleep deeper those nights. Switched these out yesterday, so you should be good tonight.”

“I should?” I asked, confused. “Kingston, this is your house. You have a huge couch out there that is plenty for Iris and me. Please don’t give up your bed for us.”

His smile dropped, his green eyes darkening as he narrowed them on me.

“Yeah, this is my house, and I’m saying you are taking the bed, Demi.

I want to know that you two are comfortable, and this bed is damn—” He abruptly stopped and glanced at Iris before correcting himself.

“This bed is really comfortable. It’s a brand-new mattress too.

Had it replaced a few months ago, because the other one was old and lumpy. You’ll sleep well tonight.”

“I don’t want to be an inconvenience,” I muttered, lowering my eyes.

“You’re not,” he growled, taking a step toward me.

My muscles locked, my body bracing for the first strike, the hit that would leave me bruised and bleeding and broken.

It was instinct. I had no control over the reaction, although I wish I did.

Especially when Kingston's expression softened, his voice lowering as if he were talking to a frightened little animal.

"Baby, please don't be afraid of me. I would never hurt you. Never."

Hearing the pain in his voice, tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them back. "I'm not scared of you. Honest. This is simply a part of who I am." I bit down on the inside of my cheek, fighting off the memories of why I was so skittish. "My ex programmed me to expect pain."

His jaw turned to granite. "Give me his name. I'll make sure he never has the chance to touch you ever again."

If only...

But the fear of what Charlie's family could, and very much would, do to Kingston if he beat the shit out of their precious son kept my lips sealed. "Thank you for letting us stay here tonight."

"You're going to be here a lot longer than tonight, Demi," he told me, taking another step toward me.

It was a careful move, his gaze traveling over me with a look in his eyes I couldn't explain.

No one had ever looked at me like that before, so I didn't know what it meant.

"Fresh towels are in the little closet in the bathroom. The fridge is stocked, but if you need anything—anything, Demi—I will get it for you."

Throat tight with emotion, I tried to thank him. "That's very kind of you, but you

don't have to?—”

“Do not finish that sentence, sweetheart. I do what I want, when I want. And what I want is to take care of you and Iris. That's not because I'm a kind person.

” He released a harsh laugh. “I'm so far from being kind, I'm in another stratosphere.

I want... Fuck no, that's a lie. I need, baby.

I need to take care of you. And I'm going to.

Now, go take a shower and then get some sleep.

I'll watch over Iris while you get ready for bed. ”

“I don't have anything to change into.” All my clothes were in the trunk of my car, and they were mostly dirty. I'd been saving up for a trip to the laundromat. Iris still had a few more days' worth of clothes, though, so I'd been waiting.

He crossed to the dresser and opened the top drawer, pulling out a random pair of boxer briefs before opening the closet and grabbing a plain black T-shirt from a hanger. Instead of bringing them to me, he held them out, letting me come to him.

Swallowing with difficulty, I approached him, my heart in my throat. “Thank you.”

Those incredible green eyes darkened even more. “One day, you'll understand that you don't need to thank me, baby.”

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Chapter Seven

Kingston

Grabbing the coffeepot, I groggily poured myself a mug.

Shoving it back on the warmer, I rubbed sleep from my eyes with the palm of my free hand and opened the refrigerator door.

I'd slept like shit on the couch. It was comfortable enough, but my head wouldn't shut the fuck up so I could get some rest.

All I could think about was Demi and Iris. Where had they been the last few weeks since leaving the Lively house? What were they doing to get by during that time?

And who the hell was the bastard who had caused Demi to fear being touched?

Every time she flinched when I got too close or moved too fast or even changed how I was breathing because something frustrated me, I felt like I'd taken a kick straight to the chest. When I found out who the motherfucker was who had hurt my girl, I was going to be their angel of death.

Pouring cream into my cup, I left the container on the counter in case Demi wanted some. I'd heard her moving around in the bedroom earlier and had finally given up on trying to get any rest. As loudly as my stomach was growling, I figured my new roommates would be hungry too.

Placing the bacon in the oven, I started on the pancake batter.

I was flipping the second batch when I heard little feet slapping against the floor.

Turning my head, I watched as Iris ran into the kitchen.

Her hair was a tangle of wild curls, a small crease in her forehead as she glanced around the room with wide eyes.

Wiping my hands on a towel, I bent down, hoping she would come over to me. With a happy little noise, that crease smoothed out.

Iris didn't hesitate before launching herself toward me, causing my heart to give a happy squeeze when her tiny arms wrapped around me in a hug. "You!"

Grinning, I returned her hug. She'd mostly slept in my arms at the hospital the night before, but the few times she'd woken up, she'd called me "you" every time. We needed to fix that.

Instead of releasing me from her stranglehold hug, she tightened her arms around my neck. Lifting her, I arranged her in my arms so she didn't risk getting hurt while I finished cooking breakfast. "Are you hungry, princess?"

She lifted her head from where she'd buried her face in my neck to look at the stack of pancakes already waiting. "Hungry," she said with a nod.

"Let's get you fed then, munchkin." Transferring two pancakes to another plate, I carried it over to the kitchen table and set it down before placing Iris in the chair. "You like syrup?"

"Dip, dip, dip."

“I gotcha, girly,” I assured her, pouring a little syrup into a small container that I used for ketchup and other condiments when I had to pack my lunch for club runs.

As soon as everything was in place, Iris picked up one of the pancakes and rolled it up.

Dipping one end into the syrup, she took a small bite.

Going back to the fridge, I extracted a gallon of milk and a pint of orange juice.

Wanting her to have options, I poured one small cup of each and set them on the table close enough for her to reach on her own when she wanted them.

While she ate, I finished the rest of the pancakes.

By the time I heard Demi leaving the bedroom, the bacon was done, and Iris was on her second pancake.

“Morning, babe,” I called without looking at her, wanting to give her a moment to get settled and hoping like hell that I didn’t scare her away.

Having her in my house, under my roof, sleeping in my bed, had soothed something in the beast she’d awakened when I first met her weeks before.

He’d been clawing away at my sanity, desperate to find her, be near her, feel her.

But after I’d seen her flinch away from me so many times, it had caused this newly obsessive monster to get twitchy.

It was a struggle to contain him when all I wanted to do was hold on to her, tie her and her adorable little girl to me in any and every way possible.

Keeping my back to her, I pointed with my spatula. “Coffee’s fresh. Cream’s on the counter, and the sugar is in the cupboard above the pot. We have pancakes and crispy bacon, but would you like eggs as well? I wasn’t sure how you preferred them cooked, so I was waiting before I started on them.”

“Um...” Hearing the hesitation in her voice caused the wildness inside me to whimper.

No, no, no. She should never be scared. For any reason.

Fucking ever. Her ex’s death was going to be slow and painful.

“I’m not very hungry, so I’ll pass on the eggs.

The pancakes and bacon are more than enough. Thank you for cooking.”

Needing to see her, I angled my body so I could watch her cross to the table, already fussing over Iris. “Cuddle bug, you should have waited for Mommy before you left the bedroom.” Sitting down on the chair beside her daughter, Demi reorganized a few things on the table.

“You helped-ed me, Mommy,” Iris told her, sucking syrup off the piece of pancake in her hand before dipping it again.

“Kingston,” I corrected. “Kingston helped you, princess.”

Iris frowned at me. “You.”

“Kingston,” I repeated, even as that obsessed monster living in my head now whispered another name. Daddy. I want to be her daddy. Squashing that down, locking it away— just for now, buddy —I gave the kid a smile. “You can call me

Kingston.”

“Kingsting,” she tried to repeat.

“Close enough,” I said with a laugh.

That crease returned to Iris’s forehead. Dropping her food back on her plate, she tugged on her right ear. “Hurts.”

Demi’s face paled, her eyes going straight to me with fear in those pretty eyes. I swallowed hard, my heart giving a squeeze that she’d looked at me when she was frightened. She might have been unconsciously scared of human contact, but at least she trusted me when she was afraid for her baby girl.

Iris’s right ear was the one that had an infection in it so bad her eardrum had ruptured.

That was going to take a while to heal, and the emergency department doctor had explained she would have hearing loss for a while.

I wasn’t sure what would happen if she developed an infection in the left ear and the same thing happened.

Her ability to hear was already cut in half until she healed.

“It’s going to be okay, babe,” I promised, keeping my voice calm while I was fighting my own panic. “We’re going to give the princess her antibiotics and some pain reliever. You’re going to eat, and I’m going to make a few calls.”

“Kingston—”

“Shush,” I said firmly, stopping whatever protest she was about to spout. “Eat. I’ll be

right back.”

Walking into the bedroom, I grabbed the bottle of children’s pain reliever and the antibiotics that the ER nurse had given us before Iris was discharged.

Taking them back to the kitchen, I started measuring out the dosages for each.

Iris gave me an adorable glower when I approached her with the oral syringes for her medications.

“No,” she said with a stubborn huff, covering her mouth with both of her hands. “No take.”

“Iris, if you want to feel better, you need to take your meds like a good girl,” Demi said firmly.

Shaking her blond head, Iris glared from me to her mom, then straight back to me.

I’d also seen River struggle with her son, Rocco, to get him to take his medication when he was younger.

It was like watching my cousin wrestle a crocodile, and not even his dad could get him to hold still back then.

I got it, though. The liquid medication tasted bad, and I wouldn’t want to put that shit in my mouth either.

Thinking fast, I grabbed the can of whipped cream out of the fridge. Popping the top, I squirted a little into my mouth. Iris’s eyes grew wide. Smirking, I swallowed the sweet treat, then squirted a little more. “You want some?” I asked.

Still covering her mouth, she nodded, but she was a smart kid. Suspicion darkened her face.

“Here’s the deal. You get one squirt of whipped cream, and then you take the medicine. If you swallow it like a good girl, I’ll give you another little squirt.”

Those intelligent eyes flickered over my face for a long moment before she finally nodded, and she slowly dropped her hands into her lap.

“That’s my girl.” Relieved, I approached her with the can of whipped cream and the two oral syringes. Tipping her head back, she opened her mouth wide. I gave her a tiny taste of the whipped cream. She swallowed it quickly, smacking her lips together as she savored the sweet cream.

Not giving her time to back out of our deal, I gave her the two syringes, letting her dose herself.

Fighting this precious baby the way River used to do with Rocco was not something I wanted to experience.

I refused to give either of my girls a reason to be scared of me, and struggling to force medicine down Iris’s throat would only traumatize us both.

As soon as she pushed the plunger on the second syringe, I had the can of whipped cream at the ready. After she swallowed the pain reliever, I filled her mouth full then put a little on her nose. Laughing, she gulped down her reward, her chubby fingers swiping at her nose.

During the entire process, Demi had sat there practically holding her breath as she watched the exchange between her daughter and me. When I looked at her, she was nibbling on her bottom lip, but I saw the smile she was fighting.

“Does Mommy want a little cream too?” I teased.

“Yes!” Iris cheered, clapping her hands together. “Mommy, eat. Eat.”

Hesitation filled her face, but she still tipped her head back, her mouth opening just enough for me to get the tip of the nozzle inside.

My cock went rock hard. I could picture how hot she would look with my cock shoved into her mouth, those lips wet and swollen from sucking me so fucking greedily.

Squirting her a little cream inside, I pulled back quickly before I did something stupid.

Like grab her and kiss her. That would only scare her, and I would never willingly do anything to make this woman fear me.

But because I was a glutton for pain, I smeared a little of the cream on her bottom lip.

Her tongue licked it away, and I couldn't mask my groan. Pink filled her cheeks, something hot flashing in her eyes. Lowering her lashes, she tried to hide what she was thinking from me, but I'd already seen it.

She wanted me just as much as I wanted her.

Iris clapped her hands in glee. “It's good, huh, Mommy? You liked it?”

“So good,” Demi agreed, a pretty pink flooding her cheeks as she licked her lips. Blinking, she shook her head. “Yeah, Iris. Mommy likes the whipped cream.”

Clearing my throat, I set the can on the table. “You two keep eating, babe. I'm going

to make those calls. We're going to get our princess's ears better in no time."

"Kingston." She caught my hand, her fingers squeezing mine. "Thank you."

Fuck, I wanted to kiss her so damn badly. Unable to stop myself, I lifted her hand to my lips, needing a tiny taste. "Anything for my girls."

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Chapter Eight

Demi

Whatever calls Kingston needed to make had taken a while, and he was still in his room talking. His deep voice floated to the kitchen every so often in raised, harsh tones, and I'd been unable to keep from flinching each time I heard it.

Unable to eat more than a single pancake and a few slices of bacon, I'd gotten started on cleaning up the dishes and was putting the last plate on the bottom rack of the dishwasher when the door was unexpectedly thrown open.

With a startled squeal, I turned at the sudden opening of the back door.

Iris gasped from her place at the table, her hands covering her eyes in fright.

On instinct, I grabbed one of the knives from the chopping block just as the newcomer kicked the door shut with her foot.

"A little help wouldn't hurt, Kingston. Christ, you're the one who asked for all this shit. The least you could do is carry it." The blond woman turned with a box in her arms. Green eyes the same shade as Kingston's widened in surprise.

At first glance, I would have put her close to thirty, give or take, but she was beautiful with her blond hair pulled into a casual ponytail.

Her simple jeans and a pastel-pink blouse fit her slender body perfectly.

With her hands occupied, I didn't think she was an immediate threat to Iris, but I wasn't going to take any chances.

Confusion pulled her brows together, and she glanced around the kitchen as if she had never seen it before. "Ah, Christ. Please tell me I did not just walk into a stranger's house. I know I've had brain fog out the ass the last few weeks, but this is getting ridiculous."

Kingston came running into the kitchen, his bare feet slapping against the hardwood floors at a pace that spiked my fear a little higher. "Babe, what's..."

His voice trailed off as he took in the scene before him.

Me with the knife in my hand, my fingers clenched around it so hard they ached.

Iris with her hands still over her face.

The blonde who was obviously related to him standing by the door with her arms full of a box that looked as if it weighed more than she did.

Lifting his hands, he cautiously walked toward me. "Hey, sweetheart, hey. Let's put the knife down, okay? This is my cousin River. She's not going to hurt you or Iris, I promise."

Feeling as if my heart was going to explode from the sudden rush of fear, I carefully unclenched my fingers and placed the knife in the sink. But my eyes kept going back to the other woman, who hadn't moved an inch since spotting me.

Kingston stopped less than a foot away, his hands still lifted to chest level. "Can I hug you?" he asked quietly. "Your scream scared the life out of me, baby. I kinda need to hold you to reassure myself you're okay."

Hesitating for only a moment, I nodded and heard his ragged exhale just as his arms enfolded me.

His warmth, the strength in his arms as they carefully tightened around me, as if he was giving me time to tell him no, the scent of his body wash—it all hit me at once, and my muscles began to unclench.

Safe. Kingston was the safe place I'd been searching for my entire life.

I felt his lips press against the top of my head, and he gave me a squeeze.

Keeping one arm around me, he turned to face the woman at the door. "You should have called me when you got here, Riv. I would have carried everything in."

She placed the box on the floor before shaking out her arms. "I did call you, and it kept getting sent to voice mail. You weren't answering my texts either.

Mila is the only one at the store this morning, and I need to get back to help her out.

We've been trying to find a replacement for Avery, but the applicants are slim pickings. "

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered, rolling his eyes at her. "You have two part-time assistants. Promote one of them to manager. There, I solved your problem. You're welcome."

"Wow, why didn't I think of that?" she snipped sarcastically.

"Oh, wait. Maybe because the two part-timers are unable to work the hours needed to be manager. And with school out for the term starting after next week, one of them will be going home for the summer. Now we need to find not only a new manager but

also a few extra hands for part time.”

“You’ll get it sorted.” Brushing his hand over my hair, he released me and crossed to the large box on the floor.

Bending, he lifted it with an ease that had his cousin grumbling something under her breath.

“Thanks for dropping this off. I appreciate you taking time to help me out. Mom was at the diner already, and Aunt Raven wasn’t answering her phone. ”

“Yeah, things have been chaotic since yesterday. Did you know Ryan and Anya arrived last night? But Mav said they flew out again in the middle of the night with Sammy and Elias.”

“Sammy was in an accident. Of course they came to check on her. Not sure if she should have been flying after a concussion, but I bet her parents wanted her to recover at their place. Sammy is such a daddy’s girl, and if she were my daughter, I’d want to have eyes on her until I was sure she was feeling better. ”

River sighed. “I’m sad Nova wasn’t with them. We don’t get to see her enough these days.”

“Yeah, I miss her too. Maybe she will bring the kids for a visit over the summer. It would be nice if Cali brought Justice as well. Garret can stay in Colombia, for all I care, but I would love to see Aunt Flick and Jet.”

He carried the box to the table and placed it beside Iris. “Hey, princess, why are you covering those pretty eyes?” He tugged on her arms gently, giving my daughter a grin when she peeked at him through her fingers. “Say hi to Auntie River.”

Shyly, Iris looked up at River. “Hi.”

River gave her a warm smile. “Hi, precious.” Her gaze went back to me. “Sorry I scared you. I wasn’t expecting there to be anyone but Kingston here. He doesn’t have company often.”

Pulse still fluttering, I tried to relax. “Sorry about pulling a knife on you. I probably wouldn’t have actually stabbed you.”

She laughed. “No, I get it. If it were me, I would have done the same, and I can’t promise I wouldn’t have stabbed anyone who got between me and my kid.”

While Kingston started pulling items out of the box, causing Iris to ooh and aah over whatever he was showing her, River joined me at the sink.

“Have you and Kingston been a thing for long? I mean, he hasn’t exactly been telling me much of anything lately.

But we’ve all been crazy busy recently. It’s just...

I’m a little pissed at myself that I haven’t made more time for him the past few weeks.

He normally tells me important things going on in his life, though.

Like asking a girl I’ve never met to move in with him.

He didn’t even let Avery live with him. They mostly stayed at her place because he’s a weirdo about his personal space. ”

“Avery?” I repeated, my stomach knotting. She’d said that name earlier too, but I

hadn't really been paying attention to the conversation. My focus had been on the door behind her, checking and double-checking that she was alone. That there was no other danger.

That Charlie hadn't found us.

Mentally shaking away the bitter taste of...something...that the mention of Avery caused, I realized what else River had said.

"Oh. No, you have it wrong," I explained with a nervous laugh. "Kingston is just being kind and let us spend the night after my daughter was so sick. We ran into each other in the emergency department yesterday. He helped keep Iris calm while she was in so much pain and scared."

Her brow furrowed for a moment before she smirked at me.

"Oh, so you're new around here. That explains a lot, actually.

" She laughed as she walked to the fridge and opened the door.

"The only time I've ever heard the words kind and Kingston in the same sentence before is when people say things like Kingston is kind of an asshole . "

"Hey, innocent ears over here," Kingston complained, closing the box again. I hadn't seen any of the contents, but Iris was playing with a stuffed animal now. "Watch your language, Riv."

"Whoa," she muttered to herself. Pulling out a sports drink, she pointed a finger from me to the table, twirling it in a circle.

"This day keeps getting more and more bizarre, but I'm not disliking this alternate

universe I've found myself in.

As much as I want to stay and get all the details, Mila is going to be blowing up my phone in about ten seconds. ”

Crossing to Kingston, she handed him the bottle.

He took it, twisting the cap off fully before replacing it and giving it back to her, as if they had done the same thing a thousand times before.

“Thanks, cuz. I expect a long, long conversation with you later. If you don't reach out, I will track you down. ”

With a grunt, he turned her toward the door. “Go to work. My girls and I are busy.”

“Rocco and Mav have been watching way too many Marvel movies. I definitely stepped into an alternate universe. Are you really Kingston Hannigan, or are you a doppelg?nger?” She poked his cheek.

“Should I be worried there's another you walking around town?

Wait, are you an alien, Kingston? Blink twice if you're you. ”

“You're hilarious, River. Now, tell Demi and Iris goodbye.”

“Bye, Kingston's girls,” she called, giving Iris a wave before Kingston shoved her through the open door. “You better answer when I call you later!”

Shutting the door in her face, he flipped the lock and walked back to me. “Thanks for cleaning up, babe. We have an appointment for Iris in an hour. Is that enough time for you to get ready? I can help Iris if you tell me what to do.”

My head hadn't stopped spinning since the back door first swung open. "An appointment? On a Saturday? I don't remember anyone telling me about an appointment today, but I-I can't afford that, Kingston."

I wasn't even sure I could afford to get Iris more pain reliever. That Kingston got her to take both her ibuprofen and antibiotics was nothing short of a miracle, but she was already running low on both the children's Motrin and Tylenol that I tried to keep on hand at all times.

"There's an ENT specialist who was able to fit Iris in today.

You don't have to worry about the cost. I got you, baby.

" He started to reach for me but stopped himself at the last minute when I tensed.

Damn it. I wanted him to hug me again. I'd felt so safe when his arms were around me.

But I couldn't stop my reaction. It was just instinct.

Something darkened in his eyes, but he gave me a gentle smile. "As soon as you give me his name, I promise you'll never have to be scared again, Demi."

That would have been a nice alternate universe to wake up in, but I knew it was nothing but a wasted wish. Charlie and his family were too dangerous. I wouldn't risk Kingston getting hurt. Not when he'd already done so much for us.

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Chapter Nine

Kingston

Pulling my truck into Aggie's parking lot, I kept the vehicle running while I glanced in the rearview mirror.

Iris was still glowering at me, her arms crossed over her chest in the most adorable sullen pout I'd ever seen.

She was pissed at me for letting the doctor look in her ears instead of telling him no.

I hadn't wanted to put her in a situation where she was scared, but she had a real fear of doctors after her history of ear infections.

She'd looked to me to protect her, and I'd held on to her while the doctor did his thing, but she'd still been uncomfortable with the thorough inspection the ENT had to perform to get a better idea of what was going on.

She was grumpy as fuck and mad at me and her mom, but we at least had a care plan that was going to save her ability to hear. Once she got the tubes placed in her ears, the ENT was confident that Iris wouldn't have as many infections.

Demi sat quietly in the passenger seat beside me, her hands clasped in her lap. She hadn't said much since we'd left the doctor's office earlier. I could see the wheels rapidly turning in her head. The worry that weighed her down must have been crushing.

Money had never been an issue when I was growing up.

My parents were well above the comfort zone when it came to finances.

The only reason my mom worked was because she wanted to, not because she had to.

Dad was a patched Angel's Halo member, so he got a percentage of the MC's funds on top of his share of the profits from Hannigans'.

I'd been making my own money since I was fourteen, bussing tables at Aggie's and doing the dishes. When I was twenty-five, I bought in to Aggie's. It wasn't just because I wanted to give Mom a business partner and take some of the day-to-day pressure of running a restaurant off her shoulders.

Aggie's was my passion, just as much as it was my mother's.

Between the profits I earned from my share of the diner and the bar, plus what I made from my position in the MC, I'd never known what it felt like to struggle to pay bills—to worry about what would happen if I got sick and couldn't afford to go to the doctor. But worry was all Demi did.

And I wanted to fix it for her. I wanted to give her and Iris the fucking world. I was going to take the load of stress off her shoulders and make sure she didn't have to worry about anything ever again.

But I knew it was going to take time for her to trust me. Time to see that I was going to take care of her and her precious little girl. I just had to be patient and show her that everything was going to be okay.

We'd been parked for a few minutes before Demi finally blinked and focused on her surroundings. "I thought we were going home... I mean, back to your house." She

fidgeted with her seat belt. “I need to get my clothes out of your dryer, and then Iris and I can get out of your hair.”

Gritting my teeth to bite back the displeased growl that tried to break free every time she said something about leaving me, I unbuckled my seat belt and then her own. “It’s past lunchtime. I’m starving, babe. And I bet Iris would be a lot less grumpy if we filled up her tummy.”

“Kingston—”

I opened my door, shoving it closed before she could get out whatever protest she might have ready.

Opening the back door, I reached in and unfastened Iris from her car seat that I’d taken out of Demi’s car.

That vehicle was a deathtrap, and I was going to replace it as soon as I could.

I might have gone outside and disconnected a few wires so it wouldn’t start while she was getting ready for the doctor’s appointment, making sure we had to take my truck.

But Demi was smart as hell—and resourceful.

She’d had to play mechanic enough times on her own to know a thing or two about what made her car tick, and she’d noticed the issue right away.

Thankfully, we were running behind, and she hadn’t had time to fix the car without making us late for the doctor.

While we’d been in the waiting room and Demi was filling out the family history forms for Iris, I’d texted my cousin Max to have someone pick up the car from my

driveway with his tow truck.

If it were left up to me, I'd crush the fucking piece of tin, but Demi seemed attached to the damned thing.

Max was supposed to do a full service on it personally, replace the brakes, tires, and fluids.

Whatever it needed to make it safer, I'd told my cousin to ensure it got done, and I'd pay for it.

Iris let me take her out of her seat, but she still had her arms crossed over her chest, turning her face away from me when I tried to kiss her cheek. She was a tiny heartbreaker, but I wasn't above a little bribery to get her to like me again. "How about a milkshake?"

"No," she said stubbornly, that crease between her brows reminding me so much of her mom, I got a squeeze in the middle of my chest.

"Chocolate cake?" I offered, walking around the back of the truck to open the passenger door since Demi hadn't moved from her seat yet.

"No, no," she shook her head, causing her blond pigtails to swing back and forth. "Hmph! "

I held out my free hand to Demi, almost holding my breath until she hesitantly placed hers in mine. With my heart giving a happy little kick, I tried to pretend like this woman hadn't just given me a precious gift. "Ice cream sundae with extra hot fudge, sprinkles, and whipped cream?"

Iris started to shake her head again, but when I got to the whipped cream, she paused.

“I likeded the whipped creams.”

“I’ll put extra, extra, extra whipped cream on your ice cream,” I bartered. “But only if you eat some mac and cheese and maybe some chicken strips. Or do you want a hamburger?”

“Fries?” Iris suggested, batting those long, dark-blond lashes at me.

“Definitely fries,” I gave in as we entered the diner.

The place was still crowded from lunch, but there was a table and two booths free.

As the door shut behind us, every head turned so fast, a few people no doubt got whiplash from it, conversations fading until only a few voices could be heard.

Almost every eye was trained on us, causing Demi to blush and duck her head.

Shooting everyone a hard glare, I tugged her toward the booth in the back. Making sure she was comfortable before I placed Iris down across from her, I nodded at a few of my MC brothers who were in the middle of their own meal.

One of the younger waitresses came over as I dropped down beside Iris. “Hey, Kingston. I thought you were off today.”

“I am,” I told her coolly, sliding into the booth with Iris. “My girls are hungry. What do you want to drink, princess? Milk, water, or juice?”

“Appie juice?” she asked hopefully.

“Apple juice for her. I’ll take a Coke. Babe?”

“Um, water is fine,” Demi said softly.

“Okay. I’ll be right back with those drinks,” the girl said, watching us curiously. I gave her a hard look, and she gulped. Muttering an apology, she rushed to do her job.

I laid my hands palms-up on the table, wiggling my fingers at Demi. “What are you hungry for, baby? You barely ate anything at breakfast. How about a cheeseburger? Do you prefer onion rings over fries?”

Her smaller hand slid on top of mine, and I nearly crowed in triumph.

It was a small, innocent thing, but it felt like I’d just won the grand prize.

Demi didn’t even seem to notice she’d done it, barely glancing at me before turning her gaze to Iris and then the window.

“I’m not very hungry. I can eat some of Iris’s fries. ”

“Would you prefer something lighter, maybe a salad? We have grilled chicken as well as fried tenders that you can add to it. Or steak. You need some protein.” She shook her head, and my gut clenched. “Baby, please eat. For me?”

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, and I felt her fingers tremble in my hand. I wrapped mine around hers, locking her in place in case she decided to move away. “I’m really not hungry, Kingston.”

Skimming my eyes over her face, I blew out a breath. I could see how tired she was. She had dark circles under her eyes. She needed sleep and food, and I didn’t need her to confirm what I already knew. My girls had been living in that tin-can car of hers.

I was pissed the fuck off about that, but not at her.

Demi was doing what she thought was best for her and Iris.

Protecting her baby girl and herself. From what, I didn't know yet.

But I'd fucking figure it out. It was me I was mad at.

She'd run because of what had happened that last morning she brought in her muffins.

That was on me. But I'd fix this and teach her that she didn't have to be scared of anything or anyone as long as she had me.

"Demi?" Mom's voice had Demi's fingers clenching around mine. She tried to pull her hand free, but I lifted it to my lips, kissing her palm before I looked up at my mother. But Mom's focus was solely on the woman across from me.

With a wobbly smile and tears in her eyes, Mom held out her arms. "It is you. Oh sweetheart, I'm so happy to see you."

Shyly, Demi stood and let Mom hug her. I didn't miss how she flinched even at Mom's touch. Her thin arms went around my mother hesitantly. "Hi, Quinn. It's good to see you too."

When Mom pulled back, her gaze dropped to me. Blue eyes widened before narrowing on me in a way I remembered from my childhood. "I have so many questions," she half growled at me.

"Do you want to ask them now so the entire town can hear my answers too? Or would you rather wait until we're alone, and then that information can slowly filter through the rest of Creswell Springs?"

” I slid my arm across the back of the booth, drawing her attention to the little girl beside me.

“Because I’m okay with either, Ma. I’m just curious if you are or not. ”

“You might be grown, but I still gave birth to you, Kingston Everett Hannigan.”

I grimaced at being full-named. It was a freaking mouthful, and neither of my parents used it unless I was in trouble. Even at thirty-five, hearing my entire legal name from my mother was enough to make me lower my head a little.

But then I heard the softest, sweetest giggle in the world. Flicking a glance at Demi, I saw her put her hand over her mouth, surprise at her own action causing her eyes to widen, but she laughed a little louder.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t laugh, but you don’t look like an Everett to me. I picture an old farmer working his crops. Not...” She paused, her pretty eyes raking over me, causing her cheeks to darken from light pink to glowing red. “...all of this.”

“Hey now,” Mom complained, ready as always to defend her name choice. From what my father had always told me, she’d researched for weeks before deciding on a middle name. “It took me forever to decide between Everett and Charles, but Everett means resilient and brave.”

Demi’s face went blank, her smile fading along with the color in her face. “You definitely picked well. I would take an Everett over a Charles any day of the week.”

“Right? I was so glad we went with Everett because I’ve met a lot of guys named Charles who are douchebags.” Mom snickered, not immediately noticing the other woman’s reaction, but I filed that away for later. “What are you three eating? I’ll go cook it myself.”

“Ma, you should take a break. Let’s have lunch together. Come on,” I urged when she hesitated.

“We’re almost at capacity, honey.”

I gave the dining room a quick appraisal, noting all the customers were being taken care of.

Everyone had drinks except for us, but I saw our waitress carrying a tray in our direction with the three beverages.

All the waitresses were doing exactly what they were supposed to do.

There was happy chatter and the sounds of utensils against dishes.

No one seemed to be displeased with their service.

“You can take time for a meal, Ma.” I nudged Iris. “Tell Grammy you want her to eat with us, princess.”

Demi and Mom both gasped, but I was focused on the kid beside me. I winked down at her. Iris did that brow-crease thing for a few moments before nodding, giving me a smile, and turning the full effects of that beauty on my mom. “Will you eat with us, Grammy?”

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Chapter Ten

Demi

Kingston Everett Hannigan was overwhelming.

From his smile, to how gentle the giant biker was with my daughter, to how he waited for me to put my hand in his before touching me.

It was too much for my heart to take. At times, I couldn't catch my breath when I looked at him.

I was more afraid that this was all a dream, and I was going to wake up in the back of my car, cold and alone with Iris bleeding from her ears, than I was of coming face-to-face with Charlie ever again.

Which was the most terrifying scenario that could possibly happen to me.

Charlie and his family could kill me, leave me in the middle of the street, and walk away without a single person in the world to stop them.

It wasn't a matter of could ; the law didn't matter when it came to the politician's son.

No one would touch the powerful Johnson family.

Not the local authorities when I'd been beaten to the brink of death.

Not even the Feds, when I'd tried to ask for help and offered to testify about some of the sketchy things I'd seen while living in their house.

That had been a last-ditch idea that had finally sent me running with Iris at the threat of having my baby being raised by those monsters.

Kingston scooped up a bite of the sundae he'd made for Iris personally, making sure it was the perfect bite of ice cream, sprinkles, fudge, and whipped cream before stretching his arm across the table.

I dipped my head forward, accepting the offered treat.

He thought he was so sneaky, feeding me every few minutes from his own plate and then slipping me a little of the huge dessert he'd made for a three-year-old.

I hadn't been hungry when we first arrived.

It was hard to think about eating when I needed to figure out how I was going to cover the cost of the treatment my child needed to avoid potentially losing her ability to hear.

That kind of stress made me nauseated. Despite my only ordering a side salad—at Quinn's insistence—he'd been feeding me fries from his own plate.

Or slipping pieces of his chicken tenders into my salad while his mom distracted me with her happy chatter.

Or telling Iris to offer me bites of her mac and cheese so I knew how good it was.

"It's yummy. Right, Mommy?" Iris asked as she watched me lick the cream from my lips when Kingston pulled the spoon back.

Her face was covered with chocolate sauce, cheese, and ketchup, but she hadn't complained about her ears hurting since we'd left the doctor's office earlier.

She'd laughed more in the past half hour than she'd done in the last week.

Damn it, she'd been happier in the last twenty-four hours than she'd been in her entire life.

And fuck, but same.

Considering the fear I'd experienced over Iris having a bleeding ear, terrified she was going to lose her hearing, then going home with a man who could have easily filed charges on me for assault and destruction of property, that didn't say much for my mental stability.

I was stressed more than ever, worried sick about how I was going to get Iris the medical treatments she needed, still homeless, and yet I felt truly safe and more content for the first time... ever.

I was starting to wonder if Charlie had caused me brain damage with that last beating he'd given me. Maybe it had simply taken three years before it fully set in.

But I couldn't blame my ex for the bizarre choices I'd made since seeing Kingston in the ER waiting room. That motherfucker didn't get to take any credit for the best thing to happen to me since my baby was placed in my arms.

Quinn used her napkin to wipe her mouth after taking the last bite of her own salad and turned so she was facing me on our side of the booth.

"Does this mean you'll be supplying us with morning pastries again?"

I have at least a dozen customers who keep begging me to put them back on the breakfast menu.

And I'm not even exaggerating when I say that Elias Reid drops by every morning looking hopeful for his muffin fix. He might have a slight addiction."

Embarrassed heat climbed my neck, memories of the last time I'd brought her a batch of muffins replaying in my mind. "I truly am sorry for what happened the last time I was here. I'm so ashamed of myself for how I behaved."

"Don't be," she dismissed with a melodic laugh. "You have great aim, by the way. It was a little satisfying seeing you put my son in his place. I think you may have even knocked some sense into his thick head."

Kingston grunted. "Let's pretend that never happened."

"If anyone should apologize, it would be Kingston. He's kind of an a-hole at times.

"Quinn picked up her glass of Diet Coke, and I choked back a laugh of my own, remembering what River had said earlier that morning about her cousin's name normally only being in the same sentence with the word "kind" when someone was calling him an asshole.

His green eyes captured mine, and he winked. But then he surprised me by placing his right hand over his heart. "From the bottom of my heart, I apologize for what I said that morning, baby."

While my heart turned to a squishy, melted mess in my chest, Quinn's jaw dropped. "Holy cow. I didn't think he was capable of saying sorry to anyone but me and maybe five other people. Interesting. Very, very interesting."

“You’re exaggerating, Ma.”

“You’re right. Five was being generous. It’s more like three, and that’s including me.”

“Mom,” he growled. “You’re making me look bad to Demi.”

“Oh please, she already saw how rude you’re capable of being. But now, I actually can increase the number of people you’re nice to. With Demi and Iris added to the list, five is no longer an inflation.” He rolled his eyes at her, and she smirked at her son.

But she stopped teasing him and returned to her original question.

“So, let’s discuss the muffin situation.

I’m confident if I place a sign on the door that you’re going to be resupplying us with all that baked goodness, I can sell twice as many products every day.

I’m willing to increase your percentage of the profits of the sales from fifty to seventy-five percent. What do you think? Do we have a deal?”

Twisting my fingers together in my lap, I considered her offer.

If I had a kitchen to cook in, I definitely would have already jumped at what she was suggesting.

But it was difficult to bake anything when my kitchen was the trunk of a run-down car that primarily stored the nonperishable foods I tried to stock up on for Iris.

I doubted Joy Lively’s family would accept me back as the old woman’s caregiver,

and even as desperate as I was for a secure place to sleep, I didn't think I could return to their house without doing that mean old witch bodily harm.

"I think that's a great idea," Kingston chimed in before I could turn his mother down. "We'll stop at the grocery store on the way home to get everything you need. The only baking I do is the Death by Chocolate cake we have on the menu here."

"Kingston," I attempted to protest, but he put another spoonful of ice cream into my mouth, effectively shutting me up long enough to swallow the dessert while he continued talking to his mom.

"Which of the muffins sold out, Ma? We should keep the stock numbers high on those and a smaller amount of the others to keep the customers happy."

"All of Demi's muffins sold out every morning, no exceptions.

But the double-chocolate and the banana chocolate chip sold the fastest. The apple-cinnamon was a huge hit, and the blueberry streusel was normally the last one to go, but we would be completely out of everything before nine every day.

I'm thinking if we double the order, we could last the full breakfast crowd. "

"That would definitely be a good idea," he agreed. "But what if we start a muffin of the week? Something new every week for a while to get an idea of what else would sell? There are a few trends going around, and we could include some of them on our dessert menu for dinner."

"Like cookie butter?" I suggested, intrigued by his idea, completely forgetting about the fact that I didn't have a kitchen to bake in.

"I could do a cookie butter filling, then drizzle the top with melted cookie butter and

add crushed Biscoff. Maybe even add a little white chocolate to give it a bit more decadence if it's added to the dessert menu. ”

Quinn licked her lips. “My mouth is already watering at the thought. Now that's all I'm going to think about until I get one.”

“I could make you a few tonight, just to test them out?” I murmured, making a mental shopping list and cringing at how expensive the materials would be.

“Well, maybe not tonight. How about later in the week?” After I'd made enough money to cover the costs for what I needed to create the new muffin option.

“She's going to bring them tomorrow,” Kingston promised, and I shot him a startled look, already shaking my head.

“I think I should figure out the whole kitchen situation before I agree to extra items I've never made before. I don't even have a recipe for a muffin like that, barely a general idea.” Panic caused my throat to tighten until my voice vanished completely.

Everything was finally starting to catch up to me.

Iris and her ears. How I was going to afford her medication and surgery.

Where we were going to sleep tonight should have been more of a concern to me than finding a kitchen I could use to bake muffins.

Yet it was what had my heart racing, sweat beading along my entire body, even as a chill started to make me shiver.

Kingston made a soothing noise and placed his hand palm-up on the table, wiggling his fingers.

Without thinking about it, I put mine on top, and he wrapped his fingers around mine in a gentle squeeze.

At first touch, some of my anxiety began to ease, my pulse lowering quickly, the warmth returning to my limbs without the risk of sweat soaking through my top.

Quinn's gaze shot between her son and me, a smile teasing at her lips. "I'm going to let you two sort out whatever is going on here and get back to work."

As she stood, Iris's attention was pulled from where she was making a mess with her ice cream, her face losing the happy glow it had been radiating only moments before. "Gammy, don't go."

I was still reeling from how quickly things had moved from Kingston instructing my child to call Quinn "Grammy" to the older woman adopting that role in the blink of an eye.

That was an honorific I'd never expected Iris to give to anyone.

Not when my own mother abandoned me the moment she and my father realized producing a Johnson "heir" wasn't going to net them the paycheck they were greedy to get their hands on.

There was no way I'd ever allow Iris to call Charlie's mother "Grandma," let alone something so adorable as "Gammy."

And I was back to wondering if I had slow-onset brain damage from the beating I'd taken three years prior because I didn't object to Iris calling Quinn Grammy or Gammy. My heart felt like it was going to dissolve with love every time Quinn even looked at my daughter with affection in her blue eyes.

“Grammy has work to do, sweet pea,” Quinn told her gently, reaching across the table to tap her playfully on the nose where she had a dollop of her beloved whipped cream. “But I’ll see you again really soon, okay?”

“Amma-row?” Iris asked, causing the other woman to grin.

“Definitely tomorrow,” she promised. “Kingston will bring you to Grammy’s house while your mommy is resting. I’m sure she will need a break after all that baking she’s going to be doing.”

Chapter Eleven

Kingston

Delicious scents filled my entire house, causing my stomach to grumble. After making sure Iris was tucked into bed, the old teddy bear I'd given her earlier that day clutched to her chest, I shut the door to my room and followed my nose to the kitchen.

As expected, Demi was still rushing around mixing up batter, her hair pulled back in a braid to keep it out of her face, a dusting of flour on one cheek. She'd been hurrying, trying to make as many muffins as possible in a single night from the moment we got home from the grocery store.

I'd thought her partnering with my mom again to supply breakfast pastries for the diner would ease some of her anxiety, but I was wrong. She'd been more nervous since accepting the offer than she was before.

"Smells amazing in here, babe," I praised, crossing to the counter where a batch of the banana chocolate chip was cooling.

I'd never had one of Demi's muffins before, but I knew these were my mother's favorite from how many times she'd talked about them.

They were huge, almost as big as my hand, with large chunks of semisweet chocolate on top.

“Hmm?” she asked distractedly, lifting her head from where she was adding blueberries to the mixing bowl for the latest batch she was making. “Oh, thank you. Have one if you’re hungry. You deserve as many as you want for helping me with all this.”

Fuck, I wasn’t sure which made me more homicidal, the way she constantly voiced her gratitude, or how she continually apologized for the smallest things. As soon as I found out who had caused my woman so much emotional and physical abuse, I was going to gut the sonofabitch.

“Demi, put the spoon down,” I instructed, keeping my tone gentle.

Brows creased, she glanced up from the mixing bowl. “What?”

Moving slowly so I didn’t spook her, I took the spoon from her hand and placed it in the bowl before carefully turning her to face me.

That she didn’t flinch as badly as she had only hours before soothed something in me, but it wouldn’t be satisfied until she completely stopped tensing when I touched her.

“I don’t deserve anything from you. You don’t owe me a single thing, babe.

Not your time or your delicious-smelling food.

Not your beautiful smiles or those cute scowls you throw my way when you’re annoyed.

But I’m going to work hard to earn them. ”

Tears filled her eyes, a shuddery exhale leaving her.

“Kingston, you’ve given me so much in the last twenty-four hours alone.

Between helping me with Iris at the hospital, to allowing us to sleep here.

You arranged for a specialist to squeeze my sick daughter in on a Saturday.

And don’t you dare try to tell me again that the ENT had some random cancelation.

Unless it’s one of those urgent care kind of clinics, I don’t know of any doctor, let alone a specialist, that is open on a Saturday.

Hell, you even bought all these supplies so I could earn a little money from selling the one thing I can actually do right—bake.

I owe you more than I’ll ever be able to repay. ”

Swallowing my groan as a few tears spilled down her cheek, I grasped her chin between my thumb and index finger.

Tipping her head up, I wanted her to see that I was speaking from the bottom of my heart.

“Listen really, really closely, because what I’m about to say is important, okay?

” I waited for her to nod, uncertainty filling her entire face.

“You’re important to me. Not just you, but Iris as well.

And I know you haven’t realized yet how monumental that is, but if you give me a little more time, I promise I’ll show you exactly what that means. ”

“But I’m no one, Kingston. Iris and I are strangers to you.

And you don’t know what kind of trouble is chasing us.

I’m being so reckless, staying in one place for this long.

If my ex finds us, I don’t know what will happen, but I do know it will be bad.

” She gulped, her rising panic causing her pulse to flutter like a hummingbird’s wing at the base of her throat.

“I don’t want you to get hurt because of me. ”

Watching the fear fill her eyes, seeing the concern she had for me, caused that freshly awakened monster in my head to thrash against the walls of my sanity.

But I didn’t let her witness that. I couldn’t.

It would terrify her, and I would do everything in my power to ensure she never had anything to fear ever again.

If I were to scare her or Iris, it would kill me.

“He’s not going to find you, Demi. I promise you, on everything I hold sacred, you will never have to worry about that bastard again.”

“You don’t know him,” she whispered, her eyes shooting toward the door, then the windows, as if making sure we were still alone.

As if she fucking needed to double-check that no one was going to barge in and attack her.

“His family has connections. It would be better if Iris and I kept moving. As much as I appreciate everything you’re doing for us, it would destroy me if you or your mom were pulled into the middle of my nightmare with Iris’s father.

They wouldn’t hesitate to take away everything you’ve worked so hard for.

Kingston, they have the kind of power that they could shut down Aggie’s.

They could snap their fingers and have your diner razed to the ground.

Those monsters would attack you financially and then physically.

They would kill you without thinking twice. Charlie’s dad...”

Her voice trailed off, her face going ghostly pale.

Pressing her lips together, she tried to push back from me.

“Damn it, I shouldn’t have said his name aloud.

The last time I did, it was like I conjured him out of thin air, and he showed up in the small town where we had been for barely a few days. ”

It was clear she thought she had a valid reason to fear those people.

But what she didn’t know was that I was more dangerous than those motherfuckers.

Whatever evil she imagined them capable of, that they must have rained down on her in the past to cause her to feel such terror from simply speaking her ex’s name aloud, was nothing compared to what I was going to return to them with interest.

Wrapping my arms around her small body, I pulled her against me.

Murmuring soothingly to her, I rocked her against me, pressing kisses to the top of her head.

After a heartbeat, she began to relax in my hold, her body melting into mine.

“I don’t doubt that whoever this piece of scum is, he thinks he is untouchable.

But he’s not God, Demi. And he sure as hell doesn’t hold any power here.

Please, give me a chance to prove to you that you’re safe here.

I won’t let anyone hurt either of my girls ever again. ”

“I can’t be selfish,” she said so quietly I nearly didn’t hear her. “I can’t put you in their path.”

Panic at the thought that she might leave me at any moment caused my arms to tighten around her.

“One month,” I begged, touching my lips to her ear.

“Please, babe, give me one month. Stay here with me. I’ll cover the cost of Iris’s procedure to get the tubes in her ears.

I can give you a new life, with new identities, and everything you ever hoped for.

All I need is for you to take a chance on me. ”

She jerked back at that promise. “That’s not possible.”

If I explained all the things that Sanctuary was capable of providing, I was scared she would want to go there instead of staying with me.

I was too selfish to let her go. Not when I knew I could protect her and Iris so much better than the women's shelter.

"Give me one month, and I'll make it possible," I vowed.

"What if he finds us? What if he hurts you?"

Jealous rage tried to blind me at the thought of her ex touching her again. I couldn't handle the idea of anyone getting close to what was mine. "Thirty days, sweetheart. Please."

Indecision clouded her eyes. I felt her inner battle, her fear of Charlie doing something to harm her, Iris, and even me.

But I could also sense how much she wanted to give in, to believe me, to allow me to make it better for her.

She was so damned tired. Her wary soul stared up at me from the depths of her eyes, silently begging me not to let her down.

"I shouldn't," she murmured half under her breath.

"But you will?" I needed to hear her say it. "Baby?"

"Y-yes. Fine. Thirty days. But if Charlie finds us here, things will end bloody."

Bloody was exactly how Charlie was going to end, but she didn't need to know that.

“Thank you, Demi.” I brushed my thumb over her cheek, aching to kiss her, but I knew it was too soon.

As much as I wanted to rush everything, I knew she wasn’t there yet.

Once she didn’t have to constantly worry about looking over her shoulder to double-check her past wasn’t chasing her, then she might trust me enough to let me into her heart.

“I swear that you won’t regret trusting me. ”

—

Mom was in her yard, weeding the flower beds around the front of the house, when I pulled into my parents’ driveway the next afternoon. Seeing my truck, she waved and her eyes lit up.

“Gammy!” Iris squealed the moment I unfastened her from her car seat. As soon as her feet were on the ground, she was running.

“Hey, sweet pea.” My mom bent to hug Iris before she took the small backpack I had in my hand.

“Her medications are all in there. She just had a dose of her antibiotics with lunch, but she’s due for some pain relievers in about an hour.

Stay on top of that, because she won’t let you know she’s uncomfortable until her ears start throbbing.

” I racked my brain, trying to think of anything else that was important.

“If she starts tugging on her ears, there are drops in there to help her get a little extra relief. Demi was taking a nap when I left, so call me, not her.”

“I don’t have her number,” Mom reminded me, and I clenched my jaw.

“Does she even have a phone?” I grumbled to myself. Fuck it, I’d take care of that after I dealt with a few other things first. “I’ll get you the number this evening. Where’s Dad?”

“What do you need, boy?” my father asked as he walked from around the back of the house where he had a detached garage he kept his bike in. Most Sundays, he tinkered around in there, pretending not to keep an eye on Mom as she pruned her flowers.

Seeing him, Iris wrapped her arms tight around Mom’s leg. Her wide eyes went to me, as if seeking reassurance that she was safe. I crouched down, holding out my arms for her. Without hesitation, she launched herself at me, hugging her little arms around my neck tight enough to choke me.

Laughing, I kissed her cheek as I straightened with her in my arms. “Princess, this is my dad. Do you want to say hi to Gramps?”

“Are you messing with me, Kingston?” Dad complained, his face set in hard lines. “That is not my name. Don’t be slapping me with something like that, boy.”

Iris’s arms tightened even harder around my neck, that adorable crease forming between her brows.

Dad moved closer, holding out his arms to her, a smile warming his weathered face. “You call me Papa, Iris.”

She studied him for a long moment before she jumped into his arms. Settling her in

one arm, he nodded toward my truck. “Are you going somewhere?”

“I’m headed over to Sanctuary,” I explained. “Shouldn’t be too long, but I want to check on Nishia, see how she’s feeling after the accident the other day. And I need to talk to Jack about a few things. I’ll be back before dinner, though.”

“Do you need anything, son?” he asked, his brows lifted.

“Nah, Dad. I got everything covered, but if that changes, I’ll let you know.” Leaning in, I smacked another kiss to Iris’s cheek. “Be a good girl for Grammy and Papa, princess. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Iris, let’s go make some lemonade for us and Papa,” Mom suggested, waiting for Dad to place the girl on her feet before taking her hand. “Do you like strawberries in your lemonade?”

“I dunno. I nevers had lemonade.”

“Then let’s find out if you like it or not, sweet pea.” Opening the front door, Mom waved to me before disappearing inside with the toddler.

Dad walked me to my truck. “Are you sure you’re good?”

“I have a few things I gotta sort out, Dad. Once I have more information, I’ll talk to you about it,” I assured him. “Don’t worry about me, old man. Just take care of that little girl for me. Protect her like she’s family.”

“As far as I’m concerned, she is family, Kingston. Now, go take care of your business. Your princess is safe here.” Knocking his knuckles against my truck, he stepped back. “Stay safe, son.”

Chapter Twelve

Kingston

Twenty minutes later, I punched in the code to the gate at Sanctuary and drove up the long driveway. A few times a month, I worked security at the women's shelter, walking the perimeter and double-checking that there weren't any weak links in the fence that surrounded the entire property.

Women from around the country came to Sanctuary in search of a safe haven from their abusers.

Some brought children; some were on their own.

But no one was ever turned away. They had an entire medical staff to help the women heal, physically as well as mentally.

Once they recovered, they were given the option of staying or starting over somewhere else, with a new identity complete with Social Security number and birth certificate.

They were even given the chance to learn a trade or get a college education through the scholarship program Sanctuary had set up with Trinity University.

Mom told me she'd tried to explain what Sanctuary was to Demi when she first met her, but my girl was so terrified of her ex, she hadn't wanted to take a chance with the shelter.

And because I was a selfish asshole who didn't want to risk losing her, I hadn't tried to go into more detail about Sanctuary being an option.

Parking out front, I climbed the steps and walked into the mansion that had been turned into small apartments for residents.

There was a common room, a communal kitchen, and even a gym for some of the women to do their rehabilitation exercises in.

I knew the layout since I'd been coming to Sanctuary to help out since I was a kid, but I made sure to keep my steps light.

Even something as simple as how a person walked could trigger a patient suffering from the PTSD of an abusive relationship, and I was mindful of that as I made my way to Nishia's apartment.

I'd texted my cousin before I left my house with Iris earlier, so he was expecting me. Stopping outside the apartment, I tapped three times and waited.

"You keep your ass in that bed, fairy," Jack growled from the other side of the door. "I'm only going down the hall to the office for a little while. Delaney is on her way over to visit. You better still be in that bed when she gets here, or she doesn't get to stay."

Jack opened the door, adjusting his MC cut over his plain white shirt.

"Bear, I'm fine," Nishia complained. "Can't I at least sit on the couch? I'm tired of being in bed."

"No. Stay in bed until I get back—or else."

“I’m bored,” she whined.

“That’s why Delaney is coming over,” he said patiently. “Hey. Let’s take this to the office. I don’t want to disturb my fairy. She still has a pretty intense headache.”

“No, I don’t! You’re being unreasonable. Kingston, help. SOS. Save me from my unreasonable boyfriend.”

Jack bared his teeth at me, the only warning he was likely to give me before he ripped my head off if I so much as crossed the threshold of the apartment. “Feel better, Nishia. See you when you’re fully recovered.”

“You Hannigans are so frustrating!” she yelled.

Closing the door, Jack led me to the office at the back of the house. Once the door was closed behind us, I dropped into one of the chairs in front of the desk. Jack pulled out his phone and swiped his thumb over the screen.

“Yo, biker,” a female voice I didn’t recognize answered. “What do you need now? The fairy is recovering, so you should be with her.”

“Mieke, say hello to my cousin Kingston. Kingston, Mieke. She’s the wizard we use to create new identities and backgrounds for all our residents. Plus, she was able to help me with Nishia’s recent situation.”

“I prefer genie to wizard, thank you,” Mieke corrected, sounding haughty for all of two seconds before she was back to her bored tone. “I’m going to assume this isn’t going to be a fun Sunday afternoon chat. Or even a thank-you conversation for helping you get the fairy back, Jack.”

“Sure, thanks for nothing. Anya Vitucci and the chip in Sammy’s arm were how I got

Nishia back. Your skills were useless.”

“It’s not my fault that you didn’t have a tracker on your girl, dumbass. But I’m rectifying that. The watch with the chip I just finished tweaking is on its way to you right now. It’s waterproof, and the battery never dies. Once it’s on her, the only way to take it off is your fingerprint.”

Jack settled back into his chair, appearing a little more relaxed, but the surly expression on his face didn’t change. “Thank you, Mieke.”

“Now, what can I do for you, Kingston Hannigan?”

“I need to find someone. Discreetly.”

“Okay, guys. Let’s clarify something. I’m a genius, not a mind reader. Can you provide me with a few more details?”

Stabbing my fingers through my hair, I sat forward in my chair.

“Someone I care about is running from a past she won’t tell me anything about.

But she’s terrified of her ex. I can give you what little I know, Mieke, but it’s not much.

And I need none of your searches to trigger anything that could put eyes on my girls.
”

A long pause filled the room. Jack’s eyes narrowed on me, but I shrugged.

He didn’t do deep, meaningful conversations, and he was the last person I would have a heart-to-heart with.

More often than not, he was a loner, but if he needed help, he tended to get our cousin Max to assist him.

River was my person in our family, and her husband Maverick was the MC brother I rode with the most. I'd come to Jack for assistance because he could help me get Demi and Iris new IDs and, hopefully, send me in the right direction so I could get my hands on the bastard who had hurt Demi.

"I'm the number one hacker in the world, Kingston.

Not the state. Not the country. Not the fucking hemisphere.

But the world. I take that title seriously.

There is a reason I'm not in a federal prison for taking little peeks into classified intel.

It's because I'm the best at what I do, and the one and only time I did get caught deep in the Pentagon when I was a sloppy teenager, the government decided they would rather use my skills for their own gain than lock me away.

Not that it would have done them much good, but whatever helps them sleep at night.
"

She sounded confident, not cocky. This genie wasn't boasting.

She was trying to reassure me of her skills.

"I can't promise that any search I conduct won't trigger any online alerts.

But I can assure you that, should that happen, the people watching will be sent on a wild expedition to the heart of the Amazonian rain forest."

Jack grimaced. “Whatever is going on, man, you can trust Mieke.”

Going with my gut, I started giving her as many details as I had, but they weren’t much. Mieke started typing away as soon as I began talking, asking me a few random questions.

“Is this your girl?”

My phone pinged with an incoming text, and I looked down to find Demi’s picture on my phone.

“I didn’t give you my number,” I mused as I looked at the photo.

Demi was younger in the picture, her hair shorter, her face fuller.

But still so damn beautiful it made my chest squeeze looking at it.

Her smile was bright, the light in her eyes almost mischievous.

Another photo popped up, this one of some guy in a football jersey with his arm around her waist. She was smiling in the picture, but something was off.

Maybe it was the lighting, but it seemed like some of the spark was missing from her eyes.

My hand drew up into a fist, wanting to put it through the face of the creep hugging up on her.

“That’s her,” I bit out.

“The guy in the picture is Charles William Johnson III. His father is a former two-

term Georgia governor. Mother was a pageant queen back in the day, and by that, I mean she was a runner-up for Miss Universe. Daddy dearest is currently running for senator in Georgia. Other than the few pictures of Demi, I'm not seeing many online connections between her and Charlie-boy.

They attended the same private prep schools, but Demi mysteriously stopped any online activity a little over three years ago.

Charlie, though, he's all over the place. ”

Her clicking sounded more aggressive. “Mommy and Daddy have been cleaning up a lot of their son's messes.

Why do people think they can hide their crimes so easily?

Do they honestly think unless they get a cleaner in, there won't be any traces left behind?

FYI, digital cleaners and hackers aren't necessarily one and the same.

But you need to be good at hacking to be able to do any cleaning. ”

More aggressive tapping filled the otherwise quiet room.

“I'm not saying I would help these dirtbags, but I've got clients who pay me very, very good money to keep their records squeaky clean.

With a few keystrokes, I could send this information to Charles Johnson II's rival.

Those idiots were way too confident that no one would deep-dive their history.

It makes me wonder why no one has exposed them yet.

Hmm... Well, that's a rabbit hole I can't fall down just yet.

But it has nothing to do with the current subject matter.

Let me make a note to return to this at a later time for my own personal reasons. Back to Charlie-boy... Aw, fuck nah."

I wrapped my fingers around the arms of the chair, feeling like I was on a fucking roller coaster with how she was shooting my emotions all over the place as she spoke. Was she even talking to me—or just herself? I didn't know, and that only increased my agitation.

"She's good at spiking your blood pressure up," Jack warned, his green gaze trained on me. "But she doesn't normally go all country twang on me. That's new territory. Entirely undiscovered level of pissed-off Mieke that I am unfamiliar with."

"Sorry, am I causing you cardiac distress?" Mieke asked casually as she continued to tap-tap-tap on the other end of the call, not sounding the least bit apologetic.

"My husband is a cardiologist. I can have him contact your personal physician with some suggestions on how to better control your blood pressure. You're due for a physical anyway, Kingston.

It's been over two years since your last wellness check. Don't play with your health, my dude."

"How does she know that?" I hissed at my cousin.

"She can multitask," he said with a shrug. "She probably has one screen open with

your full digital history in front of her right now.”

“No worries. I’m wiping your misdeeds as we speak,” she reassured before the full extent of what that truly meant hit me. “No one needs to know you accidentally subscribed to so many porn sites when you were twenty-three. Interesting viewing choices, but no kink-shaming here.”

“Christ, she’s terrifying,” I groaned.

“No need for compliments. I’m not charging for today’s services.

” More tapping. “Just tell me what you want me to do with all this intel. I can ruin Johnson’s Senate run right now.

And believe me, after what I just discovered, I want to do major damage to that entire family.

Or I can hold on to these details for a little while if you’d like.

But no promises on me not getting a random intrusive thought and just dumping this on the major news networks. ”

“I couldn’t care less what you do to that old fuck. What I want to know is where the son is.”

“That doesn’t sound fun. At least, not for me. But okay. I kinda, sorta, maybe a lot, want to make people bleed after what I just discovered. Do a little stabby-stabby for me when you get your hands on him, yeah?”

My head was throbbing with tension from listening to her talk.

What the fuck was she seeing online about Demi's ex that would make her want to stab him?

I had a hundred reasons—a slice of my blade for every flinch from my woman because she was afraid a touch might cause her pain.

But Jack shrugged again, like Mieke's rambling was expected.

“I'm sending you Charlie-boy's current GPS.

He has a few different trackers on him, which is a smart move for his parents since he stays in so much trouble.

But it's also incredibly stupid, not to mention dangerous, since they don't have someone monitoring his activities in real time.

Sucks for them that they pissed off the wrong person.

And by person, I mean me. But also you, of course,” she continued absently.

How was she having a full conversation and still tapping away on her computer? That went beyond what I could comprehend as multitasking.

“They must spend a few million a year fixing the little prick's messes.

And by little, I absolutely mean little.

Why do guys think it's okay to send people dick pics?

Gag. There are times I need eye bleach for the things I am forced to see.

This job should have hazard pay. Or a licensed medical professional on standby twenty-four seven.

A therapist would make bank on the trauma I'm subjected to by being force-fed other people's nasty. "

When my phone pinged with the new text from Mieke, I clenched my fingers around the device. The monster in my head laughed darkly, sending a shiver down my spine. She'd given me the active feed of his location. No matter where he went, I'd know exactly where he was at any time.

Jack sat up straighter in his chair, something familiar glittering in his eyes for a moment before he blinked it away.

That newly unleashed beast roaming in my head took notice and grinned, finally identifying why Jack had always made me a little uneasy.

But now that I saw it, and I understood, I realized I'd only been uncomfortable because I wasn't ready to embrace that part of myself.

Demi had unlocked something I couldn't put away again, but that no longer mattered.

"Can I go hunting with you, cuz?" Jack asked, a menacing grin tipping his lips upward.

I gripped the armrest harder, torn between wanting to destroy Charlie with my own hands and needing to stay close to my girls.

"As badly as I want to go hunting, I can't leave Demi and Iris alone right now.

My little one is still recovering, and Demi is skittish as hell.

I'm not risking losing either of them again. ”

Jack nodded his understanding, but his scary-as-fuck grin didn't falter. “That's okay, man. I'll bring him to you.”

Chapter Thirteen

Demi

Kingston stacked the last of the boxes on the back seat of his truck. “My cousin will be done with your car this evening. You take my truck, and I’ll stay home with Iris while you deliver this morning’s treats.”

At this point, I didn’t know if I was allowed to be frustrated with the giant in front of me.

He’d been working his ass off to take care of us, and I felt ungrateful for constantly telling him he didn’t have to and didn’t need to keep helping me.

It wasn’t like he listened anyway. He did what he wanted, when he wanted, how he wanted.

And I wasn’t hating it.

I’d never crushed on someone before, not even my ex.

Everything I felt for Kingston was new territory for me.

I was discovering things about myself every day because of him.

It had been a week since he’d rescued Iris and me from that emergency room.

An entire week of being cared for, appreciated, treated like my daughter and I were the most precious people in the world to him.

It was an addictive sensation. I hoped like hell it lasted forever, but I understood that it wouldn't. Good things never did.

But that didn't mean I couldn't savor and cherish every minute while I could.

My heart gave a little kick as I took the keys from him, my fingers lingering for a moment on his huge hand. "Do you always get what you want, Kingston?"

Grasping my wrist, he lifted my hand to his mouth. I couldn't hold back the little whine that escaped me as his lips brushed over my palm, his green eyes full of heat. "I fucking hope so. Because I've never wanted anything more than I want you, baby."

And I'd never wanted to be kissed more in my life than I did when he looked at me like that. As if his entire being was tuned in to mine. As if he wanted to devour me—consume me.

"Kingston," I whispered, fighting a moan as he kissed up my arm.

I tried my best not to tense up when he touched me because I enjoyed it so much, but I still struggled to control the reflex.

As soon as he felt it, he reined himself in.

Every time. I knew he was trying not to scare me off, but I wanted as much of his touch as he was willing to give.

I just didn't know how to tell him that.

His stubble tickled, causing me to squeal and him to laugh, breaking the tension.

It pulled him from the deep thoughts of what could have happened to cause me to fear touch.

He'd asked a few times, but I wasn't ready to unload my past yet.

Hearing the rumble of his deep laugh brought me back from the brink of asking him to kiss something other than my hand. I wanted to taste him. Everywhere.

Pressing one last kiss to my arm, he turned me toward the driver's door of his truck. "Be safe on the road. I'll have breakfast waiting when you get back, so don't take too long."

With my little legs, I had to adjust the seat until it was nearly touching the steering wheel so my feet would reach the pedals. It was a beast of a vehicle, and I was nervous for the first few miles to Aggie's, but by the time I pulled into the parking lot, I was more confident.

Finding a spot close to the entrance, I started carrying in the first couple boxes. All week, I'd been supplying the diner with fresh muffins, and they'd been selling out like crazy. Quinn kept asking me to up the numbers every day, and they were gone by the time lunch rolled around.

River had complained about the lack of pastries twice that week when she'd stopped by the house.

Once with her sister-in-law Mila, and the second time with her son, Rocco.

Both occasions, she'd told me emphatically that if I supplied her with more of the cookie butter muffins, she'd give me an unlimited gift card to her boutique,

WomanLand.

That was something I was taking into serious consideration.

I liked River a lot, even though she and Mila had grilled me about my intentions toward her favorite cousin.

Mila was a little intimidating, but she'd been super friendly after I'd confided a bit of my background to the two women.

Mila had four kids of her own, and I was convinced she was playing with me when she said she had two sets of twins until she'd shown me pictures from when she was pregnant.

From our brief time hanging out, I felt like Mila and River could both be good friends. As long as I didn't break Kingston's heart. That was something I never wanted to do.

But I was terrified he was going to destroy my heart if I wasn't careful. I hated being away from him for even a minute. When he went to work in the afternoons, I felt lost until he came home again. Or he called me.

Another one of those "you shouldn't have" moments was when he'd given me a brand-new cell phone.

I'd been using the occasional pay-as-you-go phones that I bought at Walmart, but I'd tossed the last one I'd had when I thought Charlie might have caught up to us in New Mexico.

Kingston had insisted that I have the phone for Iris's sake, if nothing else.

I loved it when he called me. It made me feel like a teenager on the phone with her first boyfriend, wanting to just sit and hear him breathe over the line.

There was no need for words. I was happy with the quiet between us as long as I knew it was him on the other end.

When Kingston had confessed one evening that he just wanted to hear my voice, I'd almost cried from happiness.

That man was working his way deeper into my heart every day.

Which was dangerous. At least, I tried to convince myself it was dangerous.

For Iris and me. For him. I shouldn't be selfish, playing with Kingston's life the way I was.

Every day I spent with him could be one day closer to Charlie Johnson finding us.

Hurting everyone I'd come to care about. Stealing my baby away.

But I felt safe with Kingston, and it was getting harder and harder to imagine that Charlie could even touch us when that strong Viking-like man seemed indestructible.

Placing the last container on the counter, I barely had time to open the first box to start placing them in the display before someone was asking for two of the apple-cinnamon muffins and a cup of coffee to go.

"I don't know why y'all haven't had them the last few weeks, but my wife is going to be a happy woman when I drop these off to her at work," the older man told Opal as she poured coffee in a to-go cup.

She shot me a wink as she packaged two of the desired pastries in a paper bag while I kept stocking the display. “Our supplier was on vacation, Dan. But you should let your wife and all her friends know that we will have all their favorite muffins in stock for breakfast now.”

He handed her a twenty, telling her to keep the change for a tip, and snatched up the bag. “Her ass is gonna be double the size in no time with these damn things. I can’t wait.”

Opal huffed a laugh as he walked away, whistling a happy tune. “Dan always did appreciate his lady’s backside. Maybe if my first boyfriend had shown more enthusiasm for my ass than his best friend’s dick, we’d still be together.”

“Why is everyone oversharing today?” someone complained from a stool to our right.

At a guess, the guy was in his early twenties.

Picking up his mug of coffee, he frowned down at his plate of half-eaten breakfast. “I don’t need all that shit in my head this early in the morning.

Especially about Rita’s ass. That’s my aunt, for fuck’s sake. ”

“Eat your pancakes and mind your business, Dale,” Opal told him without pausing what she was doing. “You don’t want to hear about your uncle praising your aunt’s goodies, then don’t listen to other people’s conversations.”

“Hearing isn’t something I can just turn off. I’m not Delaney Reid, who can switch off those little implant thingies she has attached to her head now.”

“Keep my wife’s name out of your mouth,” a deep voice growled with so much menace I jumped.

Startled, I glanced around, easily finding the source of that terrifying tone.

A man who seemed familiar to me, but I was sure I'd never met, stood on the other side of the counter right behind Dale.

He had dark hair a little on the shaggy side, startling blue eyes, and the most vicious scowl I'd ever seen on a person before.

Danger poured off him in waves, his incredible eyes glittering with the promise of violence.

How I'd missed his entrance, I didn't know, but I took three steps back, my flight reaction engaged.

Heartbeat echoing in my ears, I felt the panic overtake me so fast I didn't have a chance to fight the way my vision dimmed. When the room began to spin, I knew I was in trouble, but there was nothing I could do to help myself.

"Demi?" Opal touched my arm.

With a yelp, I tried to curl into a ball, every muscle in my body preparing for the impact of the next punch, the next kick. My lungs began to burn and the ache from broken ribs felt fresh, but it was only a memory.

I wasn't in real pain. Not this time. Just a memory. Just a memory. I needed to remember that it was only a...memory.

"Hey, hon, take a few deep breaths for me," my friend tried to soothe, but it was hard to concentrate on her voice when there was a ringing in my ears.

Gulping, I struggled to calm my rapid breathing, the erratic beat of my pulse causing

sweat to bead along my entire body.

“Whoa. What the fuck is going on?” another deep voice demanded. Someone grabbed my wrist, causing me to scream and jerk back, but they held firm. It was enough to cause me to blink my surroundings back into focus, and I found a familiar face in front of me.

There was no way the man before me could be mistaken for anyone but Kingston’s father.

They had the same eyes, which I knew was true for many of the Hannigan clan, but their facial features were so similar.

The shape of their nose, the sharpness of their jawline, their thick lashes that were a light brown instead of the dark blond of their hair.

Raider Hannigan had lines on his face that Kingston hadn’t earned yet, but something in those green depths was an echo of the man who had quickly become my safe place.

I’d seen Kingston’s dad from a distance in the past, but the day before, he’d introduced himself to me when Kingston and I had picked Iris up from his parents’ house.

She spent as much time at her Gammy and Papa’s house as she did at Kingston’s.

My little girl, who had only relied on me for her entire life, now had an entire army of people who adored her at her beck and call. I loved that for her. It was something I’d never had but always hoped for, and Kingston had given it to us.

Fuck, I was pretty sure I was falling for him.

“Demi honey, take a slow, deep breath for me.” His hands squeezed my wrists when I didn’t immediately follow the command. “You’re safe, darlin’. I promise you’re safe. Swear to you, girl, I won’t let anyone harm you.”

“I-I’m sorry.” Tears started spilling down my face, and I couldn’t stop shivering all of a sudden. “I-I don’t know what happened t-to...to make me...”

His face softened. “You don’t have to explain a damned thing to me. Max was just being his normal asshole self, hearing someone talking about Delaney. He’s sorry. Right, Max? You sorry, boy? Tell Demi you’re sorry.”

A large body shifted to my left, and I couldn’t help but try to shrink behind the man still holding me. “I am so sorry, Demi. I didn’t mean to spook you. Shit, don’t be afraid of me. I wouldn’t hurt you.”

“I... Um, I don’t... I-I’m not...” Pressing my lips together, I stopped myself from stuttering another word, realizing I probably sounded like an idiot. My heart rate was gradually beginning to slow, and as the pounding in my ears started to ease, I realized that the entire diner had gone silent.

Heat began to climb into my face, embarrassment scalding my cheeks. All eyes were on me. Making a public spectacle of myself was not conducive to keeping a low profile, which was exactly what I needed to do in order to make sure Charlie and his family didn’t find me.

“I’m gonna hug you now, Demi. Are you okay with that, honey?”

Raider gave me a moment to think about that, and when I nodded, he folded his arms around me. I pressed my face to his chest, realizing he was wearing his leather MC cut. It reminded me so much of Kingston’s, my fingers clutched at it, holding on to the older man a little tighter.

A little more of my panic began to recede, but my tears flowed faster. Embarrassment mixed heavily with the adrenaline still racing through my veins. Closing my eyes, I tried to focus on the man holding me. Kingston's father.

"Demi, I really am sorry," Max's voice had completely lost its menacing quality.

The change from mean and growly to gentle felt like one of the tricks Charlie used to play on me.

How he'd go from screaming and shouting in my face, slapping me across the cheek with his heavy, open palms and leaving huge handprints behind, to apologizing and begging me to forgive him in a matter of minutes.

Other than having been told Max was Kingston's cousin once or twice, I didn't know anything about him.

If I'd been thinking clearly, I would have been able to differentiate Max from Charlie, but my brain was still in flight mode.

His softer, quieter tone terrified me on the same level as the harshness that had been in his voice moments before.

Trembling, I shifted away from Max's voice and released my hold on Raider. Scrubbing my fingers over my wet face, I dipped my head and ran for the door.

"Demi!"

Chapter Fourteen

Demi

Ignoring the voices calling after me, I climbed into Kingston's truck.

Thankfully, there weren't any bystanders in the parking lot as I hit reverse and stomped on the gas.

I wasn't sure how I got out of that parking lot without crashing into other vehicles, but as soon as I was on the road again, I didn't pause for anything.

Not even the stop sign a mile down the road.

Every inch of my body felt like it had been dropped into ice, but sweat soaked through my clothes, making them cling to me.

The scent of fear was suffocating inside the cab of the truck, causing me to gag at the stench of my weakness.

I fumbled with buttons on the door until all the windows were down.

I'd gone three years without freaking out like I just had.

I'd had a few moments when I'd frozen up from some random incident that would send me spiraling with memories.

I'd relive the fear and the pain. But Iris was always with me, and some sixth sense would engage.

Having her in my arms, being able to see, touch, and smell my little one, always pulled me out of the PTSD.

None of those occasions had been as bad as what had just happened at Aggie's. There had been no baby within reach to bundle into my arms and reassure myself that we were both safe and unharmed.

It barely felt like I'd left the diner when I pulled into Kingston's driveway.

The truck lurched when I came to a sudden stop, tossing me forward before whipping me back, and I realized I hadn't put on my seat belt.

I couldn't remember anything from the drive across town.

The windows were still down. I was shaking, shivering so hard my teeth chattered together.

I had my hands clenched around the steering wheel so hard my fingers were numb.

I stared down at my hands. "You are so fucking weak, Demi. And useless. You can't protect yourself. You can't protect Iris."

A sob bubbled out of me. "Weak and useless and nothing."

Suddenly, the driver's door was ripped open, but I was too far gone in my own self-loathing to even scream. Kingston reached for me, but instead of shrinking back from his touch, I threw myself into his arms. My arms and legs wrapped around him as I buried my face in his neck.

“I don’t want to be weak and useless and nothing anymore,” I choked out. “I’m so tired of being afraid. I’m so fucking tired, Kingston.”

His hold on me was tight. “I’m sorry you’re tired, baby. But you are not weak. Or useless. And you sure as hell aren’t nothing.”

“I am,” I cried, soaking him with more tears.

“No, you’re not, Demi,” he argued, using that commanding tone he had to resort to when Iris was being stubborn and he needed to be firm with her.

“Th-then what am I?”

“Mine,” he breathed against my ear. Pressing me against the side of the truck, he tipped my head back with one hand under my chin. Sunlight was barely peeking through the clouds, shining down on us, allowing me to see the conviction in his green eyes. “You are mine, baby.”

I wanted to be his so badly, but no one like him would want someone like me.

As if he could read the thoughts going through my mind, his chest began to rumble with a protest. “Goddamn it, Demi. You’re beautiful and smart.

You are an amazing mother. And you make the most divine muffins I’ve ever tasted.

Your ex, that bastard Charlie, he is the useless one.

Worthless. Nothing but a waste of space. ”

Kingston cupped the side of my face, his eyes imploring me to listen.

“You aren’t weak, baby. You survived . Whatever hell Charlie put you through, you survived that.

Raising Iris on your own. Trying to hide and protect yourself and your precious little girl.

You did that, Demi. You lived it, and you survived it.

That’s not weakness, sweetheart. That’s not useless. ”

I shook my head, but I wasn’t sure what I was saying no to.

“How can you call yourself nothing when you’re everything, baby? You are my everything.”

“You don’t even know me, Kingston.”

He dropped his forehead to mine with an agonized groan.

“Stop fighting this. You’re only torturing us both at this point, babe.

There is no way you don’t feel this thing between us.

Christ, girl, you live inside me now. In my head from that first day, with that first muffin you nailed me with.

But now, you’re in my heart. Don’t lie to me and claim you don’t know what I’m saying. You feel it too.”

“That’s insane. No one falls that fast.”

He lifted his head, his face ravaged with pain.

My stomach dipped and flipped, knowing my words hurt him. Squeezing my eyes closed, I gave him my truth and prayed loving him wouldn't put him in danger. "But I lost my mind the same day I gave my heart to you, Kingston."

Something feral flickering in his eyes was my only warning before his mouth crushed against mine.

Gasping at the intensity of the kiss, I grabbed the back of his neck, my fingers tugging on his hair as I kissed him back.

Heat flooded my body, thawing the ice that had encased every inch back at the diner.

He licked across my bottom lip, his large hands molding my body to his.

He was everywhere all at once, making it hard to keep up with what he was doing to make me feel good.

All I knew was that I liked it all. How his kiss was greedy but gave as much as he took.

How his hard didn't yield to my soft. The way his fingers caressed but branded every inch of skin he touched.

Kingston's body was so much bigger than mine, but when he kissed me, it was like we were the missing puzzle pieces that completed each other. Everything snapped perfectly into place, anchoring us together.

Breaking the kiss, he filled his hands with my ass and turned.

His chest rose and fell in heavy pants as he walked into the house with me still wrapped around him.

“You’re lucky I still have a little blood left in my brain so I can think clearly enough not to fuck you in the driveway.

No one gets to see you come apart for me, Demi. Be a good girl while I get us inside.”

“D-don’t say that.” I tugged his head back down for a kiss. “I like it too much when you say I’m a good girl.”

He dropped down onto the couch, already pushing my shirt up and my leggings down. “There’s no such thing as liking something too much. You either do or you don’t.”

“I like it, but it’s dangerous. It makes me wet, Kingston.”

“Fuck,” he groaned, dipping his fingers into my panties. His thumb flicked over my clit, causing a rainbow of lights to flash before my eyes. “This kitty is dripping for me, baby. Let me have a taste.”

I had no time to think about what he was doing before he thrust his middle finger into me.

While I was reeling from the pleasure, he rolled us, laying me on the couch and tearing away my panties.

My brain had shut down, refusing to do anything but savor every moment of pleasure.

He spread my thighs wider, settling between my legs, opening me for him.

He swiped his tongue up my slit before slurping my clit.

My back curled up, an orgasm twisting my entire body in the most intense one I'd ever felt.

Grabbing on to his head, I shamelessly rode his face through the tremors, his tongue and mouth making the most obscene yet erotic noises I'd ever heard.

Whimpering as another pulse of pleasure rocked my body, I released him. Lifting his head, he licked my release off his glistening mouth. "I've been fantasizing about you sitting on my face for weeks now, baby. Thank you for giving me a taste of what that dream coming true will be like."

Heat filled my face, but he didn't give me a chance to feel self-conscious. Unsnapping his jeans, he pushed them down his legs, along with his boxer briefs. He wrapped one hand around his shaft. With a gulp, I watched him stroke himself, transfixed by the sheer size of his cock.

Kingston was big everywhere—no exceptions.

"Tell me you're mine," he commanded, diving in for another kiss. He notched himself to my opening and slowly began to feed his cock into my tightness. "Tell me your heart belongs to me."

Moaning, I kissed him back, feeling another orgasm building as he stretched me. "I love you, Kingston."

He sucked in a harsh breath, his eyes closing for a moment as my confession settled over him. When he lifted his lashes, everything I'd ever hoped to see in his gaze was staring back at me at the same time as he thrust balls deep. "Fucking love you too, baby."

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Chapter Fifteen

Kingston

Kissing Demi's shoulder, I rolled to my feet. I wanted to stay cuddled up to her, naked on the couch, all day, but that wasn't a possibility. At least, not for today. Soon, though, I promised myself. Very soon.

We'd been lucky that Iris had slept so long. She was still tucked in bed. That was where I wanted to take her mother, but I only had one bedroom.

For now.

Sleeping on the couch for a week hadn't been so bad.

I'd gone on many club runs and had had to sleep in some wild places.

Waking up with fire ants biting my balls had been pretty bad.

The venom from their bites caused blisters that made it look like I had an STD.

Recovering from that shit had been agony, but since Maverick had been just as miserable as I'd been at the time, suffering the same fate, I'd thought it was hilarious.

Neither of us sat down without checking for those little assholes now, though.

It was not getting to cuddle up to Demi every night that had been the worst part of

having to sleep on my couch.

Now that I'd been inside her, there was no way I was going to be able to sleep anywhere but with her snuggled against me.

I needed a bigger house, with plenty of beds, so our little one would have her own room.

I could fuck Demi without fear of scarring our kid for life.

After pulling up my jeans, I bent to pick up Demi's leggings and panties. Holding the soft fabric between my fingers was enough to get me hard again, but there wasn't time for another round. "Come here, babe."

She moved slowly, still dazed from the last orgasm when I'd filled her full with my come.

For the moment, she wasn't concerned about that little detail.

I was an asshole for getting off so hard on the idea of knocking her up, but the thought of her giving me another baby to love was too much.

I wanted a life with her, and locking her down with my kid was all I could imagine.

Once she did realize what I'd done, we could talk about it.

But for the moment, I was going to keep my mouth shut.

Her hair was wild, giving her that freshly fucked glow I wanted to see every single day for the rest of eternity. Standing on shaky legs, she let me clean her up with my shirt before redressing her in her clothes. Once she was covered up, I sat back down

on the couch and pulled her onto my lap.

“You want to talk about what happened at the diner?”

“Not really,” she said in a small voice.

I nodded. “Okay. We don’t have to discuss that yet. Tell me about your ex instead.”

It was a long overdue conversation. Other than asking a few questions here and there, I hadn’t pushed her for more information about Charlie, but that was mainly because I already had many of the answers to that piece of shit’s history.

Jack had him strapped to a table in one of the MC’s cabins thirty miles north. I’d been to see Charlie-boy every day since he’d become a guest, and each time I left, he was screaming in pain and terror like the little bitch he was.

So, yeah, I had plenty of answers to my questions about that motherfucker.

But I wanted Demi to tell me all of her bad memories, and then I’d replace them with good ones.

“I want to tell you, Kingston, but I feel like he can see me if I say his name aloud,” she whispered. “Logically, I know he can’t. But his family has the kind of power where they could destroy your entire life if they thought for a moment you were important to me.”

She traced her finger over one of my tattoos, as if she was unable to not touch me, torment in those pretty eyes I loved so much.

Seeing her like that killed me. I wanted to make everything better for her, no matter what was causing her pain, and I knew I could make all her worries disappear if I told

her the truth about myself. “And you are very important.”

Hearing her say that was on the same scale as having her say she loved me. One sentence and this woman had me ready to give her anything and everything.

“The Johnson family isn’t as all-powerful as you think they are, sweetheart.”

Demi gasped, her entire body tensing in my arms. I hated dropping their names on her like that, but she had built them up in her mind as an untouchable entity. Like a monster that couldn’t be beaten. When, in reality, I’d already wiped out their reign of terror.

Mieke had taken care of Charlie’s parents without them even making national news.

His father had withdrawn from his Senate run earlier in the week, and then he and his wife had taken a break from the public eye for personal reasons.

Their security detail had been released, and they were taking time to themselves for the foreseeable future.

That had happened three days ago.

Jack’s IT genius was more terrifying than Charles Johnson and his vapid wife could have ever hoped to be. She’d wiped all traces of them from existence with a few taps and clicks on her computer screen. Bank accounts, emptied. Social media, erased.

Once she had their digital footprints cleaned up, I’d taken care of the rest. Charlie’s mommy and daddy were as dead as he was going to be when I was done torturing the sonofabitch. They were gator food in a Louisiana swamp, thanks to a few favors I’d called in.

Wide eyes scanned my face, her heartbeat fluttering in her throat. “What did you do?” Tears filled her eyes, but she closed them before one could spill out. “Oh my god, Kingston, they will hurt you!”

“Baby, I don’t want to scare you, but you have to face the reality that I am more dangerous than Charlie Johnson.” I tipped her chin up and kissed the tip of her nose. That crease in her brow appeared, melting my heart in a way I’d never be able to make her understand.

“You aren’t afraid of me, are you?” Frightening her was the last thing I wanted to do, but I couldn’t hide who I was forever.

She shook her head. “No, of course not. You make me feel safe for the first time in my life, Kingston.”

“I don’t want that to change. Please always remember that I would rather die than cause you a single moment of fear. I want to be your safe place, babe. You and Iris never have to be scared of anything as long as I continue to breathe.”

“But they might—” I covered her mouth with my hand, stopping her frantic flow of words.

“Promise me you will remember.”

After a moment, she nodded, and I dropped my hand, tucking it between her legs. Fuck, that felt good. She was so soft and warm. I could have sat there holding her for the rest of my life and died a happy man.

Telling her was going to change everything. She wasn’t going to see me the same way. It scared the fuck out of me, but she needed this. To move on. To heal. To know she was the one who wielded all the power now.

“Three days ago, I had Charles and Veronica Johnson slaughtered like the pigs they are and then fed to a pack of alligators. All their billions were wiped from their accounts by our MC’s tech.

There isn’t a single trace of them anywhere, digitally or otherwise.

Those monsters who haunt your dreams can’t touch you now, Demi. ”

All the color leached from her face. “Wh-what?”

I stayed quiet, letting everything I’d just confessed to her sink in, praying I didn’t lose her trust.

Begging whatever deity who would listen that I wouldn’t lose her.

“You’re joking.” She tried to laugh but ended up whimpering instead. That sound was the equivalent of having my heart sliced open with a dull razor. “There’s no way you could have...”

I wanted to lie, feed her any story that wouldn’t hurt or scare her. But this woman was my forever. She was going to get the truth, and nothing less than that.

“There were many ways I could have, babe. That was simply the option I chose to go with. If you weren’t so concerned about them causing trouble for me, I might not have told you.

But I don’t want you to constantly be looking over your shoulder for them.

That would have only caused tension between us. And I won’t allow that to happen.”

Seeing the gears turning in her head, I held my breath, waiting for the fear to fill her

eyes. For disgust to replace the love in her heart. Long minutes passed before her shoulders drooped for a moment.

Only to tense again. “But Charlie’s still out there.

He could take Iris. Even if his parents are dead, he will find us.

Maybe he’s tired of hurting me physically at this point, but he could steal Iris away.

Or petition for custody. A judge would take her from me and hand her over to her father with a snap of Charlie’s fingers. ”

“Ah, baby, do you think I’d let that bastard still breathe after all the things he’s done to you?

Every time you flinch, every little whine you try to mask, the way you try to make yourself smaller when someone bigger than you gets too close.

” I laughed, the sound manic to my own ears.

That beast that now roamed free in my head had enjoyed each and every session we’d had with Charlie-boy strapped to that table while he begged for his mommy.

My beast would fucking purr when Charlie took his last breath.

“I’ve made him pay for that shit, and I’ll keep making him pay until you tell me it’s time for the angel of death to drag him to hell. ”

She grew quiet again, her chin trembled a few times, but she didn’t make a sound as minute after minute ticked away.

Her voice was barely a whisper when she asked, “You know what he did, don’t you? You said you have a tech person, that they wiped the Johnsons’ digital footprint. Does that mean they found my information from before too? Did they show you my hospital records?”

I couldn’t unsee the things Mieke had shown me.

The pictures and the medical reports that had been hidden on the dark web but not erased because the Johnsons had been so confident they were untouchable.

Her bruises. Her blood. Those X-rays of her many broken bones.

That fucking CT scan of her internal bleeding.

Those images would never be wiped from my mind.

“I hope one day you will tell me about it. All of it. Not just when you nearly died, but the stuff that led up to it as well.”

She shivered, her eyes going unfocused for a moment before popping back to mine.

“I don’t know if I can. I’ve never talked about it to anyone.

The few times I tried to reach out for help and tell someone what was happening, they either didn’t believe me or outright laughed at me.

I was seventeen, and they told me I deserved what I got because I was a dirty whore who let herself get pregnant.

They said I probably did it on purpose, and they didn’t believe Charlie would hurt me.

I probably did it to myself for attention or to get back at Charlie because he didn't want me or my baby. ”

I sucked in a breath, fighting the rage I felt for the people who had failed my girl. It caused an itchy, twitchy sensation in my head that I couldn't scratch.

Demi shrugged, as if it didn't matter. But it did. Everything about this woman mattered to me. “And then when I left, there was no one to tell because it was safer not to talk.”

“I hate that you went through all that. I'm sorry you had to face it alone. I know it's difficult to relive the dark moments. But I'll never let anyone touch you with violence again, baby.”

A tiny smile kicked up one side of her mouth. “I know, Kingston. Because of you, I look forward to waking up every morning. Being near you brings me a peace I never thought I would find. I'm not scared when you're at my side.”

“That makes me so damn happy, Demi. I'm going to spend the rest of my life ensuring you are loved and protected. But I want you not to be afraid, even when I'm not with you. You deserve that freedom.”

“I'm starting to realize that.”

“Maybe it will help if you speak to the staff at Sanctuary. They're trained professionals who specialize in survivors of domestic abuse.

” She ducked her head, her cheeks filling with pink.

“No, baby, don't do that. There's nothing to be embarrassed about.

I'm so damn thankful you're here. You escaped that monster and made a life for not only yourself, but our little one as well.

You made it home to me. That should be celebrated, not hidden away like something shameful. ”

She swallowed hard, blinking back tears. “It doesn't feel like I accomplished much. Until I met you, I was barely living. I had nothing, not even a home for my baby. You saved us.”

“That's where you're wrong. You saved me ,” I murmured, trying to keep my voice low so the intensity of what I was feeling didn't spook her.

“I wasn't living before I met you and Iris.

I was just existing. There's no way of explaining, except there was life before you, which was bland and boring.

I felt numb. And now, there's life with you.

It's full of spice and color and the most precious giggles that cause my heart to sing. ”

Inhaling deeply, I met her gaze, showing her every part of myself, letting her see the new wildness that lived inside me because of her. “This life is my best life. You give that to me every day.”

Chapter Sixteen

Demi

I wasn't sure what stank more, the smell of blood and urine or the decay that permeated the thick air, melding together in the heat. There was definitely something dead somewhere in the cabin, but it wasn't the man lying on the table in front of me.

Charlie Johnson, the monster who starred in my worst nightmares, was strapped to a table. Rope was knotted around his wrists, stretching them tightly above his head. From the angle of his dislocated shoulders, he must have fought the restraints hard while he still had the energy.

He'd been a guest in this house of horrors for more than two weeks at this point.

Now, he was nothing more than skin and bones, with barely enough blood in his body to keep his heart pumping.

The only reason he wasn't dead yet was the IV that was giving him fluids and the occasional dose of adrenaline whenever his heart stopped beating.

Or so Kingston had told me when I'd asked one night.

Charlie's feet were bound to the metal table with chains that were so tight they were embedded deeply into the skin and muscle. Flies buzzed around, and when I took a small step forward, I thought I saw something white moving around in the rotting flesh. A lot of those white somethings.

Perhaps the scent of death was actually coming from the pitiful creature lying on that table. He looked like a science experiment gone wrong. Open wounds on every part of his exposed body, and the only cloth offering him a minuscule bit of modesty was the blood-soaked towel draped over his groin.

I'd believed Kingston when he'd told me about the Johnsons being gone. A big part of me had even trusted that he'd spoken the truth when he'd said he was holding my ex captive and torturing him for all the things he'd done to me.

But there was still that nagging voice at the back of my mind that kept whispering it wasn't true.

That Kingston wouldn't have been able to exorcise the demons that continued to haunt me.

After two weeks of wondering and waiting, I'd begged him to show me it was true.

That Charlie couldn't get to me. That he'd never be able to get his hands on Iris.

I could feel Kingston's reluctance every mile he drove us to the cabin. His white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel had never eased from the moment we'd dropped off Iris at his parents' house earlier.

"You can change your mind. We don't have to do this. Let me take a few pictures instead. Don't add more bad memories, babe," he'd said more than once on the trip north.

There was no mistaking the quaver in his voice, the plea.

In the short time I'd known this amazing man, he'd never been anything less than confident.

Knowing he was nervous, realizing it was because he was afraid that whatever was waiting at the cabin might change how I felt for him, only made me love him more.

I'd almost said "okay" a handful of times, but I'd kept the words inside.

Not going was the easier option, and I was trying to prove to myself that I wasn't a coward any longer.

I'd even gotten the courage to go to Sanctuary with Quinn a few days before at Kingston's continued suggestion.

He never pushed, but each morning for the past ten days, he'd made the offer.

I declined over and over, but then I'd had another PTSD moment, and I knew I couldn't keep letting my past rule my present.

It wouldn't hurt anything if I simply sat in on one of the group therapy sessions and listened to some of the other women talk about their own experiences. But I wasn't confident it would help either.

When I first sat down, I didn't think that I would get anything from that meeting. That it would just be a waste of time while I kept my head lowered and listened to the others discuss how they had survived their own ordeals.

These women and I weren't the same. I wasn't brave like them.

But then a shaky voice began to retell her experience with her husband, and I sat up a little straighter, goose bumps pebbling along my entire body. I'd listened and relived some of my worst moments through someone else's hell.

There was a new arrival in the group who'd only become a resident of Sanctuary the

previous week, and she was a year younger than me.

She had three kids, who were in the playroom down the hall, all of them still in diapers and thankfully unharmed.

Unlike their mother, who had fought like a lioness to escape her abuser, their father.

Bruises covered most of her face and arms. She had a brace that went from her knee to her foot, with metal pins screwed along her shin to hold everything in place.

But the worst was the stitches from her shoulder to her wrist. I wasn't sure what that bastard had used to cut her, but it wasn't a simple single slice. It was jagged and grotesque.

Looking at her, I'd seen myself at seventeen. Broken, hurting, scared of my own shadow. Iris had been all I'd had back then, and I knew if I didn't run, didn't hide us, my daughter would end up just as broken as I was. Maybe not physically, but eventually, he would break her mentally.

Or turn her into a version of himself.

I wasn't sure which would be worse.

It took a roomful of fellow survivors telling me I deserved to be happy now for me to accept that fact.

But I also knew I would never fully relax until I saw with my own eyes that Charlie was gone for good.

Nausea rolled in my stomach as I stared down at the man who'd nearly cost me my life.

Once upon a time, I was the one lying on my back.

Scared and bloody, too broken to move, every breath a painful wheeze.

I had been helpless to protect myself or the baby that was in my belly as he kicked me until I passed out.

Those memories clung to me like the sweat that was saturating my skin.

A rumble sound came from Kingston, his hand touching my arm before lifting to tuck my hair back from my face. “Now you’ve seen him, baby. You know he can’t touch you. Let me take you home. We can cuddle on the couch with our girl and watch princess movies all night. Put this out of your mind.”

His voice was so tender, full of so much love and affection, but laced with concern.

Maybe a twinge of uncertainty. Fuck, I loved him.

It was hard to believe that the first time I’d met him, I’d attacked him.

Up until that moment, I’d never imagined I was capable of reacting in such a way.

But even then, part of me had known I was safe with him.

“Did you do this?” I asked, unable to take my eyes off Charlie. “Are you responsible for his condition?”

“Most of it, yes,” he said after a brief moment. “Not all of it. Jack brought him here for me. He’s come back a few times. But he knew not to go too far because I’m the one with unfinished business.”

I nodded, accepting his answer, my gaze scanning over the damage on the weeping man laid before me. “Thank you.”

“For what, babe?” Kingston asked hesitantly.

“For telling me the truth and for bringing me here. But mostly, thank you for making it possible to face my fears once and for all.” I took a slow breath, blocking out the sickening smells surrounding us, and looked up at the man who so easily had become my world. He couldn’t hide how on edge he was.

Kingston wanted me away from this place and the reality of what he was capable of, but I welcomed his darker side. It made this so much easier. Facing my boogeyman with my own personal beast at my side gave me the strength I’d lacked until now.

“Telling you what I’ve done and showing you the destruction are two different things, Demi. I don’t want you to ever think...”

“I know that, Kingston. There is nothing you could ever do to cause me to stop loving and trusting you.”

Relief brightened his eyes. “I love you so much, baby.”

“Can I...?” I flicked my eyes to the smaller table beside where Charlie was secured.

To the different weapons that were old and rusty.

There was a hacksaw and wire cutters and things I didn’t know the names of, but they had all been used.

Their jagged edges had left old and fresh imprints on Charlie’s extremities. “Just a little?”

Gripping my chin, Kingston forced me to meet his gaze. Green eyes stared down at me for a long moment, as if making sure I was okay, before he finally nodded. “Come here, love. Let me help you.”

When Kingston moved, Charlie whimpered, the sound so pathetically weak I couldn’t hold back a little giggle in response. His helplessness made me oddly giddy. Which was most definitely wrong, but he’d done such a spectacular job of breaking me, I didn’t think it mattered any longer.

Kingston smirked down at me. “There’s my little hell-raiser. Are you ready to play, sweetheart?”

I took the carving knife he handed me, a tiny thrill tingling down my spine. “So ready.”

“That’s my girl.”

Demi

Humming to myself, I fastened Iris into her car seat before jumping down from the back seat of the truck.

My little car sat parked off to the side in our new driveway, but I hadn't driven it since we'd moved in to our four-bedroom house three months ago.

Kingston preferred me to drive his truck, and I liked how powerful I felt when I was behind the wheel of the huge vehicle.

Not gonna lie, it was kind of fun seeing people's reactions when I stepped out of the tank-like machine.

Most of the citizens of Creswell Springs didn't even blink at the sight these days, but there were always tourists or new college students at Aggie's who dropped their jaws whenever I hopped down from the driver's seat.

It wasn't long before I was pulling into my favorite spot in Aggie's parking lot, right beside Kingston's motorcycle. Iris was already unbuckling herself before I could get the door open. Helping her down, I made sure there was no traffic coming and allowed her to rush ahead to open the front door.

There was no need for the little bell above the door to alert anyone to our entrance when Iris was already announcing our arrival. "Gammy, I misseded you!"

Quinn stopped in the middle of taking someone's order to scoop her into her arms.

“Hi, sweet pea. I missed you so much.”

Hiding my smile, I bypassed them and went straight for the kitchen. Three plates were already in the pass-through window. I met Kingston’s gaze just as he called, “Order up!”

Green eyes flared with pleasure and heat, and I had to restrain myself from running to him. He came out of the swinging double doors before I could reach them, already kissing me and not giving me a chance to open my mouth.

“You got something to tell me, hell-raiser?” he murmured, brushing his nose against mine.

“I love you,” I breathed.

“Love you back, babe.” He stroked his hands down my back before squeezing my ass. “Give me five minutes, and I’ll be able to have lunch with my girls.”

“Take your time. We’re early.” I stole another kiss and pushed at his thick chest. “Get back to work, slacker.”

“Go sit down at our booth. I’ll bring your food.”

I waited until he was back in the kitchen before moving behind the counter to grab drinks for us. Iris and I had lunch with Kingston every day he worked. I didn’t expect anyone to wait on us when I could get what we needed on my own.

Noticing the coffee was running low, I started two fresh pots while I was getting Kingston’s Coke and a lemonade for myself.

“Hey, I don’t want to be a bother, but I’m running late for my interview and I’d sell my soul for a Diet Coke.

” Turning at the sound of the melodic voice, I found myself sharing a grin with the blonde standing by the counter.

“Sorry, I wouldn’t normally jump the line, but seriously, my soul is on offer here for a to-go cup of my drug of choice. ”

Finding myself laughing, I filled the largest to-go cup with Diet Coke and slapped on a lid. When I placed it on the counter, she did a little victory dance, her eyes sparkling. Noticing their unusual color, I gave her a once-over.

Long platinum-blond hair hung to her waist. She had a pert nose and a perfect Cupid’s-bow mouth.

Without a doubt, she was gorgeous, but it was her eyes that caught and held my attention.

The centers were a soft brown that blended out into green and then light blue that darkened to navy around the rings of her irises.

I’d never seen anyone with eyes like that before.

Grabbing a straw, she stabbed it through the top and took a long pull before releasing a contented sigh. “Ah, yeah. That’s the good stuff.” She dropped a ten on the counter. “Keep the change, lifesaver.”

I shook my head, handing it back to her. “This one’s on me. Good luck with your interview.”

“Thanks, girl. You’re the best!” With a wave, she hurried toward the door, and I went back to making the coffee and the drinks for my little family.

It felt like a dream most days, but it was my new reality.

I had a large house with more rooms than I knew what to do with.

My daughter was healthy and thriving, her hearing completely restored, and she hadn't suffered from a single ear infection since the tubes procedure.

I had a man who loved me and adored my little girl.

We'd created a home together where I was given the security of feeling cherished every day.

From the other side of the diner, I could hear Iris giggling with Quinn as she helped her deliver food to a customer.

"Please, I'm begging you, Diet Coke!"

Laughing, I turned, but I stopped with a frown when I saw the girl leaning against the counter. It was the blonde with the unusual eyes. "Did you drop the first one?" I asked, pouring her another to-go cup.

She lifted a brow at me. "I'm going with no?"

"O...kay" I snickered, slapping the lid on the new cup. "Maybe savor this one."

"No promises." She snatched up the cup and a straw, placing a five on the counter. "You're a lifesaver."

Before I could respond, she was rushing out the door. Taking the cash, I gave it to the waitress working the counter, letting her have the tip. Money was no longer a worry for me and would never be something I had to stress over again.

With the death of Charlie Johnson came a new life for me. Kingston didn't just give me peace that day he'd let me drive an ice pick into my ex's evil heart. He handed me

a new identity and a bank account that had my name on it. All of the Johnson fortune was now mine and Iris's.

Not that my man let me use that money often.

He was a possessive asshole most of the time.

Kingston provided a good life, and I honestly didn't want to touch Charlie's blood money.

It could sit in those accounts for Iris and her future, for all I cared.

I made a nice profit from selling my muffins every morning.

Picking up our three glasses, I walked to the back booth that Kingston had dubbed ours. Getting comfortable, I sat back and waited. When Kingston walked out of the kitchen a few minutes later, he had our plates in hand.

"Princess, get that tush over here and eat," he commanded Iris.

"Daddy!" she squealed, running straight for him.

Placing our food on the table, he swooped down to get her. She threw her arms around him, squeezing with all her might. "Daddy, you're all scratchy," she complained, rubbing a hand over the stubble on his jaw.

"Mommy likes the stubble, so the stubble stays." He sat her down on one side of the booth then took his place beside me. Brushing a kiss on my lips, he gave me a cocky grin. "You got something to tell me, babe?"

"I love you."

“Love you back.” His hand dropped to my belly. “Anything else you want to tell me.”

I covered his hand, my heart suddenly pounding with excitement.

Flinching was the last thing I did these days.

At least when it came to Kingston. That instinctive reaction still lingered with others, though, but I was working on my PTSD.

Group therapy and one-on-one sessions with the staff at Sanctuary helped me more and more every week to work through my past trauma.

Charlie’s evil didn’t get to rule my new happiness.

Swallowing the emotions in my throat, I leaned in closer and whispered, “I’m pregnant. All three tests were positive.”

“Heck yeah!” he whooped, grabbing the back of my head to hold me in place for his kiss. When he pulled back, his green eyes glowed with happy tears. “You’re my best life, Demi.”