



Levee (Golden Glades Henchmen MC #9)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Levee likes his life just as it is: fun, free, and far from serious. Between endless parties, doing jobs for his outlaw motorcycle club, and dodging his grumpy uncle's never-ending complaints, Levee has mastered the art of keeping things simple. But when his uncle's artsy, eccentric neighbor barrels into his life, "simple" flies right out the window.

Jade just wants a life full of joy, beauty, and community. But her vibrant world of colors and canvases is thrown into disarray when she becomes convinced her upstairs neighbor has been murdered. Not sure if she's being paranoid or if she's onto something, she starts digging for answers on her own.

When her investigation lands herself in the kind of situation that leads her directly in the crosshairs of danger, Levee steps in to protect her.

As the sparks ignite and the danger reaches a fever-pitch, Levee must decide if he should trade in his carefree life for something messier, riskier, and far more meaningful...

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CHAPTER ONE

Jade

“You’re a nice girl,” William said in that gruff, grumpy way he always spoke. Like the whole world had screwed him over. And, I guess, if he was still living in a building like this in his golden years, that was likely true. “Stupid name, but a nice girl,” he said, making me barely resist the urge to roll my eyes as I pushed his wheelchair down the hallway toward his apartment.

William lived directly across the hall from me, still residing in the home his father had lived in. And died in a few years ago, I was told by the super when I moved in, face grim, looking more than a little perturbed by the idea.

I dunno. I guess when it came to deaths, at home in your own bed at an old age seemed like the way to go. We should all be so lucky.

“Well, I didn’t have a hand in my name,” I said, bending lower to put more of my weight into my push. I didn’t know if I was too weak, William too bulky for me, or if the wheelchair was faulty, but my arms were feeling like jelly already.

“True,” he agreed. “Got a nephew named Levee. Can you believe it? Stupid fucking name. Stupid fucking kid too,” he said as I resisted the urge to sigh.

What can I say? I wasn’t a fan of listening to people trash-talk others. Especially when the others were family members. But, I guess, if this man was having mobility issues and living all alone with no help, this nephew of his couldn’t be much to write

home about.

It never ceased to break my heart how poorly we took care of our elderly. Even if they were crotchety old men like William. I figured if I was old, achy, relying on a wheelchair, and still trying to do all my usual daily living tasks, I'd be grouchy too.

"I have a sibling named Peridot," I confided. "But we call him Perry," I added.

"Was your mom a drunk?" he asked, making my brows shoot up.

I had to take a second to make sure my tone didn't come off as snippy. "No, she was... a bit of a free spirit," I told him.

"Hippy," he scowled as I turned his chair around, so I could use my back to push open his door.

"Yeah, I guess that is one way to put it," I agreed, wrinkling my nose at the odor in his apartment. It was a mix of dust, sweat, cigarette smoke—despite it being a smoke-free building—and that acrid undercurrent of rotten fruit.

"Do you need some help moving onto your chair?" I asked, spying the recliner that, once upon a time, had likely been a beige and white stripe, but time and grime had made it a stained brown shade on the seat and back.

"Not a fucking invalid," he snapped, making me bite back my instinct to tell him that word was not appropriate anymore. If it ever was in the first place.

I was just doing a good deed.

It wasn't my place to give the man a lecture in the process.

“Okay then. How about I take the trash with me when I go? I’m heading that way anyway,” I added, hoping to avoid him getting offended again.

“Fine. Whatever,” he said, grunting and cursing as he nearly toppled his wheelchair as he tried to stand.

Stubborn old man, I thought to myself as I went to his small kitchen, an almost exact replica of mine—though my appliances were a solid decade newer and not stained yellow with tobacco residue—and pulled the top off of his trash can.

Checking to make sure he wasn’t looking, I quickly tossed the congealed bananas—a whole bunch!—and fuzzy mandarin oranges into the bag before pulling it out and cinching it. I added a new bag and replaced the top before turning back to William.

“Can I do anything else for you before I head out?” I asked as he lit a cigarette, making me want to flee as quickly as possible. Not much bothered me quite as much as smelling cigarette smoke on my clothes and in my hair.

“Open that window,” he said, waving at one of the ones at the other side of the living room, almost entirely covered in years of grime that needed to be cleaned off to let any kind of sunlight in.

I resisted the urge to clean them myself, reminding myself that it wasn’t my place. Especially when he didn’t seem like he wanted much help.

I rushed across the living room holding my breath, yanking open the window, and wondering why the hell he wanted to let the muggy air in.

“Okay, William, I’ll see you around,” I said, gathering the heavy trash bag. He clearly didn’t get around to taking out often with his mobility problems.

“Yep,” he said, already half forgetting about my existence.

“If you need anything, holler,” I told him, getting nothing but a dismissive wave.

Well then.

Okay.

I moved back into the hall, taking a greedy breath of fresh air. I pulled up some of my long wavy brown hair, giving it a sniff, being glad to find it didn't reek of smoke.

William's trash wouldn't fit in the chute, so I made my way down in the elevator with it, praying it wouldn't start leaking on the long walk around the building to the dumpsters.

I was just rounding the building when I realized I wasn't alone.

There, a few yards ahead, standing right near the dumpsters I needed to access, was a trio of men with their backs to me. While a fourth man pulled a man up off the ground by the front of their shirt, and cocked back to punch.

I wouldn't say I was a particularly brave woman. But I did have a pretty strong sense of fairness in the world. And four against one wasn't fair. Beating someone when they were already down was also not fair either.

“Hey!” I yelled, staying close to the edge of the building in case I needed to flee.

I might want to help the poor guy being beaten, but I didn't want to get beaten or assaulted in the process either. I knew all too well the fate of women caught unaware or out at night alone in this neighborhood.

“Fuck,” the men chorused.

One turned back at me, but was quick to turn away. They likely didn’t want to be identified. He slapped one of the others across the chest, and they turned to run.

The one holding the other man up by the shirt dropped him without warning, making my stomach meet my feet as his body slumped to the ground without the support.

The man managed to remember to tuck his chin to his chest before he collided with the concrete, though, letting out a grunt as he landed.

I watched as he rolled onto his side, spitting out bright blood onto the ground, then coughed up some more of it.

Speaking of blood, there was a small river of it running from his nose and off of his chin. More of it was weeping from a nasty gash on his cheek.

The bruises were probably worse than the blood, though. Both of his eyes were getting rings so dark blue they looked black. Another was on his temple. Another still on his jaw.

“Are you okay?” I asked, rushing forward, still holding the stupid bag of garbage in my hand.

“Fine,” he snapped, curling up into a seated position, barely able to bite back a groan of pain as he did so, and I imagined there were other bruises on his midsection that were hidden from sight.

“Do you want me to call for—“

“No,” he snarled, using the hem of his white tee to wipe some of the blood from

under his nose. It was futile, though; more replaced it in just a moment.

“You really should have someone look at—“

“Fuck off, lady,” he barked, getting to his feet and glowering at me before storming off.

Okay then.

Twice in one day I tried to do the right thing and got met with annoyance if not outright hostility.

I sighed, glancing around to make sure the group of men were long gone, then tossing the garbage into the bin before making my way back around the building.

Where I walked right past the battered guy in the foyer. He was stopped at the mailbox, his blond hair falling forward enough to hide some of his black eye, as he stuck a key in the lock of his box.

The one directly on top of mine.

My upstairs neighbor, it seemed.

Nice to meet you too , I thought, then forced that bitterness away as I made my way into the elevator, determined to shut myself up in my room and forget all about these two interactions. I was going to throw myself into my work instead. And call these negative interactions a one-time thing.

I probably should have known better.

But I grabbed a paintbrush and canvas and got lost in my art, happy in the blissful

ignorance of the future just ahead of me.

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CHAPTER TWO

Levee

“I don’t know why you bother going,” Cato said as I packed up a baking tin with a bunch of the food Eddie had cooked for dinner.

The party was raging out in the back by the pool. The thumping bass of the music interrupted occasionally by a high-pitched laugh or squeal from one of the club girls who were already several drinks in and enjoying the fuck out of their time with Coast, York, Velle, and Kylo.

I was supposed to be out there with them, three drinks deep with some sweet honey laughing with her legs wrapped around my shoulders as I lifted her up so she could whack at another girl with an inflatable battle log, trying to knock her off one of the other guy’s shoulders.

It was just an hour , I reminded myself. Max. Usually, my uncle kicked me out before I even got a chance to try to clean up the moldy fruit I brought and he never ate, or get the dishes full of caked-on disgustingness cleaned and in the draining board.

“You know why,” I said, shrugging it off as I put the lid on the tin.

“I get it’s blood, man. But you put up with this abuse from your grandfather for like fifteen fucking years. And now you’re taking it from your uncle too?”

“He’s mostly in a chair these days,” I reminded him.

“And if he wanted your help, he could at least not bite your fucking head off when you are there for him.”

This was an old refrain.

Cato could never understand why I would go out of my way to help these men who had done nothing but make my life harder growing up. And spat bitter words and accusations at me as an adult while I scrubbed their toilets or gathered their stinking clothes to wash.

But no amount of discouragement from Cato changed anything. I still went every week. Sometimes two weeks if it was a particularly nasty visit the time before. But I never went longer than that.

For, as he said, fifteen years as my grandfather got smaller and more sickly, but no less ornery. Before he passed a few years back.

Just in time for my uncle to start needing care as well. Right in that same apartment. Where the walls were yellow with tobacco and the windows were caked in grime. Where the tub grout was hopelessly moldy, but neither men would let me hang around long enough to pull that toxic shit out and regrout it.

I'd naively thought when I started to care for my Uncle Will that he might be a nice break from my grandfather's negativity. Growing up, he'd never really been around. He'd worked long shifts roofing, then spending his nights out drinking with friends. Most of my memories of him were just in passing where he would say something snide that, at the time, I'd taken as sarcastic.

Until, of course, I started to try to take care of him. And learned it wasn't sarcasm; it was criticism, if not thinly veiled hatred.

Technically, the grouchy ass was more declined than he should have been for his age. But he was a solid twelve years older than my father. He'd lived a hard life. And he had chronic back and knee issues thanks to the years he spent on roofs.

That and, well, I was pretty sure anger aged your ass.

It was why I tried so fucking hard not to turn into them. Not to let my own feelings get in the way of doing what I knew was right.

Like showing up at least once a week with groceries. Then taking the time to do as many tasks around the apartment as I could before my uncle became borderline combative about my presence and I needed to get the hell out of there.

"He doesn't deserve your care," Cato said, shaking his head.

"No, probably not," I agreed, grabbing some cleaning supplies, then the keys to Eddie's car, since I couldn't take my bike. "But I'm going to care regardless. I'll be back in an hour or two. Tell the pretty girls to save a round for me," I said, staring longingly out the back window before turning and making my way out of the clubhouse.

One perk to these visit days was being able to borrow one of the cars belonging to Eddie, Che, or Donovan. All of whom had been street racers back in their day. And who all had some nice-ass cars.

It wasn't that I didn't like my bike; I did. In my opinion, nothing was more freeing than taking a drive on a long, empty road by the water at night, and feeling the wind whip at you, smelling the salt air. That shit was practically narcotic.

But bikes were impractical for a lot of life shit. Hence why all the club brothers who eventually settled down with women all invested in some sort of other vehicle as

well.

To combat the stress I felt working its way into my muscles, I rolled down the windows, and cranked up the music, drowning out any thoughts as I made the long drive back to my old stomping ground.

Back in the day, Seeley, Cato, and I all grew up in the same building in a neighborhood overrun with crime and violence. Not much had changed since then. Hell, if anything, shit seemed to have gotten worse. But it was still kind of surreal to go back, to walk into that same building I'd spent my whole life in before moving into the clubhouse.

It wasn't exactly nostalgic as I pulled up to the street out front of the tall brick building. Too many floors. Too many people. Too much noise. Those were the first things that came to mind.

And, yeah, there was a lot of not good memories in the place. Namely... all of the memories involving my blood family.

But there were just as many good memories involving Seeley, Cato, and even Amarantha—the girl who would grow up to become Seeley's wife—inside and in the immediate area around this building.

It had been an easy decision to leave the building when Seeley said he could get us patched in with the bikers. But it had also been shockingly hard to leave that final time.

I knew that, in walking away, I was leaving the part of myself that I'd been there. And while stepping into new shoes and walking into a brighter future had been the right choice, it was always strange to leave the old version of yourself behind.

I climbed out of the car and slipped out of my leather cut, folding it just so and slipping it under the windshield wiper, so anyone in the area who had ideas about boosting or stripping it would know that they were fucking with an arms-dealing club if they did it.

I grabbed the food and cleaning supplies, then made my way into the building.

It hit me all at once.

The same noises. Couples arguing. Kids laughing or screaming. Babies crying. TVs and music on way too loud, trying to drown all the other racket out.

The same smells. Weed and cigarette smoke in blatant disregard of the no-smoking rule. Warming spices—chili powder, paprika, and cumin—as someone made some sort of Spanish dish, and the sharper, tart scent of pasta sauce.

The same sights. Cracked linoleum floor in the hallways, worn nearly through down the center thanks to decades of people walking up and down the halls, the color completely faded from what had once been a fake parquet pattern but was now just a muddy brown. The walls were a similarly timeworn brown that had once been white.

Some of these tenants were trying to have some individuality. Their doors featured decorative wreaths and mats, making me think they were likely new to the building, because that shit would be swiped within a week or two. Hocked and used to secure a drug fix.

But, hey, you had to give them credit for trying to pretty up the place. I hoped for their sakes that they got out of this place before living here made them jaded and bitter. As it inevitably did to just about everyone given enough time.

I made my way down the hall toward my uncle's apartment, finding that the

apartment across the hall from him featured another of those optimistic people's evidence of trying to make their apartment a home.

There was a multicolored frame around the peephole, a similarly colorful mat that declare the passerby Take it easy , and a whiteboard on the door itself with a teal dry-erase marker attached with a strand of pink and blue beads.

On the board itself someone had taken it upon themselves to take advantage of her invitation for notes from neighbors.

Nice tits.

I rolled my eyes, walking over, and using the cap's eraser to remove the message, hoping it was done by some idiot kid who meant no harm and was just being a little shit, and not some creep the poor woman would have to try to avoid in the halls. Or, God forbid, the creepy, isolated cave that was the laundry room.

For good measure, I went ahead and drew a quick little riddle in the hopes that everyone else would leave the board alone.

Why are teddy bears never hungry?

I debated drawing a teddy bear with it, but figured the chance of someone drawing a dick or tits on it were too high, so I just left it as it was.

Turning toward my uncle's apartment, I took a deep breath to calm my nerves that threatened to frazzle just at the proximity to it, then knocked.

"Don't need no help, I told ya," Uncle Will called from behind the door, breaking off into a fit of phlegmy coughs.

I guess he wasn't heeding the advice from his doctor about starting to get a touch of emphysema.

No surprise there.

I reached for the knob, knowing I would find it unlocked. There was nothing worth stealing in this apartment, and all the local thieves seemed to intrinsically know that.

"Still gonna do it," I said as I moved inside.

"Wasn't talking to you. But same goes for you," he said, not bothering to look away from the TV.

I'd bought him that TV. He'd insisted his old domed one worked just fine, despite a quarter of the screen going pixelated. Then had gone off on a tangent about how I thought I was so much better than him now that I was making money to blow.

I held my tongue so I didn't tell him that that wasn't the reason I was better than him. Always trying to take the higher road and all that.

"Who were you talking to then?" I asked, glad to find the fruit was gone for a change. The man seemed to solely exist on beer, soda, TV dinners, and cheese balls. I figured vegetables were probably pushing it, but who didn't like some fruit now and again? Sure, it took a few years—and hundreds of dollars worth of spoiled fruit—but he finally tried some.

"That girl," he said, and I heard the whooshing sound of his lighter igniting as he lit another cigarette.

"What girl?" I asked, going through the fridge and tossing the food from last week that hadn't gotten eaten.

“The one across the hall. Stupid name,” he said.

“Yeah? What was it?” I asked, figuring this was as pleasant a conversation as we’d had in a while, and I wasn’t going to ruin it by asking him shit that pissed him off. Like if he took his meds. If he needed me to grocery shop for him.

“Jade,” he scoffed.

“I dunno. Kind of unique,” I said.

“Unique,” he snorted. “Just another word for stupid, if you ask me.”

I ignored that as I got to work on the dishes in the sink. “So she’s been checking in on you?” I asked.

“Gave me a push. Didn’t need it,” he said, lying through his teeth. Because the man could barely roll himself down the hall without his back screaming. And that wasn’t to mention the fact that his upper body strength had been deteriorating for over a year now. The skin that used to stretch tight around corded arms thanks to a lifetime of manual labor now hung loosely off of his meat like a man closer to one hundred instead of seventy.

“That was nice of her.”

“Yeah, whatever,” he said, then cursed at the rerun of last night’s football game for a minute.

“How long has she been living here?” I asked, not remembering the mat or whiteboard the last time I visited.

“Week, two, something like that. She’s quiet. That’s all I care about.”

William was the kind of man who used to hit the ceiling with a broomstick or the walls with his fists, screaming about the racket. Even if it was something as simple as a baby waking up at night for some milk.

“Glad to hear you have someone new around if you ever need anything,” I said, thinking about the last neighbor. A man who my uncle had pissed off so badly that I wasn’t sure he would so much as call the cops if he heard a scream. At least not until the smell of decomposition got too strong to ignore.

“Don’t need help,” he griped, flicking ash toward the ashtray instead of actually making it in. Not that he could have anyway with how full it was.

I rinsed the last coffee cup, then made my way over to grab the ashtray, dumping it in the trash before returning it.

It was killing me not to be able to run a vacuum, no idea how many skin cells, ashes, or dirt was crushed into the discolored carpet.

I’d actually been kind of a slob myself when I lived at home and a few of the years living at the clubhouse. Enough that the guys used to rib me about it. But when I started to care for my uncle who lived in his own filth—unlike my grandfather who tried to keep things at least somewhat tidy—you could say I saw the light and the error of my ways.

Now, I was a lot more conscious about shit like that. Not a neat freak by any stretch of the imagination. But bothered enough by mold and dust that I wanted to clean it when I saw it.

Each time I was in this apartment, though, I became aware of a new kind of filth to clean.

Suddenly, the dirt on the windows was driving me a bit nuts. Enough that I made my way back to the cleaning supplies, grabbing the glass cleaner and some paper towels, and getting to work on them.

My stomach felt a little sick at seeing the nearly black grime that coated several changes of paper towels before, suddenly, the sun was streaming in again.

“The fuck you do that for?” my uncle grumbled. “Now there’s a glare on the TV.”

Of course there was.

I drew down the grimy blinds to satisfy him before making my usual trip into the bathroom to clean up, then collect some clothes to wash.

When I made my way toward the laundry room, I glanced over at the whiteboard.

Under my riddle was the answer in a swirly, feminine script.

He’s already stuffed.

I didn’t know who this Jade woman was. But I prayed to hell that she didn’t get too close to my uncle. Because it would be a real shame for all her smart and kind to get ruined by all his cranky ingratitude.

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CHAPTER THREE

Jade

I opened my door with hope in my chest every day for four days after coming across the little riddle scribbled on it.

But for the fourth day in a row what I was met with was a vulgar phrase or, in this case, a drawing. It was a caricature of me. As expected, my features were exaggerated. Instead of the typical large head like you found in these drawings, though, it was my boobs that were comically enhanced, each one of them looking bigger than my head.

It was actually really well done for what had to be a quick doodle.

Instead of erasing it in its entirety, I just removed the boobs and replaced them with a sign, and drew hands to hold it.

You're talented. If you want art lessons, let me know.

There.

That felt like a good way to handle it.

Clearly, it was almost certainly one of the many teenagers in the building. Just screwing around. Being kids. I couldn't be mad about the boobs. That was, you know, a normal thing for teenage boys to hyper-fixate on. But removing them from

the caricature felt like the appropriately adult thing to do.

I was still trying to shove my reusable grocery bags into my purse when I heard a loud slam coming from William's apartment, loud enough to make me jerk and gasp.

"William?" I called, a little tentatively. I didn't know why, though, so I tried again more loudly. "William?"

Inside his apartment, there was a groaning sound that had my heartbeat accelerating.

I rushed across the hall, reaching for the knob, finding the door unlocked. Still, I hesitated after cracking the door open. "William? Are you okay?" I called.

"Fuck, ow, fuck," a voice howled from further in the apartment.

"William, I'm coming in!" I called to be heard over his curses.

He wasn't in the living room, and I said a silent prayer for his dignity and my own comfort level that he hadn't fallen getting out of the shower or off of the toilet, as I rushed into the apartment.

Luckily, I found him in the bedroom, trying to use the bed to pull himself up, but the bedding was preventing any progress.

"How about we try this?" I suggested, moving around the bed to grab the bedding from the other side, giving him something to use to pull himself up, since he was too big for me to be able to actually lift. I tried not to think about the sweat-stained sheets as I held onto them.

From the other side of the bed, William's face was beet red as he clawed his way up onto the mattress, flopping over onto his side, breathing heavily.

“Are you okay? Did you hurt something?” I asked, moving back around the bed, reaching to right his wheelchair before I looked down at him.

“Got a bad back,” he told me through gritted teeth. Sweat was beaded in his brow and hairline, likely from the pain.

“Do you have medicine I could get for you?” I asked.

“Kitchen counter,” he said, back to deep breathing.

I moved through the apartment, grabbing the prescription bottle of pain medicine on the counter, then going to get a drink from the fridge.

Inside, I found a big tin of food.

On the island was fresher fruit, though it was already looking like it was fading. The bananas were more brown than yellow and the pears even looked mushy.

It was as I was making my way back to the bedroom when I noticed there was quite a bit of sunlight shining into the room. The windows that had been grimy on my last visit were almost completely clean.

Had William cleaned them? Maybe in a surge of insecurity at having a stranger in his place. As much as I felt bad if I’d created those feelings, I thought it was likely good for him to get some sunshine.

“Here you go,” I said to William as I twisted off the top of the bottle. He took it from me, shaking three of the pills into his palm, making me bite back a question on if that was a safe or appropriate dose. Who was I to question him? I popped his soda tab and handed that to him as well. “Can I help you with anything else? Get you something else?”

“No,” he said, biting off the word in a way that suggested I wasn’t welcome.

I couldn’t be bothered by his tone, either, since the man was clearly in agony and likely just wanted to suffer in peace, not in front of a complete stranger.

“Okay. I will let you rest. But I’m one call away if you need anything,” I assured him, making my way back out of his room.

I stopped in the kitchen to grab his garbage again and replace the old bag.

I had just pulled open the door and was rushing forward. And nearly collided with a solid chest.

“Oh,” I gasped, stepping back, instinct telling me to always put space between myself and a random man.

My gaze followed up a wiry, but strong torso and chest to find a ridiculously good-looking man. One with inky hair that had charmingly fallen over his brow toward his deep, dark chocolatey eyes fringed with an unfair amount of lashes. He had a jaw that looked like it was carved by one of the greats, a straight, masculine nose, and a generous mouth.

It was the kind of face that made my fingers itch to reach for my drawing pad and pencils.

The smile he shot me as soon as his gaze landed on me wasn’t exactly hurting either. Those teeth were almost blinding. And that smile was full of charm and a hint of mischief. It wasn’t long before those attributes brightened his dark eyes either.

“You must be Jade,” he said, his gaze moving down me.

I didn't typically gripe about someone doing a once-over. As an artist, I was often caught looking at people for what might be considered an uncomfortable or creepy amount of time.

When this guy did one, though, little prickles of interest coursed through me, making my heartbeat quicken and my belly flip-flop.

It wasn't a strange or worrying reaction. I mean, this guy was gorgeous. I was a red-blooded woman who was into men. Of course there was a little spark of attraction. Even if he was a complete stranger.

Except he wasn't exactly a stranger, was he? He knew my name.

"Yes," I confirmed. "Who are you?"

"Levee," he said, that smile spreading just a little wider.

Levee.

The name teased the edges of my memory until it came rushing back. William insulting my name. And that of his nephew. Levee.

"Where have you been?"

The words flew out of me before I could even think them through, weigh their repercussions. This man was throwing me off.

"What?" he asked, brows scrunching.

"Your uncle fell," I said, waving toward the apartment. "He needed help getting up and getting his meds. His fridge is almost empty. The apartment is filthy. Where have

you been?" I asked, indignant on behalf of a man who I knew didn't want me to be his champion.

"Is he alright?" Levee asked, glancing past me toward the bedroom.

"He seems to have hurt his back," I told him. "He took three pills."

"Thank you for helping him," Levee said, sucking in a deep, steadying breath. "I know he can be... unappreciative," he said, and I got the feeling it was more than that for him. "But I appreciate it. Here," he said, moving inside to put a handful of bags down that I'd been too fixated on his face to notice.

Levee reached inside of the bag, pulling out a receipt, then rifling through a junk drawer to produce a pen. When it wouldn't write, he pulled it up to his mouth, wetting the tip with his tongue.

And, well, I'm not proud of where my mind went right there. But as he jotted something down, need was pulsing between my thighs.

"Take my number," he said, extending the receipt toward me, then taking the garbage bag from my hand. "If he ever falls again, call me. I don't want you getting hurt trying to help him up."

"Okay," I agreed, taking the note and tucking it into the pocket of my dress. He wasn't wrong thinking I wouldn't be capable of helping his uncle if we hadn't lucked out by using the bedding.

"And I'll admit that I'm not around as much as someone should be," he admitted as he started pulling items out of the bags to put on the counter. Six packs of soda, TV dinners, and the eternally hopeful supply of fruit that it seemed William never touched. "But my uncle doesn't want me here. He barely tolerates one visit a week."

I could see that. I mean, the man was pretty grumpy and snippy with me. And I was a stranger. I couldn't imagine the vitriol the man saved up to use on actual family members.

Still, the fact was the same. William needed more help than he was getting.

"Have you considered hiring an aide?" I asked.

"Tried three," he admitted, shooting me a humorless smile as he turned to lean against the counter. "Let's just say that my uncle has a lot of shit to say about people that he has no business saying. And I don't blame those people for quitting."

"I understand," I said, thinking of all the awful things someone with hate in their heart might be willing to say to anyone who was different from them. "A home?"

"It might be coming to that. But I can't exactly force him either," Levee said. "So for now, I... do what I can. And he... manages. Once he stops managing, I guess we will have a talk then."

I couldn't relate to taking care of someone who didn't want or appreciate my help. So I really had no place to speak here.

So I decided to change tack.

"Was it you who wrote the riddle?" I asked, since another one hadn't appeared in about a week. How often he claimed he visited.

"It was," he said, nodding. "Did someone draw you with giant tits?" he asked, nodding out toward the hall where my whiteboard was situated.

"They did," I said, letting out a little laugh. "It was actually really well done."

“Kids,” he said, shrugging. “I probably would have done the same thing if I was that age and a hot new chick moved in.” I was going to go ahead and pretend his words didn’t feel like a warm sensation moving through my chest. “So, you’re an artist?” he asked.

“I am,” I confirmed, the smile coming easy, as it always did. Even if my chosen vocation didn’t exactly secure the most stable of incomes and lifestyles. Hence living in this building in a less than ideal neighborhood.

What can I say? It was more important to me that I loved my work than it made me rich.

“Bet you love that eyesore,” he said, pointing toward a wall behind me.

Turning, I found an old painting of dogs playing poker. Cigars hung from their mouths. Beer bottles were scattered around. The style was a whole trend in art in the early 1900s.

“Everyone has their own taste,” I said, trying never to judge someone’s feelings on art. “Actually, depending on how old that is, it might be worth a decent amount of money.”

“Yeah? I’ll have to tell my uncle,” he said, looking more closely at the picture. “Good thing it’s behind glass, I guess. Everything in here is covered in smoke residue.”

“I’d be happy to do some cleaning around here for your uncle. I just don’t want to offer and make him feel uncomfortable.”

“That’s really sweet, doll. And I’ll pass that along for you. But I can pretty much tell you verbatim what his response to that will be.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t need no fucking help around here. What do you think I am, some kind of...’ and then there will be a word, or string of words, that I won’t repeat.”

“I wish he would realize that we all need help sometimes,” I said. “But I won’t overstep. I just wanted to offer. I have to get to the store. Does William need me to get him anything?”

“Think I got it all covered,” he said, waving toward the bags that he hadn’t unpacked.

“Okay,” I said, starting to walk away, but turning back. “Hey, I’m sorry about snapping at you before.”

His head cocked to the side at that, his eyes warm. “Don’t apologize. Don’t blame you for being pissed. I wish I could do more too. Things are—“

“Levee? That you? The fuck are you doing here? Thought I told you to leave me the fuck alone,” William called, making Levee’s brows raise.

“Case in point,” he said.

“You’re a good nephew to keep coming, even though he doesn’t seem to appreciate it,” I told him. Maybe I’ll see you around,” I added, making my way out.

It wasn’t until I was collecting the reusable bags that I’d dropped that I finally took a slow, deep breath, trying to calm the little sparks of desire moving through me.

Maybe I would find some reason to run into this particular good-looking guy the next week.

I might have a rule against sleeping with neighbors because of the possible awkward interactions in the communal areas.

But Levee wasn't exactly a neighbor.

And I was very clearly interested...

CHAPTER FOUR

Levee

Kylo was holding out a potato chip to Mackie, the club's ornery macaw who had been cursing at him for the past five minutes.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck you, Benny.

"Better not let it get back to Remy that you're feeding him junk food," Eddie warned.

"Says the guy who slips him some of everything he cooks," I shot back, having caught him giving the bird eggs and a piece of hash brown just that morning.

"Hey, he was giving me the sad eyes," Eddie defended himself as he gathered some greens for the tortoise.

"He doesn't have eyebrows," Velle reasoned. "He can't give the sad eyes."

"The tort gives me sad eyes too," Eddie insisted, shaking his head as he held out the plate of greens to Velle. "Can you bring these out to him? Toss a few of the hibiscus flowers on top too?" he asked. "What?" he asked at Velle's bemused smile.

"Just didn't imagine that being an arms-dealing biker would involve feeding exotic animals their lunch," he admitted. "Kind of refreshing how everyone here has a soft side," he added.

Velle was the club, for lack of a better way to put it, profiler. Or shrink. I dunno how to put it. But he had a knack for getting to people's souls in just a few minutes. I figured Huck wanted him in the club to be able to help find appropriate new prospects as well as keep a finger on the pulse of the mental health of the current members. And, I imagined, to help with trying to make allies and shit like that.

"Speak for yourself," Coast shot back at Velle.

More of the current resident loose cannon, Coast wore his crazy on his sleeve. Right there with all of his tattoos. Including one that, supposedly, was a tally of how many lives he'd taken so far.

I liked Coast.

Now that Cato was kind of wrapped up a lot with his girl, I would have felt kind of adrift if Coast hadn't been around. Always ready to party or to hit the clubs. Anything that involved music, booze, and chicks.

"Please," Velle shot back, shaking his head. "No one who is as good with kids as you are could be all hard," he said before moving outside.

"Whatcha making?" I asked Eddie as he opened the fridge and started unloading a shitton of items onto the counter.

"Enchiladas and a chopped salad," he said as he went into the pantry to get some more supplies. "If you give me an hour, I'll have some to bring to your uncle," he added.

I checked the clock, deciding it was no big deal to be later than usual. It wasn't like the old man wanted me there anyway.

He'd been in rare form the week before. Sure, his back had been tweaking him, but he'd been almost intolerable. Spouting off shit about myself and both of my long-dead parents while I just tried to get him settled in his chair again.

I hadn't bothered to try to do any cleaning up or shit like that, not wanting to listen to him for any longer.

I did manage to pass him the offer from Jade. That had gone about as I expected. Plus a few new inventive curse words for good measure.

I didn't know how the man got one look at that woman and didn't want her pretty up in his apartment as much as possible.

She was one of those chicks who was just naturally gorgeous. Long, wavy brown hair that the sun kissed at the ends, bleaching them almost blonde. Oval face with high cheekbones, pretty brown eyes, a slightly dimpled chin, and a generous mouth. And that smile? Fuck, that was easily her best feature. And she did it easily and fully, making little lines crease her lips on each side and showing off one charmingly pointy eye tooth.

Imperfectly perfect.

She hadn't had a stitch of makeup on, either.

She had a long, lean body clad in one of those flowing floral sundresses that flirted with the floor and had a deep V down the chest. It didn't actually show anything, but it hinted at how easily some of her assets could be seen.

She'd even been gorgeous as she'd been scolding me about not taking good enough care of my uncle.

Hotter still when I'd looked up from jotting down my number for her and found her eyes at half-mast, an unmistakable sign of desire.

If we hadn't been in my uncle's dingy-ass apartment, I would have pushed her back against the wall to taste that mouth of hers.

As it was, my sorry ass was kind of hoping to run into her in the hall again this week since she hadn't used my number to invite me over.

And, yeah, some part of me had been hoping for that. Even checking my phone for that. As pathetic as that was. Especially considering how the club was always swarmed with lots of pretty girls.

"How's your uncle doing?" York, one of the new prospects, asked.

York was tall and on the burly side. He looked like the kind of guy who belonged in flannel with an ax on his shoulder, not in a club down in Florida. But here he was, regardless. A little older than the rest of us. And quieter. But he was always down to spend some time with the club girls too. I wasn't sure I ever saw him without a girl on his lap playing with his beard and likely making comments about all the interesting places they could get some beard burn if they took things up to a room.

He'd left his life in New York state hiding bodies for the mob to come down this way to take care of his ailing grandfather. So while he didn't have to deal with the abuse that I did from my grandfather, and now my uncle, he understood the importance of putting in the work. And how mentally and emotionally draining it could be.

"He's getting weaker," I admitted. "Falling more. But he won't hear about going out to, or having someone come in to, do physical therapy.

"Sorry to hear that," York said, wrapping his hand around his cup of coffee. "All you

can do is all you can do,” he added, shrugging. “Don’t beat yourself up about that.”

That was true.

I did have an order out for a custom electric wheelchair, though. He was going to bitch and moan about it when it showed up. But it wasn’t like he could drag the thing back out of his apartment anyway, so I figured I could just bring it in and leave it there. Eventually, his stubborn ass would start using it. And I would bite my ‘I told you so’s’ when I saw him buzzing around in the thing that would damn sure make his life easier as he lost more and more mobility.

“You can take my car if you want, man,” Kylo offered.

Kylo was the newest member of the club. He’d been the neighbor of Alaric’s new girl. A former party drug dealer who nearly died for that job before deciding it wasn’t the future he wanted. But people like that, they didn’t just go straight. And learning about the club made him see he had a way to stay in a less-than-legal profession, but have a bit less risk thanks to the protection of an entire club around him.

Kylo stood, stretching out his ridiculous six-four frame. Like Coast, he was heavily tattooed. But he was darker haired with dark eyes. Though just like Coast, he had that ‘bad news’ sign practically inked on his forehead.

He grabbed his keys out of the bowl and tossed them at me.

“You know the neighborhood I’m taking this to, right?” I asked.

“If they haven’t stripped Eddie or Che’s cars, they won’t fuck with mine,” he said, shrugging it off.

“You could get yourself a car, you know,” Coast said.

I could.

I made a nice income working for the club. And thanks to living at the clubhouse and having Eddie cook pretty much all of my meals, I had almost no expenses.

It was likely the added responsibility that had me pausing. What can I say? I liked life... easy. Shit was hard enough growing up. I just wanted to kind of coast through life as much as possible, soaking up all the good shit, and avoiding the bad as much as I could.

If I ended up needing to start doing shit like transport my uncle to visits or something, though, I'd have to invest. But not in anything as cool as the other club brothers' cars. It would need to be practical enough to store a wheelchair in. And there was nothing fun about that.

"I wouldn't be driving anything as nice as their cars, though," I said, shrugging it off. "Besides, I liked to fuck with their saved radio stations," I said, making Kylo shake his head as he headed toward the stairs.

I ended up helping Eddie with the salad to waste the time. Then I loaded up a small plastic container of the enchiladas and an even smaller one of the salad I knew he likely wasn't going to eat, climbed in Kylo's white Corvette, and made my way to my uncle's building.

Was I practically buzzing with anticipation as I juggled the bags, tins of food, and a cardboard sleeve of my uncle's diet soda? Yeah, yeah, I was.

And it was pretty ridiculous how disappointed I felt when I didn't see Jade in the hallway.

On her whiteboard was a little drawing that was clearly done by two separate people,

judging by the different styles. Jade's contribution was a pretty, delicate bouquet of flowers. The second person's addition was a fucking coffin that the flowers were sitting on. Morbid, sure, but Jade scribbled a little note regardless.

A little more shading & it'll look more realistic.

Maybe I'd catch her on my way out, I decided, then made my way in to deal with my uncle.

He accepted the enchiladas, but told me to throw away the salad.

I decided to take it with me down to the laundry room to eat while I waited instead of staying in his apartment while his clothes washed. For both of our good, to be honest.

He was short of temper.

I was short on patience.

And it was right there in that dark hole of a room lined in ancient machines that rocked and knocked noisily, sitting on top of the empty table for folding laundry with a sketchpad on her lap, that I found Jade.

She was dressed in a flowing skirt in a pink and white floral pattern with a long slit up one thigh. She paired it with one of those crop tops that, when she stood, would show off a nice chunk of her midriff.

Her long brown hair was pulled up into a claw clip with just a few face-framing strands hanging down.

She was oblivious to my presence. Her warm brown eyes scrunched up as she eyed what she was working on, then quickly erased some part of the image before drawing

it again.

As she drew, little gemstone rings on her long, thin fingers caught my eyes.

I waited until she lifted her pencil off the page so I didn't make her screw something up before I cleared my throat to announce my presence.

"Oh," she said after jumping slightly. Reaching up, she removed the one earbud she had in, tucking it back with its twin in the little white holder. "It's you," she added, shooting me that big, happy smile of hers. Like she was genuinely glad to see me.

"How you been, doll?" I asked, dropping the laundry basket on one machine. I moved the salad to the side, then dumped the laundry into the machine, added a pod, then put the change in the slots.

"I've been great, thanks. You?"

"Not bad. Any more incidents with my uncle?"

"Just pushed him up from the lobby the other day. He's struggling with his chair."

"Yeah. I got a custom electric one ordered that he's going to claim he hates for a few weeks before he starts using it. Should only be another week or so."

"Oh, that'll be great for him. He could even go outside and get some sunshine. What?" she asked as I raised my brows.

"I don't think my uncle has willingly gone outside in years," I told her. "Which, honestly, might be better for the general population anyway. I got a salad here he turned his nose up at. Wanna share?" I asked, glad I'd decided to bring it.

“Are you a mindreader?” she asked, grabbing her big sack purse, and digging around in it. “I’m starving,” she added, producing a little case, then opening it to pull out a fork.

“That’s handy,” I said, moving over to the table with her, hopping up and saying a silent prayer that the old thing could hold our weight.

“I always bring a little kit with a fork, knife, spoon, and straw,” she admitted. “You’d be surprised how often you find yourself in need of them. Plus, you know, good for the environment,” she added as I pulled off the top of the salad.

I produced my own fork that I’d washed just a few moments before leaving with the laundry.

“Oh, that looks amazing,” she said as I held out the salad, letting her grab a forkful first.

“Eddie makes the best salads,” I agreed, nodding.

“Eddie. Is that your partner?” she asked, making me almost choke on my mouthful.

“No. No. I mean, if I swung that way, I might marry the fucker. But we’re both straight. He just likes to cook for the club.”

“What kind of club?” she asked, then let out a groan as she had a bite.

I went ahead and pretended that sound didn’t go straight to my dick.

“Bike club.”

“Oh, do you guys do competitions?” she asked.

“Competitions?” I asked.

“You know... races?”

“Oh, no, doll. Not that kind of bike,” I said, smiling. “Motorcycles,” I clarified.

“Interesting. What does a motorcycle club do?” she asked.

“Hang out mostly,” I admitted. “Throw parties.”

“Who doesn’t love a good party?” she asked. If I wasn’t mistaken, she was hinting at wanting an invitation.

“I can give you an address if you ever want to pop by for one.”

“But how would I know when one is going on?”

“Pick any night of the week and you’ll pick the right one,” I said. “But you also have my number. If you haven’t lost it.”

“I haven’t,” she said. “Maybe I’ll take you up on that offer. I’ve never been to a party at a motorcycle club. What does one wear to that sort of thing?”

In her case? As little as possible.

“This works,” I said, waving at her. “But you might want to wear a bathing suit under it.”

“What? I can’t swim nude?” she asked, tone serious, but her smile betrayed her.

“Baby, I doubt anyone would complain about you swimming nude,” I said, letting my

gaze scan her.

“Oh, but I wouldn’t want to do it alone,” she said, laying the flirtatious tone on thick.

And I was eating it up.

“Doll, anytime you want me naked, I’m at your service,” I shot back, watching as her eyes warmed to golden honey.

Her lips parted to say... something.

When a mom with three enthusiastic kids rushed in, the older two gibbering about who was going to get to put the coins in the slots.

“Both of you. You can both put the coins in,” the mother placated them as she dragged two large trash bags behind her, and jiggled the baby in her carrier.

“Hey Lily,” Jade said, hopping off of the table and holding her hands out. “Come on. Give me my fix,” she demanded, making Lily pull the baby out of the carrier.

Jade pulled the baby to her chest and leaned down to press a kiss to her mostly bald head before she started to sway gently and hum.

Thanks to the older members of the club, I’d been around a shitton of babies in my life. And, yeah, they were cute and all.

But I’d never had quite the same kind of reaction to seeing any of the women with any of those babies as I did seeing Jade with this one.

It was a strange, I dunno, tightening sensation in my chest.

“How long have you lived here?” I found myself asking when she caught me staring at her with the baby.

“Just about a month,” she told me, grabbing the baby’s hand, and trying to remove the earring from her tiny fist before she pulled the earring free.

“Here,” I said, jumping up to help pull the earring free.

“Thanks. Why?” she asked.

“You seem to have acclimated really quickly,” I said, thinking about how I didn’t know any of my neighbors back before I moved into the clubhouse. The only reason I knew my neighbors at the clubhouse was because it was a club member and his wife.

“How can you see this sweet munchkin and not want to get to know her?” she asked as the baby just... made little bubbles around her mouth at her. Which, apparently, was adorable, because Jade cooed at her about it.

“No, give it,” one of the other kids grumbled, knocking his fists into the ancient vending machine that had forever been eating my money when I tried to grab a drink or snack while doing laundry.

“Here, let me show you the trick,” I said, moving away from Jade toward the machine. “See right here?” I said, pointing to the side of it, “if you hit it real hard, it usually,” I told him as I banged on the metal, making his chocolate bar fall down, “works,” I finished with a smile as he bent down to fish it out of the tray.

“Thanks!” he said, rushing away as he tore at the wrapper.

“Mom said to share!” his sister ran after him, face getting red already.

I stuck some more money into the machine to get her another bar as her brother tried frantically to shove the whole thing into his mouth.

“Here,” I said, handing it to her as she chased her brother around the laundry room for the second time as their mother grabbed both sides of the washing machine, head thrown back, eyes closed, clearly at her max.

Content with their candy, though, the older kids calmed down as Jade entertained the baby, giving the mom a few moments to focus on her task.

“Have you talked to Curtis?” Jade asked, genuine interest on her face.

Lily glanced back at the kids. Finding them content and not listening, she exhaled hard. “His lawyer thinks he should take the deal the DA offered.”

Jade’s gaze slid to the kids, then the baby. “Ten years?” Jade gasped.

Lily looked back at her older kids. “They’ll be grown,” she said, eyes watering. “And she won’t even know who he is,” she added, looking at the baby.

“Can you get a second opinion?”

“We can’t afford a lawyer,” Lily said, sounding hopeless.

“Could you just go to trial? Maybe the jury will be more understanding,” Jade suggested.

“Not around here,” I said, shaking my head. I didn’t want to squash their hopes, but if the DA was offering ten years, the jury could put him away for twice that depending on the crime and how enigmatic the prosecution was.

“You don’t know that,” Jade said, shaking her head.

“I do. I do know that. What was he accused of?” I asked, looking at Lily.

“Possession with intent,” Lily said, gaze sliding away, embarrassed on his behalf.

“So he’s facing fifteen. Ten isn’t a great deal. But with good behavior, he could be out in six, seven.”

I could feel Jade’s curious gaze on the side of my face, but I decided not to try to explain.

“He didn’t do it,” Lily insisted.

“I know no one wants to believe—“

“I’m very aware of his flaws,” Lily cut me off. “But he recently got a really solid job. A good job. We were saving up to get out of here. Into a better school district for the kids. He was on his way to getting into a union. He wouldn’t throw all of that away.”

“So what happened?”

“My best guess? He left his damn window open again...”

“And a scout said cops were around, so the dealer tossed the drugs into the car...”

“Yes,” Lily said, looking relieved that someone not only didn’t think she was nuts, but actually believed her.

“And the cops saw he has a history, and didn’t think there was any reason to delve deeper into it. And in a building like this, there’s no security cameras to confirm his

story.”

“Yes, exactly.”

I wouldn’t say I was exactly a do-gooder. But I hated the idea of a dad finally turning his life around for his family and trying to build them all up, only to get fucked over by the system.

“You’re sure he’s innocent?” I asked.

“He cried,” Lily told me. “When he called, he cried. I’ve been with him since we were sixteen. I’ve never seen him cry.”

“Give me your number,” I said, passing her my phone. “I will have someone look into this,” I told her, thinking I could either fund it myself, or ask Teddy—the club’s friendly local billionaire—to have his lawyers get on it, see what they could do.

“Really?” Lily asked, suspicious but typing in her number anyway. “But we don’t even know you.”

“I grew up in this neighborhood, in this building.” My gaze slid to her kids, bickering over some characters from a show, then over to the baby, resting her head on Jade’s chest as she slept. “Back then, I wished my family had tried to get me out of here. Least I can do is put some feelers out.”

“Thank you,” Lily said, turning away to wipe tears off of her cheeks.

Thank you , Jade mouthed to me as I glanced at her.

Hey, I was just doing it to be nice. But if it scored me some brownie points with Jade, I wasn’t gonna be mad about that.

My washer started buzzing, prompting me to walk over to turn the clothes over into the dryer.

In the time that took, Lily took the baby back from Jade, and was trying to shush the other two, who were complaining that they were still hungry.

“Why don’t you take them upstairs to get some food?” Jade asked. “Levee and I can watch your machines.”

“Are you sure?” Lily asked.

“Of course,” Jade agreed, seemingly in a hurry to rush them along. “Right?” she asked, looking at me with eager eyes.

“Definitely. Take your time,” I added.

“Thank you. Thank you both,” Lily said, pretty blue eyes full of hope as she shuffled her two older kids toward the door.

When their voices trailed off, I turned back toward Jade.

“Now why do I get the feeling that you want to get me alone?” I asked, turning back toward Jade.

Just as she reached up, grabbed my face, pulled me down, and sealed her lips to mine.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jade

It wasn't like I was in the habit of making out with somewhat random men in laundry rooms.

But, well, this particular man was ridiculously gorgeous, charming, and—miracle of all miracles—he was kind.

Kind enough to offer to help complete strangers with their seemingly hopeless situation.

I adored Lily and her family.

Lily and Curtis had been the first people in the building to say hello to me, to tell me that if I had any questions about the building or area, to let them know.

I'd babysat for them when there had been conflicts in schedules. And I went out of my way to get a few minutes playing with their sweet baby a few times a week.

I'd come across Lily sitting outside her apartment door sobbing in private so her kids wouldn't see her breaking down when she'd gotten the call from Curtis saying he was arrested.

I sat with her for as long as possible, crying with her, before the kids became too unruly, and I had to go inside to try to placate them while their mom got herself

together.

I was new to the area, new to this sort of neighborhood. It was hard not to feel my heart crack and splinter every day at the sadness I saw all around.

Single moms struggling to make ends meet. People in need of money falling prey to payday loans. The addicts who needed help, but all they found were dealers. Kids from disenfranchised families have no choice but to work as scouts for local criminal organizations. The homeless begging for spare change just to be able to feed themselves.

It was such a change from the world I'd grown up in. A happy, middle-class upbringing where I was insulated from so many of the hardships in life.

It made for a happy, well-adjusted childhood. But I couldn't help but think it gave me a very skewed outlook on what the world was really like.

I tried as much as I could to help. But I wasn't exactly rolling in cash. Hence why I was staying in this building where the air conditioning was spotty at best, the hot water almost never worked, and I was pretty sure some of the paint around was actually still lead.

It had only been a month, yet it seemed like I was often the only one who was trying to do any good.

Then there was Levee.

Taking care of his grumpy uncle.

Then offering to help a complete stranger to try to get him cleared of his charges.

What can I say?

His do-goodery was a surprising aphrodisiac.

I couldn't wait to get him alone.

The second that Lily and the kids were out of distance where my actions wouldn't scar them all for life, I reached up, grabbed the sides of Levee's stupidly good-looking face, and pulled him down to me.

I expected sparks.

I got fireworks.

Desire surged through my system as Levee's lips pressed harder, deepening the kiss.

My hands slid from the sides of his face to wrap around his neck, holding on tight as I pulled myself up.

Sensing my intentions, Levee's hands slid down my back to sink into my ass, helping lift me up.

My legs wrapped around his hips but his hands stayed planted, massaging my ass as he turned and walked me backward until my back met the wall.

A moan escaped me, the sound swallowed up by Levee's lips.

His hips ground into me, his jeans doing little to hide the bulge of his desire.

My head fell back, and his lips moved down to my neck, making goosebumps rise up on my skin and need pool in my core.

As if sensing that, Levee ground himself against me, making a low moan escape me.

“Fuck, you smell good,” Levee groaned as his nose teased up my neck.

My hips rocked against him but it wasn’t nearly what I needed.

“Why are your clothes still on?” I asked, fingers moving up under his shirt to feel his warm skin.

Levee’s chuckle vibrated against my earlobe.

“Mainly,” he said, pulling back to look at me with his heavy-lidded eyes, “a possible indecent exposure charge.”

The little whimper that was starting to escape me broke off on a moan as his hand moved between us, pressing up against the material between my thighs.

A rumbling sound moved through Levee. “So wet for me already,” he said, fingers teasing up my cleft to find my clit through the material, and starting to work me.

Keeping one arm around him, I reached between us, yanking my panties out of his way, so his fingers could touch me without the barrier.

“Yes,” I moaned as his thumb moved to my clit, and two of his fingers slid inside of me.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” Levee groaned, his forehead pressing to mine for a moment as my walls tightened around his fingers, eager for some movement, some friction. “That’s it,” he said as my hips started to rock. “Ride my fingers.”

But then his fingers were fucking me. Quick and hard, just like I needed.

He worked me relentlessly, seeming to have a sixth sense for when my little whimpers were going to become full moans, making him lean in and take my lips again, muffling my sounds as he drove me right to that edge, then sent me tumbling over.

I buried my face in his neck, crying out my release against the material of his warm, soft t-shirt. He worked me through it, dragging it out until I was spent.

I was still clinging to him and his fingers were still inside of me when there was a loud crash outside that had us breaking apart.

I dropped down onto my feet, pulling my skirt back into place as Levee turned so his back was to the doorway, blocking anyone's view of me while I adjusted.

With a smug little grin toying with his lips. Then, gaze on me, he slipped his fingers into his mouth, tasting me just before two teenaged girls and their mother came into the laundry room.

"Mrs. Jackson," I greeted her, feeling a bit like I'd almost gotten caught messing around with a boy by my own mother. "Talia. Aaliah," I said, nodding toward the tall, thin girls who both had these big hazel eyes that they'd inherited from their mother.

Those hazel eyes of Mrs. Jackson were honed in on Levee right then. Likely seeing the things I'd seen with my own eyes when I'd first seen him.

A man too handsome for his own good. The mischievous light in his eye. The cocky grin.

"Everything alright here?" she asked, speaking to me, but pinning Levee with a disapproving-mom look. "Who is this young man?"

“Mrs. Jackson, this is Levee,” I said. “He takes care of William. You know, my neighbor.”

Mrs. Jackson made a clicking noise at that information.

“Ma’am, I apologize for anything my uncle may have said or done. I’m sure all of it was inexcusable,” Levee said, making Mrs. Jackson relax her stance.

“That’s right,” she agreed. “But you’re a good nephew for caring for his rotten soul anyway,” she said, shooting Levee a little smirk before turning to help her daughters start their laundry.

I took the opportunity to move my bedding along and by the time it was done, Lily and her kids were back.

Talia and Aaliah entertained the kids as Mrs. Jackson plucked the baby from Lily, the two women talking in hushed tones, likely discussing Curtis.

I noticed that a lot of the moms in the building really tried to close in around each other. All of them living similar experiences and trying to help one another as much as possible.

“Jade,” Lily called as Levee finished folding the last of William’s clothes. “Mrs. Jackson wants to talk to you about hiring you to do portraits for her girls.”

“They have their school pictures coming up, but those are never any good.”

“Of course I will do them. But no charge,” I insisted as I moved toward the women.

“You need to make a living,” Mrs. Jackson insisted.

“Fine then. Twenty bucks each.”

“School pictures would be around one hundred for both of them. More if I want digital files.”

“Okay. How about an even seventy-five, with access to digital files at no extra charge?” I asked, vaguely aware of Levee’s phone ringing. But much more acutely aware of his absence just a moment later.

I had to stay there discussing portraits, pretending there wasn’t a crushing sort of disappointment moving through my system, realizing that I wasn’t going to be able to continue what we started here. That I was likely not even going to see him for another whole week. If then.

When I made my way back upstairs half an hour later, the only sounds coming from William’s apartment were his usual sports replays.

I knew without knowing that Levee was gone.

Sighing, I turned back to my apartment. My whiteboard had some new additions to it. Namely, the shading I’d told the kid that the coffin needed. I took a second to jot a little note encouraging his progress, then made my way into my apartment.

“Hello, my pretties,” I cooed at the fancy goldfish swimming happily around their tank that was practically the size of my bed.

Goldfish were the first thing that I really mastered drawing when I was a kid and won one at a carnival.

It didn’t occur to me until a few years later how cruel it was to give away live animals as pets to small children who had no idea how to care for them.

I still felt guilty about the four goldfish that died early on my watch before I finally learned how to take care of them.

There was something truly beautiful about them, though. Their colorful scales. Their fanned tails.

It helped, of course, that my first true subjects were rather slow moving and unchanging, giving me a chance to really study and perfect them.

Ever since then, I'd been keeping goldfish in increasingly larger and more ornate tanks.

My current setup featured actual sea grass that I grew myself from seed. There were also fifteen varieties of live aquatic plants in the tank, creating natural hideaways for the fish and helping to keep the water clean.

"Are you hungry?" I asked as I flipped open the lid. It was a rhetorical question. Goldfish were little pigs; they always wanted to eat.

Lunch and laundry handled, I made my way over toward the windows where I had my easel set up.

Keeping a few feet back, I eyed it, trying to figure out what it was about the painting that was bothering me, that didn't feel quite right.

I was being hypercritical. But I'd been working on it for three weeks now, and I really needed it to sell for a decent amount of money to make up for the time spent on it.

I never put all my eggs in one basket, of course. One thing you learned when you were an artist for a living was to diversify.

I sold it all.

Originals, prints, greeting cards, bookmarks. Print-on-demand items. Everything from sweatshirts and mugs to wallpaper and coffee tables.

I had shops on every single social media site, artist sites, my own website, you name it.

It... paid the bills.

I wasn't exactly rolling in it, but I was getting closer each passing week to having the hope of moving up in the world. Maybe getting myself a sweet little bungalow close to the beach.

I reached for the canvas, taking it down and putting it against the wall to deal with another day.

I set my phone on the easel with the pictures Mrs. Jackson sent me of her daughters, then picked up my sketchpad to get some rough drawings done.

I got lost in the work, wanting to do something really perfect for Mrs. Jackson. Before I knew it, the sun was setting, and I needed to get up to start flicking on all the lights so I could keep working.

I made a quick dinner and a cup of tea. I was about to finish my preliminary sketches when there was a ruckus in the apartment above mine.

The guy from the dumpster who I'd seen getting his face beat in was a relatively quiet upstairs neighbor. I mostly only heard him swearing at or taunting other players that I assumed he was playing video games with.

There was no loud music.

No sex sounds late at night.

And never any visitors. At least not that I'd ever heard.

That streak was ending tonight, though, it seemed.

Several sets of footsteps charged across the floor, then there was a loud thud. Loud enough to make me jerk, my tea sloshing over the rim of my cup and burning my hand.

My heartbeat tripped into overdrive, pulsating in my chest, wrists, and throat. I stared up at the ceiling, like if I tried hard enough, I could see right through it and know what was going on.

There was more slamming.

Then grunting.

Footsteps.

The slam of the door.

And an eerie silence.

I rushed over toward my window.

I'd lucked out with a view of the front of the building, including the entry itself, letting me always know what was going on.

There'd been three open units when I came to take a tour. The owner expected me to want to take the one with the view of the back of the building that was just an open lot.

Nice and quiet, he'd said.

But I hadn't wanted quiet.

I'd always liked being in the hub of activity. I felt like it sparked my creativity. And, well, being a woman living alone, it made me feel safer being able to watch the various goings-on.

Just a few moments later, four men emerged from the building.

I had no reason to assume that it was the same men from near the dumpster the week before since I couldn't actually see them now, nor did I see them then.

But that was what I thought regardless as I saw them start to emerge.

It wasn't until I saw that they seemed to be struggling to carry something heavy and awkward between them.

My heart sank but before I could see what they were carrying, they took a sharp turn, heading toward the side of the building next door instead of heading back out to the street.

My gaze slid up to my ceiling, praying to hear some sort of sound.

Footsteps.

Water running.

His video games playing.

Something.

Anything.

But no sound came.

Not that night.

Not the whole next day.

And I couldn't help but worry that the thing the men had been struggling to carry between them... was my neighbor.

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CHAPTER SIX

Levee

Raff checked his watch, then looked between the rest of us.

“So... is he always late?” he asked.

Raff and Coach were in from our sister chapter in Shady Valley, California, dropping off guns they’d picked up at various gun shows in the south.

We, in turn, passed off those guns to our international arms dealer, Zayn. Who we were currently waiting to transfer the guns the Shady Valley crew and our own crew had procured.

“It’s his way,” I said, shrugging. “He likes to make an entrance. The first time we met him, he came in on an airboat.”

“Should we be watching the sky for a skydiver?” Raff asked. “A hot air balloon, maybe?”

I laughed that off but went ahead and checked the sky because, quite frankly, I wouldn’t put anything past someone as larger-than-life as Zayn.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. And I had a momentary surge of hope that it was maybe Jade texting me. Even if it had been a full week with no contact from her after the whole thing in the laundry room.

I'd wanted to hang out and walk back to her apartment with her. Maybe finish what we'd started.

But Huck had shot me a text, asking me where I was because I'd somehow forgotten that he'd texted us earlier that week to talk about a church meeting, since we had a few small weapons pick-ups to do ahead of Raff and Coach arriving.

Huck wasn't exactly a hard-ass leader, but when he called for church, you showed up. Not even the excuse of being with my uncle would be good enough.

Jade had been preoccupied with her neighbors so I made my way out, dropped off the laundry, and headed back to Golden Glades.

I'd been kicking myself ever since, wondering if she'd felt slighted and that was why she hadn't shot me a text about getting together again.

Which was why I was actually happy about Raff and Coach being in town, and needing to do a drop with Zayn. It meant we would almost certainly be hitting up Miami. Which put me close to my uncle's place for me to 'happen by' the next morning since I was in the area.

"That can't be him, can it?" Coach asked, nodding down the road.

"Jesus. How many guns did you tell him we brought?" Raff asked as the, I shit you not, party bus rolled up the road toward us.

Yeah, I was pretty sure that was Zayn. It was just his style. Ridiculous.

As expected, the bus rolled up next to us, the door opened, and there was the man in question.

“My friends!” he said, a champagne bottle lifted in one arm.

“Zayn, you don’t seriously want us to put the shit in the bus, do you?” I asked after looking around and realizing I was the most senior member of the club here— when the fuck did that shit happen —and therefore had to ask the grown-up questions.

“Of course not,” Zayn said, that enigmatic smile not falling for a second as he came down the steps, then gestured behind us. “Didn’t you see my men?”

We all turned in unison, watching as no fewer than six men appeared out of fucking nowhere.

“Yeahhhh,” I said, looking at Raff, Coach, Coast, and Kylo. “How about we leave this little part out when we report back to Huck?” I suggested, watching everyone nod in agreement.

No one wanted to fess up to the president that we’d somehow missed that many suspicious men when we were about to do a big drop to Zayn.

“They will handle it from here. And we,” Zayn said, heading back to the bus, “party.”

“Fuck yeah, we do,” Coast agreed, taking the bottle from Zayn, and starting to chug it as he moved up into the bus.

“I like him,” Zayn declared as Kylo, Raff, and Coach followed suit.

I was about to follow them all inside when a figure moved out from behind the bus, making me pause.

Daniyal was the antithesis to Zayn. Where Zayn was extravagant, extroverted, and wholly unserious, his right-hand man was understated, reserved, and sometimes

grave.

The older guys in the club said that the strong, stocky man with the dark hair and skin and the almost jarringly gray eyes was clearly some kind of former special forces agent from an overseas organization since he had cut up his fingerprints or some shit like that.

Honestly, I could see that.

I'd been with the club for a few years now. I think we'd been connected with Zayn pretty much all of that time. But I'd never heard Daniyal speak.

I knew better than to ask him where the hell he had appeared from. The man slunk around like a cat. One moment he wasn't there, the next he was.

One thing I did know, though, was that rarely was Zayn out of Daniyal's sight. And I guess if you were a man like Zayn who had all the money in the world, and likely more than a few enemies, you wanted to keep your personal security guy as close as possible at all times.

"Hey, Daniyal," I said, getting a nod from him as I turned to climb into the bus, feeling him move in behind me, shut the door, then slide into the driver's seat.

The music was already thumping in the back of the bus. And thanks to the blackout windows, the neon lights inside made it look like a damn nightclub.

I'd normally be eating up this shit, talking to Coach about what beaches to hit up to find some girls to bring on the bus with us.

But what was the first thing I did when I sat down?

Reach for my phone to check yet again to see if Jade had texted.

“Really?” Coast asked, shooting me a raised brow look.

“Got a text from Teddy,” I told him, shrugging.

“Teddy, does he want to join?” Zayn asked.

While the two men were from wholly different upbringings, when you reached a certain level of wealth, you ended up rubbing elbows with the same people at the same events regardless. Charity shit, I guess.

So even before Zayn and Teddy met through the club, the two had known each other.

“I’ll ask,” I said as I shot off a text thanking him for having his lawyers working on Curtis’s case so quickly. He’d even gone above and beyond and posted the bail for the man he’d never met. So the man was home with Lily and his kids already.

“Teddy said he’s at a board meeting, but he might catch up with us at the clubs later,” I told the crew who were already several drinks in while I hadn’t touched a drop of anything yet.

With that, I tucked my phone away, determined to put thoughts of Jade out of my mind as we drove down to the beach, then filed out.

Coast, Kylo, Raff, and Coach were quick to make their way over to a group of bikini-clad girls. While my lame ass made my way down toward what looked like a farmer’s market in the opposite direction.

I was only maybe a third of the way down the parallel rows of booths. Some featured overflowing crates of colorful vegetables. Others featured flower arrangements.

Others still were full of handmade jewelry or honey.

But then, right at my side, was something I never could have anticipated.

Jade.

Sitting on a chair with a green juice in her hand, smiling at someone who was asking her questions about one of the prints she had hanging up all around her.

I don't know what I expected when I heard she was an artist. I guess I figured she must have been decent if the women in the laundry room had been gushing about her work. But I never really thought about it beyond that.

But, fuck, she was really good.

And eclectic.

There were a bunch of beach scenes, likely hoping to capitalize on the tourists in the area who wanted to bring a piece of the area back home with them. But there were also ones of mountains, deserts, goldfish, flowers, and even a few less aesthetically pleasing, grittier pieces featuring the apartment building I grew up in as a backdrop as she, I assumed, drew inspiration from her new home. None of them showed any actual faces, but they were all painted in darker colors with one bright focal point. In one, a mom was lifting up a baby over her head with her other kids sitting around at her feet. Another had an older boy helping a younger one learn to use a skateboard.

I figured there were actual scenes she'd witnessed and wanted to immortalize.

Directly behind Jade were two incredibly realistic portraits. One of them looked like an older version of herself. Her mom, I assumed. And the other looked like a more masculine version of Jade. A brother, probably. The sign on them said she was open

for private commission portraits.

I waited for the couple she was talking to to move on before I stepped closer.

“If you’re looking for any models, preferably nude, I’m available,” I said, watching as she turned, a big smile blooming across her face.

“It’s you!” she said, climbing off of her seat to come to the other side of the table.

“This is genuinely one of those ‘fancy seeing you here’ moments,” I said, waving back toward the beach. “Some buddies wanted to come to the beach and I decided to check out the market. Are you here every week?” I asked.

“This is my first time, actually. And I’m still not convinced it was worth the booth rental,” she admitted. “But I’m always open to trying new things.”

“You’re not selling anything?” I asked. “Really?”

“I sold five prints and one bookmark,” she said, waving at the table where there were various greeting cards and bookmarks spread out. “I’m not complaining. Money is money. But once I deduct the rental fee, it might just make more sense for me to stay home and work instead.”

“How’re the portraits for Mrs. Jackson coming along?” I asked, moving behind the table to get a closer look at her art.

“Almost done with one,” she said, and I felt her moving closer, but keeping her distance. Like she didn’t want to disturb my browsing. “Which one is your favorite?” she asked when I was done.

“This one,” I decided, moving back toward one that featured an orange and white

goldfish with its fanned tail spread wide.

“That’s Swim Shady,” she told me, making a laugh bubble up as I looked over at her.

“Swim Shady?” I asked.

“Yeah, he’s one of my fish. They’re one of my favorite things to paint,” she admitted.

“Here,” she said, going back to her table to rifle through a box, then coming back with a print of the same picture set in a see-through protector. “On me.”

“Nah, I have to support the arts,” I insisted, reaching for my wallet, then handing her a fifty.

“I can’t break that.”

“I wasn’t asking you to,” I told her.

“That’s too much. The print is only going for twenty.”

“And, yet, you’re gonna take it,” I said.

I was half a second away from tucking it down into her skirt pocket when fucking Coast appeared out of nowhere.

“Levee, the fuck did you... oh,” he said, stopping short at seeing me standing so close to Jade. “Told you you underestimated him,” he called back to the other guys. “He’s picking up a pretty thing too.”

Christ.

“Coast, this is Jade. Jade, my brother, Coast.”

“Brother?” she asked, her artist eye taking in our different coloring and facial structures in a blink.

“Club brothers,” I clarified.

“Oh, right. The motorcycles.”

“She’s pretty as fuck, man, but she’s busy,” Coast said, his gaze moving over the booth.

“What are you guys up to?” Jade asked as Kylo came up behind Coast, arms thrown over two different women.

“A party bus, if you can believe that,” I told her. “Then likely the clubs later.”

“A party bus?” Jade asked, brows scrunching. “People actually use those outside of bridal parties?”

“I’m afraid we don’t have any penis-shaped straws or hats,” Zayn declared, joining us. “But if it is an absolute deal-breaker, we can surely find some. Is this your art?” he asked, moving into the booth.

“Jade, Zayn. Zayn, this is Jade,” I said.

“Nice to meet you. And, yes.”

“Do you sell originals?” he asked, moving around the booth, seeming to study each painting with a practiced eye.

I mean, this was Zayn. I was sure the fucker had been in every art gallery in no fewer than twenty separate countries. Not to mention having multiple houses where he,

presumably, kept artwork.

“I do,” Jade admitted.

“Canvas?”

“Of course.”

“Do you have a website?” Zayn asked. In that posh, yet unplaceable accent of his, he actually suddenly seemed like someone from Teddy’s circle of friends. And less like the larger-than-life arms dealer I knew him to be.

Zayn and Jade continued to talk as I turned to share surprised looks with Coast and Kylo.

“Where did Raff and Coach go?” I asked.

“Back to the bus with a couple girls,” Kylo said. “Which is where we are heading, right, darlin’?” he asked the brunette.

“Hey, what about me?” the blonde asked.

“Right, darlin’?” he asked, nipping her earlobe.

Behind them, some of the other vendors seemed to be wrapping up for the day.

Kylo took his two girls back down toward the bus, leaving Coast to look at me, questioning.

“I’ll be there in a few,” I said, getting a nod from him before he headed back as well.

In the corner of my eye, I spotted Daniyal situated a few booths down. Far enough to be able to scope out the whole area, but close enough to rush toward Zayn if needed.

“Do you see my friend over there?” Zayn asked Jade, pointing toward Daniyal.

“I do,” Jade said, offering him a smile that he didn’t return.

“I want to commission you to do a canvas of him. For his birthday.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Jade said.

“I would like him to be astride a unicorn with a cowboy hat on,” Zayn said, getting a snort out of me, who knew he was serious, and a bemused laugh out of Jade, who thought he was kidding.

“He means that,” I told her.

“Really?” Jade asked, eyes brightening.

“Really,” Zayn confirmed. “He is young at heart,” he insisted. “Would it be possible to have the unicorn surfing?” he asked.

“Ah, yeah, sure,” Jade said, nodding. “That sounds fun.”

“And could he—” Zayn started again.

“Zayn, look, there’s a pretty redhead,” I said, turning him to point her out.

“Indeed there is. Jade,” he said, reaching for her hand and bringing it to his lips. “I will be in touch.”

With that, he was gone.

“If I didn’t stop him, he was just going to keep going, coming up with more and more asinine ideas. Next thing you know, he’ll have rubber ducky shoes on and a tattoo of a dinosaur merman on his chest.”

“He does seem very... eccentric,” Jade declared, glancing around, then starting to pull her own pictures off of the walls of the booth.

“He’s richer than God and is used to the whole world being his playground.”

“What I’m hearing is he won’t scoff at the five hundred bucks I was going to charge him for the portrait.”

“Doll, I don’t think he would blink an eye if it was five hundred thousand, ” I told her as I helped her pull down the rest of her art.

“Wow,” she said, shaking her head.

“He also has contacts all over the world. You might be a very busy artist once he has some canvases of yours.”

“I’ll just be happy to make a few sales from him personally,” she said.

The humbleness seemed to be innate in her. She always seemed to be wanting to do good, to offer of herself to others. Without seeming to ask for anything in return.

As much as I’d gone years liking the club girls who were just a little more vapid and seeking their own interests, I found Jade refreshing.

“So what are you doing after you’re done here?” I asked as she hauled the boxes out

from under the table to organize her prints.

“Uhm, coming to see what the inside of a party bus looks like, obviously,” she said, shooting me a playful smile. “Though, I have some plans later. So I can only hang for a few hours.”

As much as I’d prefer to spend a few hours alone with her instead of with the guys and whatever girls they’d rounded up, if I was going to get a few hours with her at all, I was sure as hell going to take them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jade

He saved me.

That was dramatic.

But it had been a long, hot, boring day that felt mostly not worth my time.

Sure, I'd had lots of conversations with lovely fellow vendors who tried to assure me that things would pick up, that it took them weeks to really start to make a solid income. But when it came to the public, I had a lot of people stopping for a quick look, but very few who even moved in the booth to check things out. Fewer still who actually bought anything.

More so than that, though, Levee saved me from my own thoughts. Which had, admittedly, taken a really dark turn ever since the sounds in the apartment above mine got my imagination going in endless circles.

They all inevitably ended with me trying to convince myself that I was being crazy.

But the feelings kept coming back regardless.

Especially when I didn't see that neighbor the next day. The thing was, though, that I didn't see all of my neighbors every single day. We all had different lives and schedules. When I sat to think about it, I wasn't sure I'd ever actually noticed that

particular neighbor before.

Still, there was no reasoning with my fears. And with nothing to do but sit around all day, they'd been growing stronger and stronger.

So, yeah, Levee's timing was pretty awesome in that respect.

He saved me from my own mind.

And, honestly, I was actually pretty excited about the party bus.

Since moving to the area, I'd been doing lots of exploring. The beaches. Local coffee places. Pet stores. Little independent restaurants.

But, well, I didn't exactly have any friends to go out at night with. Sure, I had friendly relationships with other tenants in my building, but we were strictly 'in and around the building' friends. Which was fine. Good, even. I really believed in community like that.

Still, I had to admit that it felt like a little something was missing. No one to go out to the bars or clubs with, to dinner, to a movie, poetry reading, play. Stuff I was used to doing in my old town. With other people.

So, yeah, this was going to be good for me. Bonus points for getting to spend some time with Levee.

"Do you have to worry about these in your car?" Levee asked, grabbing the tote for me. "I'm sure the bus has storage."

"They'll be fine," I told him as we walked past all the other booths wrapping up for the day and back to the lot to store my tote in the trunk. While I was busy with that,

Levee went over to the parking machine, putting enough money on my spot to last the whole night.

“Alright,” he said when I joined him. “Allow me to apologize in advance for how insane this could potentially get,” he told me as we closed in on the bus, the bass of the music thumping even from the outside.

I thought he was being a little dramatic. Then, of course, we walked into the bus. Where two of the girls that the other men had rounded up were grinding against each other to the music as some of the men looked on. Others were occupied with making out with other girls.

Levee’s hand went around my hip, keeping me close. As if I had never seen girls flirting with each other to excite men before. Or people making out for that matter.

He led me over toward the U-shaped black leather sectional, and pulled me down beside him. His arm went around the back of my shoulders as Zayn popped the cork on a new bottle of champagne.

I recognized the bottle. It was the one my parents had bought as a ‘big splurge’ once to celebrate my father getting a promotion at work that would allow my mother to retire her full-time job and focus on her art.

He passed one bottle toward his left before reaching for another to pop the cork.

There were two more empties rolling around on the floor.

What was that? Almost six hundred dollars in champagne on some random weekend afternoon.

Maybe Levee was right about how much I could be charging for my commission.

Even if I didn't think I would be willing to ever ask anything that astronomical.

Zayn dropped down on my other side, passing both Levee and me clear plastic party cups and filling them almost to the rim.

"You two are entirely too sober. And I am not drunk enough," he declared, starting to use the rest of the bottle like his own sippy cup.

Everyone else around acted like this was the most normal thing in the world. I glanced at Levee, who was casually sipping his champagne.

Maybe this was the norm for him.

I was suddenly struck with the knowledge that I knew very little about Levee.

I mean, I surmised things from his actions. Like caring for a difficult uncle who didn't want his attention. Like stepping up to offer help to a complete stranger with a legal matter.

All signs pointed to a good person.

Other than that, and knowing he was in a motorcycle club, I really knew nothing about him.

Suddenly, I wish I'd asked if he wanted to go get coffee instead of hanging out on the bus.

But even as I thought it, a man walked up the steps, closed the door, got behind the driver's seat, and pulled away from the curb.

The girls dancing lost their footing, falling into the laps of Coast and Zayn, who both

seemed pleased as punch by the arrangement.

I half turned away from Zayn to look toward Levee who shot me a smirk as he tapped his cup to mine.

I took a tentative sip as one of the girls let out a squeal when one of the guys started to tickle her sides.

Levee reached down, scooping up my legs, and pulling them over his lap. He leaned in close, his lips tickling the shell of my ear.

“I thought you’d text,” he said, making butterflies take flight in my chest.

“I didn’t know if you’d want to hear from me,” I admitted.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“You left in a hurry,” I reminded him.

“Had a work meeting,” he told me, making some of the tension leave my shoulders since I’d felt a little, I don’t know, rejected after he left. “Didn’t want to interrupt you. Figured I’d see you this week.”

“Funny how that worked out,” I said, going ahead and letting myself lean into him a bit more as I took a bigger sip of my drink.

I had several hours before I needed to drive. I would be fine.

“So what happens now?” I asked as Levee’s free hand started to sift through my hair.

“From experience, now there is a lot of drinking. Then, likely, a stop to do something

completely unusual. Like an arcade. Or aquarium. Food. More drinking. Then clubs and, you guessed it, more drinking.”

“To what end?” I asked.

“Usually, hotel rooms and hooking up,” he admitted.

“Makes sense,” I decided, glancing around. These were all stupidly handsome men in the prime of their lives. What else would a night out involve besides hooking up?

I was suddenly frustrated that I’d agreed to having a late dinner with Lily and Curtis after the kids went to bed.

Because the idea of Levee hooking up with some other girl to end his night made my stomach feel like there was a pit in it. Even if, objectively, I had no claim on the man. We had a little half hookup. It wasn’t like he belonged to me.

“I was actually thinking of ending the night at Teddy’s place, then dropping by my uncle’s in the morning. Hoping to run into you.”

“Teddy? The one who helped Curtis?” I asked.

“Yeah, he’s a friend of the club. Has a penthouse in Miami. We crash there when we’re in the area sometimes.”

“Were you really going to try to run into me, or are you just laying it on thick?” I asked. “I’m fine with either answer,” I told him. Even if, in my heart, I was kind of hoping for the former.

“I had a whole plan and everything. I was going to bring bagels. Then say something about how I got too many. And then offer you one. That we wouldn’t even get to

eating.”

“Oh, really? What would we get distracted by?” I asked, taking another long sip of my champagne.

“An in-depth discussion of the Impressionists, of course,” he teased, making a little laugh burst out of me. “And that would, inevitably, lead to an analysis of Expressionism and Surrealism...”

“Someone paid attention in art class.”

“I, ah, may or may not have looked up some art shit in the hopes of impressing you.”

“That is the cutest thing I’ve heard in a long time. And I heard a little kid refer to pasta as persketti this week,” I told him, charmed. No one had ever done art research for me before.

“It’s hard to beat persketti,” Levee agreed.

“So, in your research, what painting did you like best?”

“Well, I mean, the Home Alone one is always a hit.”

“The... Home Alone one?” I asked, squinting at him.

Levee reached out to set his cup into a holder, then pressed his hands to either side of his face, mouth open.

Another laugh escaped me at that. “The Scream,” I told him. “By Edvard Munch.”

“Yeah, that one. I kinda liked that one with the girl with the pearl earring in her lobe

too. Kind of sad, but passionate look in her eye. What was that one called?”

“The Girl with the Pearl Earring,” I told him.

“Yeah, that one.”

“But I think I have a new favorite artist. She’s got a real pretty name, too. Jade...”

“Holland,” I told him.

“Right. That’s her name. Jade Holland. She paints a mean goldfish.”

“Do you have any pets?”

“Me, personally? No. The club has a tortoise and a macaw named Mackie. And we’re all in charge of taking care of them.”

“So, you’re at the club a lot?” I asked.

“I live at the clubhouse,” he told me. “Same with Coast and Kylo. And Velle and York. The older club members have moved on to other houses and shit now. Starting families and such.”

That was... surprisingly wholesome.

See, he wasn’t the only one who’d been doing some research. I mean it wasn’t every day you came across someone who said they were in a motorcycle club. And, quite frankly, I had absolutely no idea what that entailed.

The thing was, my research had ended up involving a lot of fictional content that likely made things out to be a lot grittier than it actually was in real life.

The general consensus was that guys who liked riding motorcycles sometimes got together into little clubs and hung out and rode together. Kind of their version of a book club or knitting circle kind of thing. A way to connect with people who had similar interests and passions.

None of the stuff I'd come across had ever mentioned the bikers actually living at the clubhouse, though.

I couldn't help but wonder if that was a common thing, or if this club was more of the exception to the rule.

"So there are a lot of kids around the club?" I asked.

"Ton of 'em," he admitted. "All different ages now. Seems like every few months, one of the guys is finding a forever kind of girl and settling down. Not long after that, they start popping out litters."

"Do you like kids?" I asked.

"Yeah. Think they're more fun when they're mobile and you can do fun shit. But they're a good time. You love them, right?"

"Yes. I wouldn't mind having a litter myself one day," I admitted.

I'd always liked kids. But I figured that thing about feeling your clock ticking was utter nonsense. Until I first held Lily's baby. Now, all I wanted to do was spend some time with her, soaking up the snuggles and smiles and that oddly sweet-sour baby smell.

"I can see that," he said nodding. "Lot of kids in your family?"

“God, no. My brother is fully anti-kid,” I admitted. “He has two dogs that he travels around with when he’s got time away from work. And it’s just the two of us.”

“Does he live around here?”

“No. He’s back in Massachusetts still.”

“What brought you down here then?”

“I’ve never been a fan of the cold. I mean, don’t get me wrong, snow is magical. But I figure I can appreciate that from a distance. Or on the occasion when I go visit home in the winter. I wanted to be down by the beach.”

“Makes sense how you ended up in that neighborhood then,” he said. “Thought it was an odd place for you to be.”

“I don’t think I realized just how expensive the area was going to be. It was the only place I could afford right away. You know, with first, last, and security on top of furnishing the place and stuff. I have a five-year plan. Max. Probably more like two.”

Though I’ll have to admit that some part of me would find it hard to leave now that I was making connections.

That said, Lily and Curtis didn’t even want to be around for another year. And Mrs. Jackson and her husband were planning on retiring to Mr. Jackson’s parents’ house once things went through probate.

Sure, new people would move in. But I got a feeling that this building was a more transient of a place for most families. A stepping stone to a house or an apartment in a better school district. There were too many bad elements around for most people to want to settle down long-term.

“I know there is a lot of rough shit going on around there, but there were things I liked about my childhood in that neighborhood.”

“Did your parents move eventually?” I asked, since he said he’d grown up there. And it was only his uncle around now.

“My old man died a few years back. My ma ran out on us a long while before that. Not that I blame her. My father was a fuck. But—“

“But she left you alone with him,” I filled in for him.

“Yeah,” he said, eyes dark for a moment before he shook it off. “So where are you thinking of moving after this?” he asked.

“I honestly don’t know,” I admitted. “I entertained the idea of a bungalow by the beach.”

“Might not have enough room there for a litter of kids,” he warned.

“The next step doesn’t have to be my final destination,” I said, shrugging. There was time. I mean, you wouldn’t think that if you felt the little ovary explosion each time I was around a baby these days, but it wasn’t like I was anywhere close to settling down. I didn’t even have a serious man in the picture.

As much as I was into Levee, everything about this party bus and the comfort at which he felt around the drinking, mostly-naked girls, clubbing, and all of that suggested that this was all stuff he partook in fairly often. He clearly wasn’t in a settling down phase in his life.

This was just, you know, for fun.

Even if that little voice in my head was whispering about what cute babies he would make.

The bus drove around for about an hour as everyone drank and had fun. I'd even almost finished my drink before we pulled to a stop, and the driver opened the door.

"Do I want to know where we are, Zayn?" Levee asked as I propped up onto my knees to look out the window.

They were almost completely blackout, but I could still see the words on the front of the building we were in front of.

"Ah, we are going to the World Erotic Art Museum ," I told him, beaming at the idea, figuring this place was going to have all sorts of art to check out.

"Huh," Levee said a while later, his arm sitting heavily around my shoulders. "I don't know what I was expecting exactly," he admitted, "but a wall of pussy sculptures wasn't it."

"I still can't get over the bed made of four penis pillars," I admitted. Each one of them had been carved with various sexual positions. "And I really want to know if I can find a print of those scissor people in a meadow."

"Did you two see the giant copper phallus?" Zayn asked, waving over toward where two of the girls we'd brought with us were each sitting on one of the testicles and smiling at Raff, who was taking their picture.

"Hard to miss," I said, smiling.

"I've lived in this area all my life and I had no idea this place existed," Levee admitted.

“To be fair, it seems like the kind of place you really only need to see once.”

“Zayn isn’t from here, is he?” I asked.

“No. Well, I mean, who the fuck knows? The man seems to exist everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Why?”

“How does he even know about this place?”

“I imagine he has someone on his staff whose job it is to find interesting things for him to do no matter where he is visiting. Figure this was a better trip than having to drag you around to Horrorland or some shit like that.”

“Yeah, horror really isn’t my style,” I admitted. “I’m not a huge fan of violence in general.”

“We have that in common,” Levee admitted. There was a strange edge to his tone, though, that I couldn’t quite place.

But Zayn was calling us over to check out some more pieces of art, so there was no more time to talk in private.

I was actually having a really good time. It felt nice to be out of the apartment with other adults doing just random fun things.

But after the museum, then a stop at a very fancy restaurant where none of us should have been permitted to enter dressed as we were, but Zayn seemed to have some sort of pull, it was about time for the bus to circle back to the lot where they’d picked me up, so I could get back to my place in time for my dinner date with Lily and Curtis.

“So, are you still going to be bringing bagels in the morning?” I asked as Levee

walked me to my car.

“That depends.”

“On?”

“If you’ll tell me what kind of bagels you like.”

“Cinnamon raisin.”

“Then it’s a date,” he said, backing me up against the passenger rear door, leaning in, and sealing his lips over mine.

It was long and deep but far too quick, leaving my body feeling tingly and unsatisfied.

“See you in the morning?” he asked, getting a nod out of me. “Cinnamon raisin.”

“Cinnamon raisin,” I agreed as he pulled open my door, then waited for me to slide inside.

I was floating on cloud nine the rest of the night. All through dinner with Lily and Curtis that featured a snuggle with the baby as I fed her.

It wasn’t until I was on my way back down to my floor, when the elevator stopped the floor above mine to let another tenant out, and I looked down to see a door ever so slightly ajar that I felt my stomach drop again.

Because that door?

It was to the apartment right above mine.

Before I even knew what I was doing, I was stepping out of the elevator.

And making my way to the door.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jade

My heartbeat was punching against my ribcage as I crept down the hall.

I suddenly regretted the second dinner I'd eaten at my friends' place as it moved back up my throat, my mind conjuring up endless images of horrible things I might see.

Like my neighbor dead on the floor of his living room, never having a chance to even try to run away.

I stopped just outside of the door, pausing to take a deep breath as I listened for a moment.

Hearing nothing, I used my elbow to push open the apartment door.

It was dark inside, save for the glow of his TV screensaver, casting the space in pink and purple glow.

Using the back of my hand, I flicked on the overhead light.

My gaze went first to the desk setup near the windows. Three separate monitors, two gaming systems, a desk covered in energy drinks, chip and candy wrappers, and a collection of what looked like fidget toys.

The chair was turned over on the floor and a pair of white gaming headphones were

on the ground next to it.

None of those things were what had a gasp catching in my throat, though.

No.

That would be because of the big dried puddle of blood in the center of the floor.

There was a strange whining noise in the apartment and it took me an embarrassingly long moment to realize it was coming from me.

The dinner that had been making its way up my throat threatened to find its way out, and I had to focus on taking a few slow, deep breaths to fight it back down.

I sidestepped the puddle of blood, pressing my back against the cabinets straight out of the seventies, but these ones were a faded yellow color compared to my sage green ones.

I followed the counters to the edge of the kitchen, then snaked my way down the hall. I checked out the bathroom, finding nothing, then made my way toward the only bedroom.

It was similar to mine. The layout of the closet and the windows making it so the bed had to be on the same wall with the feet facing the door.

Unlike my room, though, the walls were the same bland white they'd been when I'd moved in. And his bed was covered in nothing but a flat sheet with one pillow and one throw blanket. No nightstands or decor and just a small dresser across from the bed with a large TV sitting on top of it.

The closet door was half-open, the floor covered in a pile of dirty clothes.

No man.

Living or dead.

But the blood...

“The fuck you want from me?” a voice said from the hallway.

Close. Way too close.

Like it was coming in here.

Where I definitely didn’t belong.

I mean, if it was the tenant, I could just... say I saw the door opened, that I was worried, that I wanted to make sure he was alright.

But then I heard something else that made my blood run cold.

A second voice.

Then a third.

My mind flashed back to the encounter by the dumpster. Four men. And the ones who’d exited the building after the altercation the other night. Four.

This wasn’t the tenant.

These were the men responsible for the blood on the floor in the other room.

Panic surged, making my heartbeat hammer, my blood rush through my veins, and

my stomach roil.

I glanced to the closet as I heard noises in the other room.

Cabinet doors slamming, drawers being overturned.

They were looking for something.

And it was only a matter of time before they came this way.

I glanced at the closet, the most logical place to hide. But also the most likely place they were going to look for something next.

That just left the bed.

This guy's one was much closer to the ground than mine was. Too low, really, for hiding.

But what choice did I have?

There was a crash from the other room, making me press my lips together to keep any sounds from escaping as I slowly lowered myself onto the floor, flattening onto my belly, then starting to wiggle my way under the bed.

The bars scraped across my back, snagging the material of my skirt, making me need to reach back to yank it free to keep moving. I slid up as close to the top of the bed against the wall as possible so that if someone reached under the bed to feel around, their hands were less likely to come in contact with me.

My whole body was shaking as I heard footsteps make their way into the bathroom, emptying out the cabinet under the sink.

They were coming here next.

And what would happen if they found me?

Would I be another bloodstain on the floor? Another body carried right out the front door?

How long would it be before someone missed me? Before they would even think to look for foul play?

Why hadn't I told anyone about my suspicions? Lily, at least? So someone would suspect someone coming for me if I went missing?

It was too late for that now, though, as I heard another set of footsteps making their way into the bedroom.

I pulled my hand up, pressing it hard over my mouth to keep any sounds muffled as I focused on breathing slow and deep so it couldn't be heard.

Sweat was trickling down my neck and spine, wetting through my shirt in moments as the drawers of the dresser were overturned, the contents scattering all across the floor, a pair of boxers sliding halfway under the bed with me.

"Nothing," the man said as another set of footsteps moved into the room.

"Check the closet," said the other as he moved over toward the bed, whipping off the sheet and tossing the pillow to the ground.

There was a moment of nothing, then a loud ripping sound.

It took me a second to place it. But when I did, the anxiety tripped into overdrive as I

worried he might split the mattress down to the bottom. Which would expose my hiding spot through the slats of the bed's platform.

The cutting stopped, though, and the bed jiggled as he, I assumed, dug around into the foam mattress.

Looking for... I don't know what.

There was a thunk across the room. Maybe a shoe hitting the wall from the man rummaging through the closet.

"Anything?" the man directly above me asked.

"Just stinkin' laundry," the other guy answered.

"Fuck," the other one snapped as he suddenly lowered down in on the side of the bed, his arm reaching around under.

I wanted to curl smaller, but I was terrified of being heard or of making the bed move.

So I just stayed as still as possible, not even daring to breathe as I seriously worried I was going to pee myself out of fear.

The man's hand grabbed the boxers, the only thing under the bed save for dust and balls of hair.

He pulled it out and with a disgusted grunt, tossed it back to the ground.

"Let's get the fuck outta here," he said.

“But T said—“

“Fucking T wants to look, he can come do it himself,” he snarled before stomping out of the room and down the hall.

With a sigh, the other guy seemed to follow behind.

Footsteps moved through the living room, then there was the click of the door.

I didn’t move.

I barely breathed.

My whole body was shaking violently, hard enough to make the bed rattle with me.

But I couldn’t make myself move. Not yet.

What if they came back?

If they saw me?

If they knew I’d heard their voices? Knew they worked for some guy named T?

I stayed there, trying to breathe deeply so I didn’t hyperventilate, listening to the neighbors on the other side of the wall who were having a screaming match over the husband turning off his location on his phone. The neighbors above had a child trying—with not much success—to learn to play something on a flute.

Doors out in the hallway opened and closed, making my whole body jerk each time as I tried to count to sixty slowly.

Once.

Twice.

Ten times.

When I was at fifteen, feeling that no one would hang in the hallway for that long where they didn't belong in case they might be overseen, I slowly started to slide out from under the bed.

Just my head at first, looking around, some paranoid part of me sure that someone was going to rush back in, grab me, and strangle me to death.

To be fair, my own fear seemed to be doing a sufficient job of that.

By the time I got onto wobbly legs, I was feeling lightheaded from the adrenaline surging through my system.

But I had to move.

I had to get out of there.

Down the hall, into the elevator, then into my own apartment. Where I was—relatively—safe.

I wiped the back of my arm across my sweaty brow then inched my way back out of the bedroom, my back hugging the wall.

I stopped at the end of the hallway, glancing into the living room. Seeing nothing, I moved forward, stopping only when I saw a big butcher's knife sitting on the floor.

I wasn't really even thinking very clearly as I reached for it, holding it tightly in my palm as I made my way to the door, then as I peered out into the hallway.

Seeing no one, I carefully slid the knife into the waistband of my skirt, then made my way out of the apartment as quietly as possible.

My nerves jangled together as I waited for the elevator, my head on a swivel, looking for anyone who might be hanging around waiting for me to exit the apartment.

There was no one, though.

And when the elevator doors opened, there was no one inside to see me as I collapsed back against the wall, gasping for breath and clutching my slamming chest where my heart seemed seconds away from breaking out of the confines of my ribcage.

The elevator dinged too soon for me to pull myself back together. So after a quick glance to make sure no one unsavory was hanging around, I grabbed for my key hanging from a coiled band on my wrist and ran to my apartment.

My hands shook so badly that I dropped my key twice before it finally went in, unlocked, and let me inside.

I slammed the door behind me, sliding the lock, deadbolt, and chain, then reaching for the little doorstopper thing that had an alarm on it if the door was pushed open, and shoved that in for good measure.

Pulling the knife out of my skirt, I held it high as I moved through my apartment, flicking on every light and looking in every possible hiding spot before I finally collapsed down on the floor of my bathroom and let the sob that had been building escape me.

I couldn't say how long I sat there crying, it being the only outlet for my fear and adrenaline. But by the time I pulled myself back off of the floor, my face was raw from the tears and my eyelids were puffy.

I made my way back out into the living room, creeping over to the windows to glance outside.

There weren't a lot of working lights outside of the building at night. So while I could see a bunch of people hanging around, it was impossible to tell if any of them were the men from the apartment, or if they were just the usual shady characters that were always out at night.

Paranoia had me yanking my curtains shut, not wanting anyone to be able to look up and see me.

I was suddenly glad that the building didn't have fire escapes. It had been something that worried me when I toured the place. But the super had insisted that the stairwells were built to, I don't know, prevent fire from going down them or something. And that fire escapes in a building like this would only encourage break-ins and other crimes.

Feeling shaky as the adrenaline drained, I moved to sit down on my couch, wrapping my blanket tightly around myself and setting the knife on the cushion just to my side.

I didn't sleep.

I didn't turn on the TV or some music.

I just sat there staring at the door, terrified that someone was going to come and kick it down for the whole night.

Then into the morning, the light started to slice through the corners of the curtains where they didn't quite kiss the walls.

I think at that point, I was completely zoned out, lost in my own mind. Because I didn't hear the comings and goings of my neighbors at all.

It wasn't until there was a loud knock on my own door that I was shocked out of it, nearly falling off the couch in the process.

"Jade, open up. I've got bagels," a familiar voice called.

I didn't stop to think about how I was still in my ripped clothes from the night before, how I was likely covered in filth from being under the bed, that I probably had evidence of crying and lack of sleep all over my face.

All I could think of was that Levee was a big, strong guy. Someone who felt safe.

And I really, really wanted to feel safe again.

So I flew at the door, disengaging the alarmed doorstop, then sliding the locks, and throwing the door open.

Then there he was.

I just barely resisted the urge to throw my arms around him and drag him inside.

CHAPTER NINE

Levee

I tapped out of the festivities after the first club, finding myself kind of, I don't know, bored.

I'd never felt that way about a night out on town before. The only thing I could chalk it up to was the fact that I wasn't interested in any of the women who came around our table in the VIP section.

I couldn't even say what it was about them that didn't interest me. They were all pretty and engaging.

But they weren't... Jade.

I guess it came down to that.

"You're uncharacteristically introspective tonight," Teddy said as he brought me over a glass of scotch from his bar, then moved to sit in the chair across from me.

"I guess I am," I agreed, taking a sip of the drink and looking around his penthouse. I'd been there a dozen or so times before, but this was likely the only time I'd seen it while not actively drunk or hungover.

As enormous as the space was, I found it surprisingly comfortable. I got why Teddy lived here instead of the many other estates he and his family owned across the

country.

“Would this happen to have something to do with a favor you asked for a friend of yours?” he asked, insightful as ever.

“Think it might,” I agreed, taking another sip.

“I’m assuming this friend is of the female persuasion.”

“Yep.”

“And very pretty.”

“Gorgeous.”

“I thought so,” he said, nodding as he looked off into the distance for a moment, reaching up with his hand to rub his jaw. “I feel like I’ve been here about half a dozen times already,” he admitted.

“What do you mean?”

“One of you clueless bikers sitting across from me, all up in their heads about a girl.”

“Oh,” I said, realizing that Teddy likely was the person a lot of the guys ended up confiding in. He, like Eddie, was a friend of the club without being a direct member. And that little level of detachment made it seem like he was a safer person to confess something to.

“History goes like this. Sad sack feeling all confused and lost about a beautiful woman. Me, offering eloquent and spot-on advice on how you can’t logic your way out of feelings. Them, completely disregarding that advice and going out of their

ways to be complete fucking idiots. Only to circle back around, realize I was right, do what I said to do, and get the girl and the happily-ever-after,” he said, making me let out a small chuckle, easily seeing the other guys in the club acting exactly like that. “So how about we cut to the chase and you just take my advice.”

“I’m... not opposed to that,” I said.

“I know you guys are the party hard, different girl every night, nothing serious kind of men. Which generally means you have the emotional intelligence of fleas,” he said, making me snort into my drink. “But let me break it down for you. When you finally come across a woman who makes you leave a night of partying early to come and sit in an empty penthouse with a man you barely know, that’s the woman you want to slow down and spend some time with.”

“I’m seeing her in the morning,” I admitted.

“Let me guess. She’s being chased by a dangerous member of the Russian mafia or is being stalked by an ex-boyfriend.”

“Eh, not that I know of.”

“No shit,” he said, nodding. “Interesting. Well, even better. How’d you meet?”

“She chewed me out for not taking good enough care of my uncle. She’s his neighbor across the hall.”

“And she’s not writing super secret fan fiction about you online?” he asked, making me smile at the mention of Donovan’s girl.

“Not that I’m aware of. She’s an artist, not a writer. I did offer to pose nude for her, though,” I said, smiling.

“Oh, is that who Zayn was talking about?” Teddy asked. “He was spouting something about a commissioned art piece for Daniyal. Which seems like the last thing in the world the man would want.”

“Precisely why Zayn would get it for him, I think,” I said. “But yeah. We happened to run into her at the farmer’s market earlier. I bought this,” I said, producing the goldfish print and handing it to him.

“This is really well done.”

“It’s Swim Shady.”

“Excuse me?” he asked, brows raising.

“That’s her goldfish. His name is Swim Shady.”

“Does she exclusively do animals?” he asked.

“No. She does a little bit of everything,” I told him, finding her website, then passing him my phone.

“Hmm,” he said as he scrolled through the images.

“Hmm, what?” I asked, not realizing my tone was a little sharp until he shot me a knowing look.

“She’s very good,” he said. “I’ve been looking for art for that new hotel,” he said.

“I’m sure she’d be over the moon at the idea. It would be nice for her to be able to get out of the building she’s in.”

“Same one you, Seeley, and Cato grew up in, right?”

“And Ama,” I agreed.

“Yeah, that’s not an ideal place for a single woman to be living,” he said. “I’m going to have the designer reach out to her in the coming weeks if you want to tell her to be on the lookout.”

“I will,” I agreed. “So, do you know a good bagel place around here? Particularly if they have cinnamon raisin ones.”

“Already know her food preferences, huh? Maybe you didn’t need the pep talk after all,” he said as he handed me back my phone. “There’s a great place about five minutes down the street. Mo’s. But you have to get there early or there won’t be anything left. Now, I’ll trust you can see yourself to bed,” he said, putting his glass on the coffee table. “I have an obnoxiously early meeting.”

With that, he headed off.

And I did something very unusual for me. I got an early night of sleep.

So that when Teddy got up for his obnoxiously early meeting, I was already up with coffee ready.

By the time he headed out, I decided to as well, wanting to make sure I could get Jade’s bagels.

I did drop into my uncle’s place first, but he was still out cold on his recliner, so I just left a few bagels on the counter, then made my way across the hall.

There was a second of hesitation, worrying it was too early, but I decided that Jade

struck me as a morning person, so I knocked.

I immediately second-guessed my decision a moment later when the door opened to reveal a very exhausted-looking Jade.

No. Not just exhausted. Sure, there were purple smudges under her bloodshot eyes. But it was more than that. Her eyelids looked swollen. She was still wearing the same outfit from the night before, but now the skirt was ripped and the whole front of her was dirty.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my smile falling as my mind raced with all of the possible things that could have happened to her after she drove herself home.

If there wasn’t a spot in the lot and she had to park on the street, making her walk past the local drug dealing crew amongst various other people who were likely up to no good.

Or, you know, even some of her neighbors.

“What? Sorry,” she said, shaking her head.

“Are you alright?” I asked again.

“Oh, uhm,” she started, looking down at herself, realizing what she looked like for the first time. “Sorry. I’m... behind today. Can you give me twenty minutes to throw myself together?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure,” I agreed.

“Ah, make yourself at home,” she said before rushing off, whacking her hip off of her kitchen counter she was walking so closely to it.

I heard the door close a moment before the water in the shower turned on.

“Huh,” I said, setting my bag down on the old formica counter, checking out the fresh sage-colored cabinets that made the space feel less dated than my uncle’s apartment or the one I’d grown up in.

Her apartment as a whole didn’t even seem like it was in the same building as anyone else’s.

Unsurprisingly, Jade was a fan of color. From the yellow and orange drapes on the windows to the green couch covered in a bright, multicolored crocheted throw and multiple mismatched pillows.

There were a ton of live plants scattered around, including around her little space in the apartment that acted as her studio. It faced the front windows to allow for good light, and the walls were lined in shelves full of brushes, paints, and sketchpads.

There was also an abundance of art on the walls. All different styles in lots of different types of frames.

The only other wall left in the apartment was dominated by a massive fish tank. Inside, there were a shitton of live plants. And four fancy goldfish moving around.

I recognized Swim Shady immediately as I moved over to look at them. But the other three were equally as striking. One, black, white, and orange. Another, pure orange. The final, black and white.

“I feel like it’s wrong I only have a print of one of you,” I told them before moving across the room to pull open the curtains to let the sun in for the plants.

Moving back to the kitchen, I rummaged around in the cabinets to find the coffee,

then started brewing a fresh pot.

In another cabinet, I found her plates and cups. As I expected, not a single one of them matched. And they were all colorful or fun. One mug featured hand-drawn flowers. The other was covered in various bird eggs.

The bathroom door opened, bringing a burst of hot air and the scent of lavender from, I assumed, her body wash or shampoo.

I exhaled hard, trying not to imagine her naked as I heard her move across the hall and close the door to her bedroom.

She emerged just a few moments later as the coffee machine beeped, looking refreshed.

Sure, her eyelids were still puffy and she still had the sleepless smudges underneath her eyes. But she looked less haunted.

Though, what I couldn't seem to look away from the way her wet hair was soaking through her thin white cutoff tee. That she wasn't wearing anything underneath.

I forced my gaze down, finding her wearing some sort of loose, flowy pants of some paper-thin light blue material.

"That smells good," she said as I poured each of us a cup.

"Everything okay?" I asked again now that she'd seemed to have recovered a bit.

"Yeah. I just didn't sleep well last night," she said, shrugging it off. "This should make up for that," she added, ducking into her fridge for some half & half.

“Please tell me you’re not one of those people who hates sugar,” I said as I took some of the creamer. “Because I’m gonna have to go borrow some from the neighbors then,” I admitted.

“Nothing wrong with cutting the bitter a little,” she said, reaching for a sugar bowl. “I don’t have coffee often, but when I do, I need something to sweeten it too,” she said, scooping one teaspoon into her cup. “Oh, wow,” she said, barely holding back a laugh as I put three.

“Yeah, the guys give me shit about it all the time too,” I said, taking a sip. “So, hungry?” I asked.

“Starving,” she said as I put my mug down to reach into the bag, pulling out two different cream cheeses and some butter before putting her cinnamon raisin on her plate and a sesame on mine.

“Oh, cinnamon sounds amazing,” she decided, producing a bread knife, and slicing her bagel before tossing it in the toaster. “You can’t eat this kind of bagel cold,” she explained. “Did you bring any to your uncle?”

“I dropped them on the island. He was still sleeping.”

“Yeah, he seems to keep odd hours,” she agreed. “So what did you guys do last night after I left?”

“Well, Teddy and I cut out after the first club,” I told her.

“Why?”

“Just wasn’t feeling it,” I said. Adding silently without you there. “And Teddy had an early morning, so it made sense to crash with him.”

“Are party buses a common occurrence for you guys?”

“This was a first. But Zayn always has something interesting planned. He once had his yacht docked around here and had a giant-ass party that went on for three days or so. I don’t even remember much of it. I think we were all wasted the whole time.”

“Zayn seems to be a party starter for sure,” she agreed.

“To be fair, the club has a lot of parties too. But his always go over the top.”

“Is he in real estate or something?”

“He’s... into international business,” I told her.

I wasn’t sure why I didn’t tell her the whole truth. It wasn’t like I was ashamed of my job and our connection to Zayn.

Maybe it came from growing up in such a disenfranchised neighborhood where I brushed shoulders with drug dealers and pimps almost daily. Amongst other criminals. And, to an extent, they were all kind of decent guys. They just saw a market and sold to it.

That was what we did as well.

There was just... something soft about Jade that made me want to protect her from the truth.

No.

That wasn’t exactly right.

It was that I didn't know she would still want anything to do with me if she knew what I was into.

Was I probably a shitty person for keeping it from her? Yeah. But it wasn't like she'd outwardly asked me what I did, or the club did, for a living.

I never felt so conflicted about my profession before. I guess that in the past, the women around us knew who we were and what we did since they were, you know, club girls. Or when it wasn't club girls, it was all just fun and casual. I never knew their last names. They didn't need to know my job.

This was... different.

I was kind of just stumbling my way through it.

"Oh, speaking of Teddy," I said as she grabbed her bagel and started to spread the cinnamon cream cheese. "He told me to tell you to be on the lookout for his designer to contact you in the coming weeks."

"Really?" she asked, eyes going round.

"He's renovating or building, not sure of the details, a hotel. He says they need art. And he liked what he saw on your website."

"Oh, wow," she said, a shocked smile tugging at her lips. "You have a lot of amazing connections, huh?" she asked.

"To be fair, those are the only two super-rich guys I know. But they are good men to know because, well, they know everyone else. So shit kind of spirals out in a good way."

“Is Teddy the sort to commission art of people he cares for riding mythical creatures?”

“I think Teddy’s tastes are a little more traditional than that. I imagine some of your beach pictures will be right up his alley for the hotels anyway. Maybe a goldfish one too. He liked Swim Shady. I met your other fish, by the way. Do they have names too?”

“Well, we have Tuna Turner, of course,” she said, making me chuckle.

“Of course.”

“Then there’s Mackerelmore and Carly Salmon.”

“Those have got to be the best names I’ve ever heard,” I decided as she took a bite of her bagel, letting out a moan that did not go straight to my dick or anything.

“Thank you,” she said. “And this is so good,” she told me, seeming to relax a bit more with each passing moment.

I still wanted to ask what had happened the night before. But I’d already asked three times. I didn’t want to piss her off with my curiosity. It was probably none of my business anyway.

“How was your dinner last night?” I asked, figuring we could hedge around the topic of what was wrong.

“It was good. I got lots of baby snuggles. And Curtis was filling me in on how things were going with his case.”

“Well, I hope.”

“Yeah. His new lawyers found out that the cops never even dusted the bag of drugs for prints. So they are having that done now since Curtis knows his fingerprints aren’t on it.”

“And there might be prints belonging to someone else who is also in the system.”

“Exactly,” she agreed. “He and Lily are hopeful. Cautiously optimistic. I really hope it goes well for them.”

“What about his work?” I asked. “Did he lose that new job of his? What?” I asked when she looked a little sheepish.

“I may have suggested that Lily call and, uhm, tell them that Curtis came down with, uh, meningitis.”

“Why meningitis?”

“Because employers aren’t scared of the flu or stomach bugs, since they go around so often. But meningitis is pretty alarming and people don’t want to catch it. So, it bought her enough time to cover for his absence since being in jail. He’s starting back the day after tomorrow.”

“And if he gets the charges dismissed, no one ever has to know.”

“Exactly. And if the worst happens, well, what does it matter?”

“And in the meantime, he’s earning a living.”

“Yes. Lily took on some child care work with other moms in the building for some extra cash too. I think this made them even more determined to get out of here.”

“Understandably. I wish I could say that things have changed since I lived here, but...”

“But there’s no decent social safety nets to help people rise out of poverty,” she filled in. “This area could really use some outreach programs for at-risk youths. Try to break the cycle of the local drug dealers getting their claws into the kids when they’re still in elementary school. Did you or your friends...” she started, then trailed off, worried she was asking something inappropriate.

“No. I mean, don’t get me wrong, we considered it. All of us came from shitty homes with no money. It was tempting as fuck. But we all knew that once you got in, you were in for life. And we wanted more freedom than that.

“Seeley got out way before us. Linked up with the bikers. Then once he proved himself, he brought us in too. And Ama, she got herself out thanks to college. Became a doctor. She actually runs the clinic in this area. Her way of trying to do good for the people around here.”

“Lily talked about that clinic being a lifesaver,” she said, smiling. “So where do you all live now?”

“Out in Golden Glades,” I told her.

“Oh, wow. I guessed I figured you were closer than that.”

“The club started in Miami. There was a car repair shop that also worked as an apartment building. But, uh, it... burned down.”

That was mostly true.

It actually exploded.

But admitting that would require an outright lie if I didn't want to tell her it had been deliberately destroyed.

"Then the president decided to move somewhere that they could get a little more bang for his buck. Plus, it has a pool."

"Ugh. That's ideal with the heat around here," she said.

"If you ever want to come swim, you can drop by anytime you want," I invited.

"To swim naked?" she said, smirking.

"I will never judge you for your choice of bathing attire," I confirmed, getting a tinkling little laugh out of her.

"I might just have to take you up on that," she said as she finished up her bagel. "Hey, Levee," she said, suddenly seeming serious again, her pretty eyes going as haunted as they'd been earlier, "can I ask—"

"Fuck! Oh, fuck fuck fucker!" my uncle's voice yelled from across the hall, making both of us stiffen.

We were frozen in place for a moment, unsure if my uncle was just being his grouchy self, or if it was something more serious than that.

But then there was a cry for help that had us both turning and running across the hall.

I pushed the door open first, rushing into my uncle's apartment to find him slumped back against the counter clutching his hand.

It was the blood that sent my adrenaline shooting through my system.

On the butcher's knife. The cutting board. The countertop. His shirt. Leaking down his arm.

"Oh, God," Jade gulped, looking a little green. Not great at the sight of blood. That was good to know.

"Let me see," I demanded, moving forward and reaching for his hand.

"No."

"You called for help," I reminded him.

"Not from you."

"Well, tough shit. You got me," I said, grabbing his arm and pulling it closer to inspect the wound.

It wasn't my favorite part of being in the club, but because of my line of work, I'd seen some gnarly wounds before. So while it was a nasty, deep wound, the contents of my stomach stayed where they belonged.

"Fuck," I said. "Doll, can you hand me a dishcloth?" I asked, gesturing toward the drawer.

"Doll," my uncle scoffed, trying to keep up his bravado, but he was looking a little pale now that he got a good look at the damage he'd done.

Some part of me wanted to lecture him about using a butcher's knife to cut a bagel, but it hardly seemed the time. And the last thing I wanted to do was get into a fight when he was still losing so much blood.

I tightly pressed the dishcloth into the wound, then wound it tightly around his hand.

“Clamp down on it with your fingers,” I instructed as Jade moved around to push his wheelchair closer. “We have to go to the clinic,” I told him.

“Not going fucking anywhere with you,” he snarled.

“You need stitches.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You’re losing a lot of blood,” I insisted, thinking his blood thinner meds must have been the culprit.

“What do you care if I bleed out?”

“If I didn’t care, I wouldn’t be here,” I insisted. Though, at times like this, it was hard to remember why I did.

“William,” Jade tried, voice placating, “we need to go get you checked out, okay? It won’t take long.”

I was already texting Seeley and Amarantha, letting them know I was heading to the clinic with my uncle.

Ama texted back quickly, telling me Seeley was just dropping her off then, and she would keep a room ready for him.

“Fine,” my uncle snarled, glaring at me.

“Seeley is on his way to pick us up.”

“Don’t got your own fucking car, huh, boy?”

Sucking in a deep breath, I bit back my anger, reminding myself he was extra nasty because he was in pain and likely scared, even if he’d never admit that.

“Levee has a motorcycle, remember?” Jade asked, still using that singsong voice, but her face was a little harder since he couldn’t see it. “And as much fun as it might be to hook you up to it and drag you to the clinic, it’s probably safer to take a car.”

“Don’t like being treated like an inv—“

“Like someone who is hurt and needs to get looked at?” Jade interjected, cutting him off before he said something offensive. “Sorry, William, but that’s exactly what you are. Now, do you want me to make vroom-vroom sounds as I push you down the hall?” she teased. “Or are you going to stop being a big baby about it?”

Uncle Will harrumphed at that, but there was a slight twitch to his lips at her words as she started to push him through the apartment.

I went searching for his wallet so we had his insurance cards, then followed behind, catching up to them at the elevator.

We rode the car down in a tense silence, but both Jade and I were looking at how quickly my uncle’s blood was soaking through the white dishcloth.

By the time we made it out front, Seeley was already waiting for us with the passenger side door open.

“Seeley, you remember Uncle Will. And this is Jade,” I said.

“Hey, Jade. I would invite you to ride with us, but we’re barely gonna fit the three of

us and the chair,” he said, taking charge and hauling my uncle out of the chair to push him into the seat, knowing he would get less lip about it than I would.

“I wouldn’t want to get in the way,” Jade insisted as Seeley grabbed the chair and walked around the car to fold it up and finagle it into the trunk. “William, try to be a good patient,” she said, giving him a smile. “You might even get a sticker if you behave,” she added, getting another lip twitch out of him.

“Doll, I’m sorry we got—“

“Don’t apologize,” she cut me off as I closed my uncle’s door so he wasn’t listening to us. “You can’t control an emergency. Go take care of your uncle. I need to get some work done on Mrs. Jackson’s canvases anyway. But thanks for breakfast. That was much needed today,” she added, reaching out to grab my wrist for just a second.

The look in her eye said she wanted it to be more than just a touch.

But my uncle and Seeley were waiting.

“Text me,” I said. “That way, I can give you an update.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “Now go. He’s looking really pale.”

With that, I climbed in behind Seeley into the minuscule backseat, and we were pulling away from the curb.

I turned back to watch as Jade seemed to almost run back into the building.

“Wouldn’t have fucking cut my hand if you didn’t bring those fucking bagels,” Uncle Will grumbled in the front seat.

Seeley rolled his eyes at me in the rearview.

“Wouldn’t have fucking cut your hand if you had used a bread knife to cut the bagel,”
I shot back, patience razor-thin.

For once, though, my uncle had nothing to snap back at me with.

So we drove in stony silence to the clinic as I wished to hell I hadn’t dropped off the damn bagels.

If not for that, I might still be in Jade’s apartment.

Clothes might already be scattered on the floor.

Hands and lips and tongues might be exploring.

I sighed, shaking off those thoughts.

I’d get another chance.

I hoped.

CHAPTER TEN

Jade

As horrible as it was to think, I was kind of glad that William had interrupted us.

I wasn't happy he was hurt, of course. It was just that I was seconds away from spilling my guts to Levee.

I'd been lulled to confession by his quiet confidence, his ease, and, well, I won't lie about this... his big, strong, manliness.

I was as feminist as you could get. But even strong, independent women sometimes wanted someone physically stronger to lean on. Or, you know, hide behind.

The thing was, I wasn't sure I wanted to unload all of that crap onto Levee. A man who I really wanted to not scare away. And, let's face it, a woman hyperventilating and crying about a missing neighbor and the men who she suspected killed him might just be a little too much for our budding... whatever it was.

I needed some time alone to get my emotions in check. The lack of sleep was making me unusually out of control of myself. So I dragged myself up to my apartment, locked myself in my bedroom, and took a much-needed nap.

Was it fraught with being chased by shadowy figures through an unknown building? Sure. But it was still sleep.

And as I dragged myself back out a few hours later, all was quiet across the hallway, save from the TV playing some sports game. I took that to mean William had been all patched up and that Levee had likely left with his friend Seeley.

It was for the best, I tried to remind myself several times that day as I fiddled with my portrait for Mrs. Jackson.

But I was too distracted, having to keep fixing things I was messing up. I knew if I didn't step away from it, I would do something that would screw it up enough that I would want to start over. And I was on a deadline, as the portraits were going to be a gift for Mr. Jackson on his upcoming birthday.

Rolling some of the tension out of my shoulders, I made my way toward the door, grabbing my purse and keys, then moving across the hall to knock on William's door.

There was no answer so I made my way downstairs, intent on going to the market, maybe buying some ingredients to make something warm and comforting, despite the heat. There was nothing like a hearty soup or stew to comfort you from the inside out. Or, at least, that was what my mom had always insisted. I was ready to test that theory out.

I was one foot out of the building when I saw someone who gave me an idea.

The super.

He was always around. Always busy. In a building this crowded and this dated, there was always an air conditioner on the fritz, a thermostat not working, plumbing issues, you name it.

"Mr. Booth!" I called, throwing my hand up as I spotted him bending down to pick up what looked like a pile of empty dime bags, curling them in his fist, then dropping

them into the bin just a few feet away.

I saw him suck in a deep breath as he looked for who was calling him, then nodding at me before lumbering over.

Mr. Booth was a massive man. Tall, wide, with legs like tree trunks, and arms almost as big. He looked like he juggled refrigerators for fun.

He had pale skin made ruddy from the sun, or any personal exertion, with thinning blond hair, and small blue eyes.

“6D,” he said, nodding at me. Then his gaze slid to my hair, nodding. “Need me to snake the shower drain?”

“What? Oh, no. No, the drain is fine, thanks.”

“You sure? Hair like that...”

“I’m sure. No, actually, I was just wondering if you are allowed to go into other units?” I asked.

“What for?”

“Well, I’m kind of worried about my upstairs neighbor,” I admitted.

“7D? Why?”

“Well, I heard a loud thump the other night. But not a peep since. I’m worried he might be, you know, really hurt or something. I didn’t know if you could check in on him, or if I should have the police do a wellness check?”

“I, ah, I can take a look, I guess,” he said, gaze moving past me. “Just to put your mind at ease.”

“I would really appreciate it. I’m worried about him.”

If he went in and saw the blood, maybe he could call the police. Which would kind of... take me out of the equation, right? So the bad guys wouldn’t have a reason to suspect me.

I hoped.

“Sure. No problem. Let me know when the drain backs up,” he said before lumbering off.

Feeling satisfied, I made my way to the market, the long walk in the sunshine enough to chase away the lingering anxiety I was still feeling.

I was feeling like a different person as I made my way down the hall toward my apartment.

I was even excited to see what new art might be drawn on my whiteboard.

But the smile fell from my lips as I moved closer to see it wasn’t art at all.

It was a message.

And not one of Levee’s riddles. Or even one of the lewd ones I came across now and again.

No.

This one was a threat.

Mind your own business, bitch.

A strange whimpering sound escaped me as I reached for the pen with a shaking hand, using the eraser cap to remove the words.

Only they weren't drawn on with the dry-erase marker. It was permanent.

On a grumble, I ripped the whole board off the door, not even caring at the spot of chipped paint that came away when I didn't remove the peel-and-stick strip properly.

Unlocking my door, I rushed inside, going straight to the kitchen to toss the board.

I was a second away from dropping it when I realized what it was. Evidence.

Graphology was the study of handwriting. And they used that kind of thing to compare known samples if, you know, something happened to me.

As much as I didn't ever want to look at it again, I brought it with me into my bedroom, slipping it into my top drawer where I figured it would be easily found if it came to that.

I shoved the whole bag of groceries into the fridge, all thoughts of cooking abandoned as the fear I'd been trying to tamp down came rushing back to the surface.

I slid my locks and put the alarm under my door. I closed the curtains. I sat in complete and utter silence, paranoid that I wouldn't be able to hear someone coming.

But even if I did, what good would it do? There was only one way out of my apartment. If they came in that exit, I was trapped. Completely at their mercy. Up this

high, I couldn't even get one of those escape ladders to throw out my window.

I was a sitting duck.

My memory flashed back to the encounter with Mr. Booth in the courtyard, trying to remember who was close enough to have overheard my concern about my upstairs neighbor.

I hadn't been paying much attention. The area was always relatively busy. People came and went constantly. And then, well, there were the people making a living by standing around and waiting for other people to come to them. Little drug deals with out there in the broad daylight.

Anyone could have heard.

Or Mr. Booth could even have mentioned something to someone while working on another task.

Who knew how they found out that I was asking around about my neighbor. All I did know was that they knew. And they weren't happy about it.

Logic told me to go to the police. To tell them about the sounds, the signs of a struggle, the blood on the floor, the men I'd seen and heard, the threat on my whiteboard.

But aside from the whiteboard, I had no proof of... anything. And I imagined the whiteboard could be brushed off as just some neighbor who thought I was watching their comings and goings or something.

This was an area that had a lot of real crimes going on almost right under the police's nose. They wouldn't appreciate me bothering them without proof.

Besides, I wouldn't have to be involved at all if Mr. Booth found what I found in the apartment.

I just had to be patient.

I sat all day, fiddling with sketches for Zayn's commission because it was silly and fun, nothing that required a lot of concentration on my part as I waited for what felt like ages before I finally heard a knock on the door a floor above mine.

"7D?" Mr. Booth called. "7D, open up. Got a call about some noises," he called, and I couldn't help but wonder if his voice was always so loud or if I was just being hyperaware. "I'm coming in," he called, and I heard a jingle of keys.

Then I heard footsteps walking into the apartment, then back out.

A slam.

Footsteps retreating.

But not... hurried.

Before I could even consider what I was doing, I rushed out of my apartment, taking the elevator down to the main level where I could 'just so happen' to run into Mr. Booth again and casually ask if he'd dropped in yet.

"6D," he said, looking taken aback at seeing me at the mailboxes.

"Oh, hey again, Mr. Booth. Long day, huh?" I asked.

"They usually are," he said, nodding.

“Did you get in touch with 7D?” I asked.

“No one was there,” he said, shrugging it off. “Maybe you heard noises from another apartment,” he said, turning and walking off.

“Maybe,” I agreed, watching him retreat.

There was no way he would be acting so casual if he’d seen what I’d seen, right?

What the hell was going on?

Before I could talk myself out of it, I was taking the elevator back up to a floor above mine, rushing down the hallway, and reaching for the doorknob, praying it wasn’t locked or I was going to need to look up how to pick a lock to get answers.

But the knob turned effortlessly in my hand.

My heartbeat was pounding in my ears as I moved inside where I couldn’t be seen.

And I stood there, stomach twisting and turning.

The chair was set neatly by the desk. His headphones were set on top of their stand. Some of the wrappers and cans were missing.

More than that, though, the big bloodstain on the floor was gone.

My gaze lingered on the spot, feeling like the ground had been pulled out from under me.

Had it just been a stain? Any old stain? Not blood?

Could I have missed 7D moving around his apartment, cleaning up not only the mess the men had made when they'd tossed the place, but also the chair and headphones?

Was I being paranoid?

Maybe the guys paid a visit just to rough him up. And I'd imagined all the stuff about the men carrying out a body.

I slid back into the hallway, feeling shaky.

But the fear this time had a lot less to do with the fate of my neighbor and the scary guys with their scribbled threats.

And a hell of a lot more to do with my own damn sanity.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Levee

“How’d it go?” Huck asked as Alaric, Kylo, Coast, and I made our way into the kitchen.

Eddie had been and gone, judging by the array of plates sitting on the counter with aluminum foil on top. Though Mackie had climbed down off of his cage, found his way up the island, and was trying to punch holes in said foil while muttering under his breath to himself.

“Oh, give the poor bird some food already,” Kylo said, moving over to the island to find some pasta. He grabbed some, the bird, and brought both back to the cage.

“It was good,” I told Huck. “Riff and Coach scored more than we did. But you said we don’t have that many requests right now anyway,” I said.

“Did you drop them off?” he asked.

Back in the day, the club used to keep the guns at the clubhouse. Once the older guys started settling down and having kids, though, they seemed to want to put as much distance between themselves and the guns as possible.

No one wanted to get locked up. But I imagined that was double so for a parent.

So for a while now, we’d been storing the guns in a facility that had been secured

thanks to our hacker friend Arty getting into the system and creating a fake account with fake names and IDs. There was one of those refillable gift cards on the account to pay it with.

We even took care to put magnetic fake plates on our cars, and wear baseball caps down low over our faces before we got anywhere near the locked gates where we had to stop to punch in a code.

From there, we wore gloves and made sure never to leave anything personal in the unit.

Nothing would ever trace back to us if someone came snooping around.

“Yep. Everything went to plan,” I assured him. “You can ask Donovan,” I added, waving over toward where he was loading up a plate since we’d been up and on the road at the crack of dawn without getting a chance to eat.

“I trust you, Lev,” Huck said, brows furrowing. “You’ve been here long enough to know how to do shit right. Know being in charge isn’t your thing, but I wouldn’t let you be in this club if I didn’t know you could step up when you need to.”

“The fucker wouldn’t even let us stop to get coffee,” Coast said, throwing an arm around my shoulder in what would have just been a friendly gesture, but the fucker closed his forearm around my neck until he started to cut off air.

It was a situation that led to a mild scuffle, some bets from our brothers, and good-natured laughter from both of us when we were done.

“How’s your uncle doing?” Huck asked when we were all done and sitting around the table to eat.

To that, I sighed.

“That good, huh?” Huck asked, shaking his head.

“I’m just glad his new chair arrives today,” I said. “There’s no way he can easily wheel himself around with his hand all fucked up like that.”

I also got him a fucking bread slicer for my own peace of mind. I’d actually spent the whole ride back to Golden Glades after the event looking at various shit that was created solely for the purpose of keeping the elderly independent and safe for as long as possible.

I had everything from a device to open the pull tabs on soda or soup cans to a recliner with a lift saved in a wishlist for if or when they became necessary.

Normally, I would have just bought it all and put it in his place. You know, if he was anyone else than my stubborn-ass Uncle Will, who was going to be throwing enough of a fit about the electric wheelchair.

Baby steps, I guess.

Besides, for once, I was actually starting to look forward to my visits to my old apartment building.

Even all my uncle’s ranting and raving about what a piece of shit my old man was, and how I hadn’t fallen far from that tree, didn’t bother me at all.

Mostly because I wasn’t even listening. I was too busy thinking about how quickly I could wrap up my usual cleaning and stocking and maybe catch some alone time with a certain pretty brown-eyed neighbor of his.

“You’re heading over there?” Coast asked, looking disappointed.

“You have York, Kylo, and Velle to party with,” I reminded him, knowing his mind was on what girls to invite to the club to hang now that work was done for the day. Or likely the next week or so.

“What am I missing?” Huck asked, looking between us.

“Don’t you know the look of a man hung up on a woman by now?” Donovan asked the president, shaking his head. “Seems to be happening over and over ‘round here.”

“It’s—“ I started, not sure what I was about to say.

“They all claim it’s Not like that ,” Huck said. “Until it is. What? She live over by your uncle?”

“Across the hall,” I confirmed.

“She some kind of cartel princess?” Huck asked. “An assassin for the Russian mob? On the run from a loanshark ex?”

“She’s just an artist.”

“Does she draw naked portraits of us?” he asked, lips twitching.

“Not that I’ve seen so far. And I’ve offered to model for one,” I admitted, getting a chuckle out of him.

Wherever the conversation might have been going after that got derailed by the loud, indignant scream of a child from over in Huck’s house.

“That’s my cue,” he said. “You,” he said, looking at Coast. “No skinny dipping until after eleven when there’s no chance of my kids looking out the window to see. We’ve had to have a conversation about nipple piercings already once this month.”

Coast saluted him, waited for him to leave, then declared, “We’ll do strip poker inside until then.”

“I doubt the club girls know how to play poker,” Velle said, coming down the stairs still pulling a shirt on, looking like he hadn’t slept in days. I realized then that while Velle had a knack for getting to know all of us pretty well, often without us even realizing we were spilling our guts to him, we knew almost nothing about him.

“Yeah, that’s the point,” Coast said with a grin as he shoved the rest of his food in his mouth.

At the corner of the table, Mackie was gripping the bars of his cage and hanging down toward Kylo—who he’d rightfully decided was the club sucker when it came to sneaking him food—who immediately ripped off a piece of bread and handed it to the bird.

“I’m always down for poker,” Kylo said as York came in from the backyard, a large plate in his hands after likely having dropped off food for the tortoise.

“We’re playing poker?” he asked.

“Once the girls get here,” Coast confirmed. “Gonna start making some calls,” he added as he got up to put his plate in the dishwasher. “Sure you don’t wanna hang?” he asked me.

“Nah. Rather have some alone time with Jade. Been cock-blocked twice by my uncle.”

“Good luck to you, man,” he said, already reaching for his phone.

“You ever want someone to talk to about her...” Velle invited as he loaded up a plate.

“And find out I have some long-buried mommy issues and anxious attachment or whatever shit I heard you talking to Candy about? I’ll pass,” I said, getting a smile out of him. “I got my pep talk from Teddy already,” I added.

“Can’t get a read on that man,” Velle admitted. “There’s... something going on with his need to get the guys of this club to get their heads outta their asses and commit to their women. But I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Well, good luck with that, man,” I said, clamping him on the shoulder on my way toward the door, wanting to make sure I made it to the building before the delivery window, not wanting my stubborn-ass uncle to refuse delivery or some shit like that.

—

“What do you want?” Uncle Will greeted me, shooting small eyes at me as I moved into his apartment to find him in his chair waiting for something in the microwave.

“Got a delivery coming for you in a few minutes,” I told him.

“Don’t need nothing from you.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before,” I agreed, hanging back near the door, pretending I was waiting for the delivery guys when I was really just listening to hear if Jade was in or not. “Any idea what happened to Jade’s whiteboard?” I asked.

“Her what?”

“The board on her door? It’s gone.”

“Probably some little shits stole it,” he said, shrugging it off.

That was possible.

Just seemed unlikely that it would have been up for over a month only to be stolen now. That said, the paint on the door was chipped where it had been hanging, so who knows.

“What are you waiting for?”

“Your new electric wheelchair. I ordered it weeks ago. Timing is good now, though, with your hand.”

“I’m managing,” he insisted, but I saw that spark of interest in his eyes, no matter how much he tried to squash it.

“And now you can do more than manage,” I said. “And I’ll run the cord under the rug to near your recliner, so you can charge it when you’re sitting there.”

I got a harumph at that but he sat up a bit straighter in his chair at the prospect.

“Speaking of, I’m gonna run a vacuum real quick,” I said, hearing nothing but silence from Jade’s apartment, and feeling kind of silly for standing there listening.

With that, I got to cleaning as much as quickly as I could as my uncle ate his food sitting in his wheelchair in the kitchen. Uncharacteristically out of my way to let me get things ready for the delivery.

By the time I was somewhat satisfied about the state of the apartment, the delivery

arrived. It was an unexpectedly lengthy visit where they actually helped my uncle into the chair, showed him how to use it, made adjustments, and made sure he didn't have any questions before they finally packed up and headed out.

"You sure you got it?" I asked as he zoomed over to the living room, narrowly missing running into the TV dinner table he used as an end table by his recliner.

"Not a fucking idiot," he said.

I figured that it was pretty idiot-proof, so I didn't bother going over anything again, just made sure the plug was easily accessible, then made my way out of the door.

Then three feet across the hall.

I knocked, wishing she still had the whiteboard so I could leave a note to text me since it didn't seem like she was home.

But then I heard the slide of the locks and watched the door slide open.

Maybe if I'd hesitated for just a moment, I would see that she looked even more haunted than the last time I'd seen her, that the dark circles under her eyes had intensified, that she looked pale and shrunken into herself.

I didn't hesitate, though.

I ducked low, grabbing the backs of her knees, and lifting her up off of her feet.

Then walked both of us into her apartment.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jade

I wish I could say that I got myself together after sneaking back into 7D's apartment to find everything set to rights. Or that I didn't rush down to the lobby when I saw the mailman approaching so I could see if mail easily still fit into his slot, or if there was some struggle involved because 7D hadn't cleared out his box in days. Or that I didn't sit up at all hours of the day and night listening. But hearing... nothing.

I was actually avoiding calls from my mom because I knew that, of all people, she would be the one to pick up on something being wrong with me. I just wasn't quite sure I wanted to talk to anyone about my concerns.

At least not without some other bit of information to go on.

I tried to remind myself that if 7D wasn't around anymore, like I sincerely suspected, that eventually his rent was going to come due. Then maybe I could convince someone that something happened to him.

Even if the blood was cleaned up, the police had ways of finding traces of it.

I knew that because my paranoia and lack of sleep had led to a researching problem.

I was practically a pro when it came to crimes and cover-ups now.

The only thing my research hadn't given me was the ability to compartmentalize the

situation, to just let it drop so I could eat or sleep or even just think straight.

I wasn't sure how people who witnessed actual, for sure crimes managed to ever go back to their lives. I kind of maybe overheard one and I was a freaking wreck.

I did manage to finish my canvases for Mrs. Jackson. As well as one for Lily, Curtis, and their kids since I knew they weren't long for the building either.

I wasn't sure how I was going to function without someone else around that I knew, that I felt like I could run to if I was feeling threatened or like I was losing my damn mind.

I was in one of my daily spirals when there was a knock at my door.

My whole body jolted as I shot off the couch in my bare feet, the blanket I was wrapped in pooling on the floor as I stared at the door like it might burst inward. Like the bad guys who wrote the note might try to force their way in and attack me in the broad daylight.

Realizing I was being stupid, that it was probably Lily, Mrs. Jackson, or even William showing up for some reason or another, I forced myself to move forward, ignoring the chill working its way up my spine as I got closer to the door.

When I looked out the peephole and saw a very welcome face, I practically clawed at my locks in desperation to get them free, to get Levee in my apartment with me.

The door was no sooner open before he was stooping downward.

Before I could even guess at his intentions, his hands grabbed the backs of my knees and pulled me right up off of my feet.

My arms flew around his neck instinctively, holding on for dear life as he held me aloft as he moved into my apartment.

He kicked my door closed. Then he slammed me back against the wall just to the side of it as his lips crashed down on mine.

He swallowed my surprised gasp as he kissed me with a sort of frenzied desperation, like he'd been dying to do exactly this for so long that he couldn't control himself now that it was happening.

My body sank into his as my arms wrapped around him more tightly, wanting him as close as possible, to feel the comforting strength of him around me.

Levee's teeth nipped my lower lip, nipping just enough to drag a moan out of me.

Taking the opportunity, his tongue slipped in to toy with mine, making desire spark and catch fire, spreading wildly through my system that was desperate to feel anything other than the unending uncertainty and fear it had been riddled with for days.

My hand slid up Levee's neck, slipping into his hair and tugging. His groan vibrated against my lips as he pressed me more firmly against the wall.

His hardness was pressed against me and I didn't hesitate to hook my legs around his hips so I could rock against him.

Levee's hands slid up my thighs, slipping under my skirt, then continuing their path upward until his fingers were teasing the edge of my panties over my hip.

He pulled himself back from me, dragging a frustrated grumble out of me that quickly fell away as his hand slid under my panties.

My head fell back against the wall on a moan as his fingers wasted no time sliding inside of me. A welcome fullness. A needed friction. A perfect distraction .

Levee's head ducked, teasing his lips and tongue up my neck as his fingers started to rock inside of me, gently at first, then a little more quickly, roughly, as my mewling sounds became desperate moans.

His head shifted up, teeth nipping the lobe of my ear as his palm flattened against my cleft, engaging my clit.

“Hardly been able to think of anything but this since the laundry room,” he murmured against the shell of my ear as his fingers got more insistent. “But this time, I think I need more than just a taste,” he said as his fingers slid out of me.

There was a moment of a sort of all-consuming disappointment as his hand left my panties, as he pulled away from me and forced me to stand on my own two feet.

But then he was on his knees in front of me, his head tipped back, hungry gaze on me as he reached up under my skirt to slowly draw down my panties.

My stomach felt coiled, my muscles weak and shaky in anticipation as I looked down at his gorgeous face.

He lifted each of my feet, getting my legs free, then leaned down to slip under my skirt.

It fell over him, blocking him from view as his lips met the inside of my knee then blazed a delicious trail up my thigh.

His tongue discovered the crease where my hip met my thigh, dragging a little whimper out of me as my legs trembled in anticipation.

Suddenly desperate to watch, I rushed up my skirt just as his head shifted, his hair tickling my thigh for a second before his tongue was on me.

My breath felt constricted in my chest as I watched, as I felt, his tongue slowly slide upward.

Every inch of me felt poised for the moment his tongue flattened against my throbbing clit.

But I swear I nearly came right then and there, I was so far gone, I was so needy for him.

He made a sexy little rumbling sound against me just before his tongue started to work me.

Slowly, like he had all day, like he wasn't killing me little by little with each passing second.

His hand reached for my leg, cradling it over his shoulder. He slid up my thigh to grab and hold onto my ass as his other hand moved between us again, his fingers surging into me.

My chest felt tighter and tighter as my breathing went faster and more shallow while he worked me with his tongue and fingers.

My moans were starting to sound like cries just as his fingers turned inside of me, stroking slowly across my top wall.

The orgasm shot through my system too quickly to prepare for it, making my whole body shudder hard as a strangled cry escaped me.

My hands grabbed at him, one going to the back of his neck, the other grabbing his shoulder to keep myself upright as the waves crashed through me over and over.

Levee kept working me through it, dragging it out until I felt wrung out.

Only then did his head turn, pressing a sweet kiss to my inner thigh before moving to stand.

He reached for me again, hoisting me up around his waist, his hands sinking into my ass as he turned and walked toward the living room. Turning, he dropped down, taking me down, straddling him.

I wanted to just nuzzle into his neck, to cling to him with as much neediness and desperation as I was feeling right then.

I let myself have a moment, my lips pressing into his neck, breathing in his crisp scent. Something citrusy and clean that I couldn't get enough of.

A little rumble moved through him, vibrated into me, sparking the flame of desire through me again as he swallowed hard.

I kissed my way up to his ear, then down his jaw until my lips claimed his.

With one orgasm to take the edge off of my own need, my lips were soft and lazy for a long time, just soaking up the feel of him, the comfort of his closeness.

It wasn't long, though, before my own desire was rising to meet his.

When his hands grabbed my hips and dragged me downward until there wasn't a whisper of air between us, making his cock press against my cleft, the little spark became a fire once again.

I pulled back, loving the raw hunger in his dark eyes.

His hands slid up from my hips, grabbing the hem of my tee and slowly lifting it, exposing me inch by inch.

I lifted my arms up over my head, and he leaned forward to free me of the shirt before sitting back and soaking in the view.

His hands rested lazily at my waist for a long moment. It wasn't until a little whimper of need moved through me that his gaze cut to mine, his hunger undercut with a spark of amusement.

But then he was leaning forward, his face pressing between my breasts. I felt him breathe me in as my hand slipped into his soft hair.

Then he was shifting and sucking one of my nipples into his mouth.

The desire was a white-hot fire that burst through me, making my skin feel too heated, too tight to contain all of that need.

Levee's teeth grazed the tightened bud, making my thighs clamp to the sides of him, my cleft rocking against his hardness.

He teased me with lips and tongue and teeth until I felt like I couldn't take it. Then moved across my chest and continued the sweet agony.

When he finally moved back, I was the one quickly losing my grip on my control.

My hands yanked at the leather vest he was wearing. With a chuckle, he sat back to help me remove it. That wasn't nearly good enough, though. I grabbed his shirt, pulling it until he took over and pulled it off, tossing it carelessly to the side.

A little whimper escaped me at the feel of his bare skin on mine as I leaned forward to steal his lips. But just for a moment before the need to explore him became too strong to ignore.

I kissed down his neck, over his collarbone, down the center of his chest, then took a moment to tease my tongue over his nipples before continuing down.

His abdominal muscles were tensed with his desire, each of them tightening as my tongue and lips moved over them.

I scooted off his lap, lowering my body down between his thighs.

My hands went across his stomach to the waistband of his jeans, working his button and zipper free, then reaching inside to free his cock.

Levee's hand clenched his own thigh, like it was taking actual effort not to reach for me, not to draw me down onto him.

He didn't need to hold himself back. I had no intention of torturing him.

I leaned down, teasing my tongue around the head of his cock, then down and up the underside of his length.

A rumble moved through Levee as his hands reached out, gathering my hair and moving it out of his way. He twisted the long strands around his fist, then held it against the back of my head as my lips parted and started to take him in.

Beneath me, his whole body was tensed, and I felt high on my control over his desire right then.

So I worked him achingly slowly for a long few minutes. Until his breath was coming

in short, shallow little huffs and his hand was tightening on my hair.

Only then did I start to suck him harder and faster, my head twisting as I moved, tasting his desire in my mouth as his labored breathing was disrupted by increasingly rough groans and curses.

Suddenly, his hand yanked hard at my hair, making little sparks of pain shoot across my scalp as he pulled me back until his cock slid from between my lips.

He didn't let up, and the pain had me moving as he was silently directing until I was straddling him again.

Leaning forward, his lips took mine.

Hard.

Deep.

Bruising into mine.

His free hand went to my ass, dragging me against him, and the feel of his cock against my cleft had a long moan escaping me, my thighs shaking with the effort not to just lift up and take him in. Like both of us were aching for.

Sensing my desperation, likely feeling it himself, his hand released my hair as his body shifted, allowing him to reach into his back pocket to grab his wallet.

He fished out a condom, and as I leaned in to nip his earlobe, he made short work of protecting us.

Both of his hands went to my hips, dragging me against him again, then rocking me

against him until I was drenching his hard length with my need.

“Let me feel you,” Levee groaned, his hands sliding to my ass, sinking in, as I shifted up, positioned myself, then slid down onto him.

His sharp exhale was overpowered by my deep moan as he slipped into me, stretching me inch by inch, making me his.

“Fuck,” he groaned as I took him to the base, needing a second to adjust to the feel of him, the depth of him.

His fingers tightened on my ass, but he didn’t try to make me move until my own need became too strong to ignore.

I rode him slowly, caught up in the sensation of him moving in me inch by delicious inch.

But it wasn’t long before the coiled need in my core had me riding harder, faster.

His hands made me take him faster still as our breathing went shallow, as sweat started to slick our bodies.

The orgasm came on slowly, then all at once, making me choke on a moan as it slammed violently through my system, deep, hard pulsations of pleasure that had my whole body shaking with their intensity.

“Fuck, baby,” Levee groaned, rocking his hips up to me when I couldn’t even think of moving by myself anymore.

I collapsed into him, spent.

But Levee wasn't done with me. Not yet.

He pushed me off onto the side of him, then rose up, getting onto his knees as he turned me, pushing me up onto my knees, then bending me over the arm of the couch as he moved in behind me, then slammed deep.

My lips against the arm of the chair muffled my cry as he filled me again, the new angle making his cock slide against my top wall.

He moved with slow, deep thrusts at first, giving my body a chance to both recover and rekindle with need.

As soon as my hips were rocking back into him, though, his hands sank into my hips, pulling me back against him as he thrust. Harder. Faster.

My moans, his groans, and the sounds of our bodies crashing together filled the apartment, reaching a fever pitch as Levee got me right at that precipice again.

"Come for me," he demanded, voice rough, close himself.

Just like that, I did, pressing my face into the couch cushion to muffle my cries as he fucked me through it, then slammed deep, body jerking as he found his own release.

There was nothing for a long time in the aftermath save for our labored breaths and the distant sound of reggae music down the hall.

Eventually, Levee leaned forward, pressing a kiss between my shoulder blades before slowly moving away from me.

Silently, he yanked his pants up then made his way down the hall toward the bathroom.

Alone, I was too spent to do anything but flop onto my back.

That was exactly how he found me a moment later when he reappeared shirtless with his jeans hanging low on his hips.

If I thought his build had been impressive when he'd been sitting, it didn't hold a candle to how magnificent it was when he was standing.

"Fuck, that's a good view," he said, reaching up to run a hand through his hair as his gaze moved over my bare body.

"I was just about to say the same thing."

"Yeah?" he asked, that playboy smile toying with his lips. "Reconsidering using me as a model?"

"Oh, I've already drawn you," I confessed.

"No way," he said, smile going even wider. "Can I see?"

"Sure," I said, going ahead and stretching like a cat, enjoying the rumbling sound that moved through him at it, before unfolding and climbing off the couch.

I could feel his gaze on my ass as I walked toward my little art corner of the apartment, grabbing my sketchbook, then making my way back to the couch.

He'd already moved to sit, so I dropped down next to him, my legs draped over his, still craving that closeness, as I flipped open the cover of my sketchpad.

"May I?" he asked, reaching to flip the page.

“Sure,” I agreed, letting myself rest against him as he flipped through all of the sketches I’d been fiddling with since I moved in. Half-finished ones of my apartment, of my neighbors, of the building itself.

Then he got to the first of them. It was the roughest of all of them, his features not fully fleshed out since I’d only seen him once at that point.

But the next few were much more detailed.

Yes, few. What can I say? When you had that gorgeous of a subject, you drew the hell out of them until you got every detail right.

“So,” he said when he got to the final one. It was my favorite. Not only because it was a really good representation of his handsome face, but because I’d managed to capture that boyish smile and that playful light in his dark eyes. “You think I’m kinda hot, huh?” he asked, shooting me a smirk.

“Kind of is an understatement,” I admitted, never feeling any embarrassment over my feelings and desires.

“Suddenly wish I could draw,” he admitted, teasing a hand up my thigh. “Because I’d like to be able to look at this whenever I want.”

“Give me your phone,” I demanded.

“Okay,” he said, reaching for it without hesitation, even unlocking it for me.

I opened the camera, then handed it back to him as I slid away to get into a long pose, my arm draped over my face.

I had no shame about my body. But every girl knew better than to let a man have a

naked selfie of them with their face showing.

“Seriously?” he asked, sounding both shocked and excited at once.

“Hurry up. I’m kind of cold over here.”

“That’s... not a problem from my point of view,” he said, making my lips curve up as I heard his shutter click once, twice. “You’re really gonna let me keep these?” he asked as I moved in at his side again to look at the end result.

“Yeah, why not? It’s just a body,” I said, shrugging. “We all have them.”

“Trust me, doll, not everyone has this one,” he said, looking down at the pictures, then letting me watch him create a password protected folder to store them in.

“I think any of my puritanical ideas about the human body fell away the first time I sat in an art class and a nude model walked in.”

“Male or female?”

“Both. I’ve drawn dozens of nude models. Men, women. Thin, voluptuous. Early adulthood, middle-aged, senior...”

“Really? Seniors?”

“Yeah. The body is beautiful. Even the things we typically don’t find attractive about ourselves. Rolls, cellulite, stretch marks. They’re really beautiful when you’re looking at them with kinder eyes.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever met someone as positive as you are,” he said, watching me for a long second. “It’s nice.”

“We’re all here such a short time. It feels like a crazy waste of precious time to be cynical and moody all of the time.”

To that, he let out a little laugh. “Try telling my uncle that?”

“Some attitudes, I fear, are generational.”

“That’s the damn truth,” he agreed, nodding.

“Was your father like your uncle and grandfather?”

“Yeah. Mean sonofabitch. More violent than my uncle. Then again, Uncle Will didn’t have kids, so who knows if he would have knocked them around too if he had.”

“You broke that, though,” I said, wrapping an arm lightly around him, not caring if I was coming off a little clingy. This was the best I’d felt in weeks. I was going to hold onto it as long as I could.

“Well, I don’t have kids. But if I did, I wouldn’t put a hand on ‘em. I’m assuming your parents didn’t hit you?”

“No. My parents were big on teaching natural consequences.”

“Natural consequences?”

“So, if I colored on the walls, the natural consequence was I had to be the one to scrub it off. If I spilled a drink, I cleaned it up. That kind of thing. The consequence was always related to the indiscretion. It taught me to think of the outcome before I did something. And if I didn’t want to spend an hour scrubbing the wall, I should just get a piece of paper instead. That sort of thing.”

“Yeah, seems a lot healthier than being told you’re a worthless piece of shit, smacked around, and sent to your room for a week. Oh, shit,” he said, looking taken aback at the way water flooded my eyes. “Didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“I just can’t imagine being that cruel to a little kid,” I said as he reached out, wiping the single tear that escaped off of my cheek.

“You’re gonna be a good mom someday,” he told me, sounding certain of it.

“And I think if you decide to have kids, you’ll be a great dad. I mean, look at how you take care of your uncle. And he doesn’t make it easy.”

“That he doesn’t,” he agreed.

“How’s his hand?”

“Wouldn’t let me look at it. But now that he’s got the electric wheelchair, it will put less pressure on it.”

We stayed just like that for almost an hour. Mostly naked. Just talking.

Until my stomach that I’d neglected to feed for almost a full day at that point decided to make its objections known.

With that, we got dressed enough to be able to answer the door when the pizza we’d decided to order showed up.

It was the most normal I’d felt in weeks.

But the second he walked out of the door, it all came flooding back.

Then three days later as I was walking in late from a gallery opening I'd attended, a shadow moved out from the corner of my vision. And before I could react, could even draw in a breath to scream, it was on me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Levee

“All those hunnies out there and you’re in here chopping carrots with me,” Eddie said, shaking his head like I was out of my mind.

“Well, you’re in here too,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, ‘cause the hunnies like a man who can cook. This is me being in my element. Being all sexy and shit,” Eddie said, waving down at his apron-covered front.

To be fair, the girls did fawn over Eddie. They would be in and out all during the parties, heading to freshen up, grab drinks, steal some ibuprofen to fend off alcohol headaches, or sneak some food. And each and every time, they would stop to tell Eddie how hot it was when a guy could cook, how good his food was.

I honestly didn’t know how the guy was still single since the girls did seem to like him and he sure as hell loved them.

“I’m not interested,” I said, shrugging.

“Yeah?” he asked, brows raised. “That have something to do with a certain pretty hunnie I’ve heard some of the guys talking about?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. What was the use of trying to lie about it? Everyone in the club could see I was not my usual party-hard self.

You never would have found me hiding in the kitchen from the fun before. I would be right out there in the pool with everyone else.

But there I was.

Chopping carrots.

Wondering how long it could be before I slunk away to my room, locked the door, found my pictures of Jade, and rubbed one out like some fucking teenager or something.

I was still kicking myself for not getting her damn number. And while she had mine, I guess she was busy. Or didn't want to seem needy by reaching out to me first.

Even if I was checking my phone fifty times a day in the hopes that she had texted.

"She got you all strung up, huh?" Eddie asked, tone completely devoid of judgment as he drained and rinsed several cans of beans.

"Guess so," I admitted.

"Lucky, man," he said, glancing over at me. "Just waiting for a hunnie who gets her claws all up in me. Dunno why these fuckers," he said, waving a spatula toward the back door where the other prospects were all partying, "seem to think it's the worst thing that could happen."

"Dunno. Guess I was one of them a few weeks ago too," I told him. As much as I liked seeing my friends, especially Seeley and Cato, happy with their women, some part of me just didn't understand it.

That whole 'why eat one meal when you can sample the whole menu' mindset that

I'd been carrying with me for years.

Guess everyone neglected to tell me that your mind changed and your tastes developed when you'd feasted on the best meal of your life.

Figuratively.

Though, yeah, I wouldn't mind getting some eating done with Jade again... literally.

"Which one of 'em you think is next?" he asked as a chorus of male laughter came drifting into the kitchen.

"I don't know. I can't see Coast settling down."

"No? With how good he is with kids? I can see it. But maybe not next."

"York is the oldest," I said.

"Which might matter if love had an expiration date," Eddie said as he started to scoop beans, rice, cheese, and beef into tortillas.

"Velle is the most... in touch with emotional shit."

"Yeah, call me crazy, man, but I think that might work against him when it comes to finding a hunnie," he said. "Besides, that guy has demons, even if he ain't talking about 'em."

All of that seemed true when I thought about it.

"That leaves Kylo," I said. "Or you."

“Hey, man. Your lips to God’s ears,” Eddie said, crossing himself and looking up toward the sky. “So, when am I gonna meet this girl of yours?” he asked.

“Good question,” I said, resisting the urge to check my phone again. It was sitting on the damn counter beside me. I would have seen or heard a text coming in. “Wish I had an answer. Eventually, I hope.”

I was going to stop being such a pussy and just ask for her damn number the next time I went to visit my uncle. And got some more naked alone time with her.

“What’s her favorite food? Gotta brush up on my skills if it isn’t one of my specialties.”

“Everything is your specialty.” I mean, the man had cooked at least once a day for all that time I’d been at the club. I’d yet to eat a bad meal. “I know she likes cinnamon and raisin bagels and pizza. That’s as far as I’ve gotten on that front.”

“Hey!” a female voice called, a little too loud from the liquor and having to speak over the loud music out back. “I’m supposed to ask how long on the burritos,” she said, standing in the doorway dripping from her hot pink bathing suit.

“Burritos are ready,” Eddie said, holding a tray out to her. “The rest’ll be coming in an hour or so.”

“Don’t you ever get sick of cooking?” I asked when she was gone again. “I mean, it’s ten at night. You worked all day. And you’re here cooking again.”

“Nah, man. I love it. Keeps me calm. Feels good to put this kinda love into the club and these people,” he said as he took my carrots and set them on the tray along with potatoes, onions, peppers, brussels sprouts, and broccoli, then started to drizzle oil and some seasoning before slipping the tray into the oven.

“Figure, one day, I might have me a family to cook for, and I won’t be able to do as much around here. So I’m happy to do it while I can,” he added as he started to pull the marinated chicken out of a bag in the fridge and lay it out on another sheet pan.

“Can’t imagine the club without you cooking,” I admitted.

“It was a lot of takeout back then,” Eddie said, shaking his head at the prospect. “That your hunnie?” he asked as my phone beeped on the counter.

I barely held back from lunging at the damn thing. I unlocked the screen and opened the message from an unknown number.

It’s Jade. Was wondering if you wanted to hang out.

I was quick to text back, saying I was free, and asking if she wanted me to come over.

Actually, I’d rather come to you. Unless you’re busy. Could use to get out of the apartment for a bit.

I never sent someone my address so fast in my life.

“Jade is heading over,” I told Eddie, getting a knowing smile out of the man.

“You sure there are no science experiments going on in your room?” he asked.

It was an old joke the guys all still shot at me. Even though it had been a long time since I was that big of a slob.

“My room is fine,” I insisted. “But I might go change my sheets,” I decided.

And pick up the clothes that hadn’t made it into the laundry basket. Do a quick dust.

“Go on then. Spruce the place up. I got this from here.”

With that, I did. Getting the place as neat as possible, checking that there were condoms in the nightstand, then doing a quick change of clothes while I was at it.

I made it down the stairs just as there were headlights pulling into the driveway, creeping up the line of bikes, then parking.

I tried to keep myself inside, to not seem too eager. But, fuck it. I was eager.

I met her halfway to the door, but stiffened as soon as I got a look at her.

“Doll, the fuck?” I asked, reaching out toward her face.

She flinched back. It was a quick gesture that she quickly tried to shake off.

But I saw that shit.

And the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

“What happened to your face?” I asked, trying to keep my tone calm.

But there was a nasty cut on her cheek, her nose was swollen with some dried blood still in her nostrils, and there was a nice shiner starting under her right eye.

“I slammed face-first into the wall trying to get into the building tonight,” she said, rolling her eyes to play it off. But there was a false note in her voice. “Then I went and got myself looked at,” she added, trying to move the conversation away from the ‘walked into the wall’ bullshit. “And then I decided I just wanted to get out for a while. So here I am,” she said, forcing a really fake smile.

This was uncharted territory for me.

On the one hand, I wanted to force her to tell me what really happened.

On the other, I didn't want to piss her off or push her away if she didn't want to tell me.

Maybe the best way to play this was to just let her have her way. For the moment. Get her comfortable and calm. Then ask again. Maybe when she was all snuggly after a few orgasms.

But I was gonna get some fucking answers, damnit.

"Well, I'm glad you thought to come see me," I said, sliding my hand up her jaw, then tilting her head up, so I could lean down and press a light kiss to her lips.

I didn't want to accidentally bump her nose if it was broken. I knew that pain pretty well.

But the second I tried to pull away, Jade's hands snaked up my chest to grab my cut, pulling me close by it, and dragging the kiss out.

My arms went around her, pulling her close as I let her take the lead, take what she clearly needed from me right then.

"Is something cooking?" she asked as she pulled away.

"Eddie is cooking," I told her.

"At this hour?"

“He likes to cook when the guys have company. Or, well, anytime anyone is hanging out around here. There’s burritos right now. And there will be roasted chicken and veggies in about forty minutes.”

“God, that sounds good,” she said, her hand going to her stomach like she hadn’t eaten in ages.

“Long day?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess. Haven’t been sleeping well. Then I went to an art gallery tonight. Hence the extra effort,” she said, waving down at herself.

She was dressed more subdued than usual in a little black dress. There were some colorful flowers embroidered on the hem, but otherwise, it was very bland and dark for her usual style. Even her hair was different, pulled up into a fancy updo instead of long and loose.

“You look nice,” I said. “But I think I like you in color more.”

“Me too,” she said, smiling. “But this was one of those fancy galleries. They wouldn’t have let me in wearing a crop top and floral skirt.”

“Then they would be missing out,” I said, moving to stand beside her and hooking an arm around her hips. “Ready to meet the rest of my brothers?” I asked.

“And the foul-mouthed parrot?” she asked, hopeful.

I led her in through the front of the house, drawing her into the kitchen where Eddie was trying to act like he wasn’t waiting for her.

One look, though, and his face fell.

“Jade had a little mishap with a wall tonight,” I said, so she didn’t have to repeat.

“Did you?” he asked, clearly picking up on the bullshit, but deciding to let it drop too.

“Well, you’re stupid pretty even all bruised and scratched up,” he said, giving her a big smile.

“This is Eddie,” I told Jade.

“I’ve heard about your cooking,” she said. “I’m really excited to try some.”

That was the exact right thing to say. Eddie literally puffed up at her words then started to babble about everything he was going to have ready in an hour. Which involved three more dishes than he had previously planned.

You had to love Eddie.

“Fuck... fuck... fuck you,” Mackie grumbled to himself, making Jade whip around to find him sitting on top of his cage, his feathers all puffed up as he was likely trying to get some sleep.

“Oh, aren’t you the most beautiful thing?” she cooed, moving closer to him.

“Here,” I said, fishing a grape out of the bowl of fruit on the counter and handing it to her. “If you want to be friends with Mackie, his love can be bribed with food.”

Mindful to be careful with her fingers, Jade set the grape in her flattened palm and held it out to Mackie who woke suddenly up and rushed over to take it.

“Does he curse because of you guys?” she asked, looking over at me.

“No. He’s a rescue. We figure his previous owner really hated someone named

Benny. Because that's who he is usually saying Fuck you to."

"It sounds like there's a pool party going on," Jade said when there was a break in the music and we could hear a squeal followed by a loud splash.

"Want to go check it out?" I asked.

"Sure," she said, nodding. "Save a plate for me," she said to Eddie.

"You'll get the first one," he assured her, then set to working at warp speed to get the extra meals going.

We moved out into the backyard where the girls and guys were all in or around the pool. There were almost twice as many girls than guys this time and I was curious how that was going to play out later. Though it wouldn't be unusual for Coast to take more than one girl to bed with him.

Seeing us standing there, Velle—who was sitting on a chaise and seemingly in charge of the music—turned the stereo down.

"Hey, guys. Just wanted to introduce Jade to those who haven't met her yet," I said. "Over on the chaise, that's Velle. And that's York," I said, pointing toward the lumberjack with a woman sitting on his shoulders. "This is Candy and Cherry and... their friends," I said, not recognizing the other girls.

"What happened to your face?" Coast, who never suffered with a filter, blurted out.

"Fell into a wall on the way in to my building," she said.

My gaze slid immediately to Velle, catching him eyeing her with his brows pinched.

“Sounds like you need a drink,” Kylo said, waving toward the dispenser where Eddie’s famous margarita was waiting for her. “It’s raspberry,” he added.

“Oh, that sounds so good,” she said, moving away from me to go get her drink.

When she seemed occupied by talking to Kylo, I made my way over to Velle, dropping down in the chaise next to him.

“She’s lying, right?” I asked.

“About the wall? Absolutely,” he said, nodding. “But I think it’s more than that.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Doesn’t seem like she’s slept in a week,” he said. “She’s already loosening up,” he added, watching her laugh at something Kylo said. “But she’s tense as fuck too. You don’t know what’s going on?”

“No. But it hasn’t been... serious,” I said. “And I maybe see her once a week, so... I dunno. But I don’t buy the story about the wall for a second.”

“I wouldn’t push, though. She seems a little fragile. She’s probably here to try to get away from whatever it is bothering her. Be that getaway for her. If she’s comfortable enough, she will let you in eventually.”

I wouldn’t pretend to understand how Velle got so much insight into a complete stranger just by observing her. But everything he said rang true to me.

“How long do I need to be the comfort person?” I asked.

“As long as she needs,” Velle said, getting up off of the chaise to walk over and join

Kylo and Jade.

I sat back for a moment, watching, ready to step in if Jade looked uncomfortable. There was no chance of that, though. She was someone who seemed able to easily get along with strangers. I mean, look at the close bonds she already made with her neighbors in such a short amount of time.

I just waited for her to come to me.

Which she did. After finishing one drink and starting another, stopping to talk not only to Velle and Kylo, but York and Coast as well as the girls.

Watching her, you'd think that she'd been a part of this club for months or years with how easily she seemed to fit right in.

But I was just glad to see her usual smile come back, to watch her laugh and lose the tension in her shoulders.

Making her way toward me, her head tipped to the side, she didn't move to sit on the chaise next to me that Velle had abandoned. Instead, she dropped right down on mine.

"I really like your friends," she told me.

"Even Velle?" I asked, knowing that sometimes people found him a little off-putting because he seemed to see so much.

"He's got a quiet intensity, but he has kind eyes," she said, shrugging as she finished off her margarita.

"Those are good, aren't they?" I asked.

“They don’t even taste like alcohol,” she admitted, shifting easily as I reached to pull her back against me.

“Oh, but they are. You might want to wait until you have some food in your stomach, or you’re gonna be too shit-faced to walk straight.”

“I’m buzzing already,” she admitted, reaching to put her cup on the ground, then relax into me, taking a slow, deep breath.

“Buzzing is good,” I agreed, sliding my hands up her arms, her neck, the sides of her face, then pressing my fingers into her temples.

“That’s nice,” she said.

“Headache?” I asked.

“A little. The tequila helped,” she said. “So, are the girls... girlfriends?” she asked.

“No. They’re... club girls,” I told her.

“What does that mean?”

“It’s just a biker thing, I guess. When you have a club, you have club girls.”

“To party? Or do they hook up with the members?”

“Both. Either. Depends on the girl, I guess. Does that bother you?”

“Why? Because you’ve had sex before?” she asked, turning her head to glance up at me. “No virgin is as good in bed as you are,” she told me. “And all the women you’ve been with before are a part of that. Why would I complain when I’m reaping

the benefits?”

“I like the way you think,” I said, wrapping an arm around her waist.

“We all have histories,” she went on. “That’s kind of what makes us all so interesting. This is nice,” she said, watching the girls on York and Coast’s shoulders pick up inflatable batons and start whacking each other.

“Yeah, it is,” I agreed. “Found family here,” I admitted. “Better family than my blood ever was.”

“I can see that,” she agreed. “You deserve that for all the care you do give to your blood family, even though they don’t really appreciate it. Oh!” she said as one of the girls lost her balance and fell into the water. “Can we play?” she asked, shooting me an excited smile.

“Sure,” I agreed. “You got anything on under that?” I asked.

“Not enough to be decent,” she admitted.

“I’m sure we have something in the community closet that will fit you.”

“Let’s get moving,” she said, hopping up, then reaching for my hand, pulling me along with her into the house.

We made our way upstairs, stopping in the hall closet to fish through the plastic container full of bathing suits of various sizes, all of which still had the tags on.

Jade grabbed a bright yellow top and a boy short combo.

“Gotta grab my suit too,” I said, reaching for my door handle. “You coming in?” I

asked as she moved in at my side instead of going into the hall bath to change.

“Are you feeling shy?” she teased, eyes bright. “Because I’m not,” she added with a playful little smirk as she walked backward into my room, already starting to hike up her skirt.

“Nope. Not at all,” I said, reaching for my shirt as I kicked the door closed behind me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Levee

Jade's dress was completely off her body by the time I pulled my shirt up over my head. It left her standing there in nothing but a barely-there pair of panties that cut up high by the hip and made out of a lace that played peekaboo with what was beneath.

The cool air in my room had her nipples pebbling up, and the mix of the desire and the tequila had the skin on her chest flushed.

"Fuck, if I knew that was all you had on under there, I wouldn't have taken so long to get us up here," I said, watching her as she hooked her fingers into her panties, then pushed them down and stepped out of them.

Before I could even move closer, get my greedy hands on her, she was moving up on the bed, scooting back slightly, then moving flat.

For a second, her legs were up at an angle and closed.

But as I got to the foot of the bed, she let her thighs butterfly open.

Well, that certainly looked like an invitation to me.

Reaching down, I hooked my arms around her legs, yanking her to the edge of the bed as I got down on my knees, then wasted no time sliding my tongue up her cleft, finding her clit, and working it relentlessly.

It wasn't long before her thighs were shaking, before her hips were writhing. My fingers slid inside her pussy, and her hands slapped down on the back of my neck, fingers twisting in my hair as I worked her.

Her moans filled the room as her thighs clamped on the sides of my head, as her pussy tightened hard around my fingers.

If I wanted to be mean, I'd pull away right then, make her wait to come. Edge her until she was crying for it.

But she came here for release from tension. It was the least I could do to keep working her until her whole body went stiff, her back arching, her breath catching, and her walls clenching around my fingers as she came.

Her body was still trembling as I turned my head, kissing up her thigh, over her hip, up her belly, between her breasts.

Turning my head, I sucked one of her hardened nipples into my mouth, licking, sucking, nipping until she was moaning and writhing again.

Her hands clawed at my back as her hips rocked against me, begging for more.

"Levee, please," she whimpered, reaching between us to work my button and zipper down, then yank my jeans and boxer briefs down my legs.

Her legs hooked around me, pulling me down against her until my cock was gliding against her cleft.

Her fingers ran down my back to sink into my ass, pulling me more firmly against her as my lips met her neck.

I reached out toward the nightstand, but Jade chose that moment to throw her weight, rolling me onto my back as she came on top of me.

She reached outward instead, grabbing the condom, bringing it up to nip the corner with her teeth, then scoot back to reach for my cock, sliding it on herself.

Which was a lot hotter than I could have anticipated.

Finished, she lifted up, then slowly lowered down onto me, both of us sucking in a deep breath as I settled deep inside of her.

I knifed up, reaching behind her head to gently free her hair, then moving flat as it fell around her shoulders.

“Better,” I said as the tips teased across her breasts, making her nipples play peekaboo as she started to ride me.

Slowly at first.

Almost painfully so.

But it wasn't long before the need started to grow too strong to ignore, making her ride me hard and fast, her moans filling the room.

My hips rocked up into her as she started to roll hers, making her gasp and cry as the orgasm shot through her, her head falling back, her thighs shaking.

Hooking an arm around her hips, I pulled her down and rolled her under me, starting to fuck her hard and fast. The headboard knocked against the wall as her moans of pleasure became whimpers of need once more.

Her heels dug into my ass, giving her leverage to rock her hips up as I thrust, rocking her clit against me and making her pussy start to clench around me within a matter of minutes.

This time, when she came, she took me with her.

Afterward, I collapsed beside her, both of us panting for breath for a long couple of minutes.

It was Jade who recovered first. She slid her body over mine, pressing a quick kiss to my lips before moving off of me.

“Come on,” she said, fishing the bathing suit off the ground, and starting to slip into it.

“Give a man a minute to recover,” I said, shooting her a lazy smile as she grabbed each of her tits to situate them fully into the cups.

“You better hurry up, or I’m gonna find someone else’s shoulders to sit on,” she teased.

“Like hell you are,” I said, shooting off the bed to grab her around the hips before she got to the door.

She squealed as I twisted her around and dropped her onto the bed, her body bouncing as she landed.

She was beaming at me as I turned away to find my swim trunks, then slip them on.

“Still coming?” I asked as she made no move to get up.

She held out her hands, letting me pull her to her feet, but she pulled my hands until she had them wrapped around her hips.

“Pool games. Another margarita. Food. Then back to this bed. Deal?” she asked.

“Depends,” I said, loving how easy this was, how neither of us felt awkward or unsure.

“On what?” she asked, brows lifting.

“If you’re really firm on the bed thing. I do some good work outside of it too,” I told her.

“Oh, really?” she asked, eyes brightening.

“Really.”

“Well, then,” she said, walking her fingers up my stomach and chest. “Then I recommend hydrating. Because I am going to insist on learning all of your moves,” she told me.

Then she twisted away, grabbing my hand, and pulling me along with her through the house.

Objectively, I knew there was some serious shit going on with her, that she was just looking for a distraction from that.

But until she was ready to let me in, I was going to enjoy the fuck out of being that distraction for her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jade

I tried not to be judgmental about art. Really, I did. Everyone had a right to express their creativity. From the people compiling pretty little junk journals to those creating this generation's fine art.

That said, it was hard not to feel really discouraged about your own art and career trajectory when you got yourself all gussied up to go to a fancy art gallery only to find that the hunks of twisted metal with words like Overconsumption scrawled on the heaps with spray paint were selling for over a hundred thousand dollars a piece.

And all of them were sold by the end of the night.

I was surprised just how down I felt as I got in my car after the gallery. Especially considering that there had been some big strides in my career just in the past few weeks.

Including that email that came in from Levee's friend Teddy (well, his assistant) about the hotel job. One that would include at least six pieces of art for the common areas of the hotel. And, possibly, original artwork for every single room in the hotel.

I mean that was too big of a job for just one artist, of course. But even if I was one of ten, that was a lot of commissions. And a lot of exposure to people who might want to get their own prints or originals.

And I wasn't even factoring in the doors that might open to me with Zayn, according to Levee.

Things were really looking up for my career. I should have felt really positive, even if I still genuinely didn't understand the hunks of metal with spray paint.

I knew as I turned the car over, then just sat there with the cool air blowing on me because I didn't want to go home, that my mood had nothing at all to do with my job.

I was just in a funk.

Emotionally.

There was still no noise from 7D's apartment. And the mailman couldn't shove anything else into his mailbox anymore.

He was gone.

But no one seemed to be looking for him.

I found myself sneaking a look at one of the letters as the mailman tried to push it into the mail slot. Getting a name.

Albeit not a super original one.

Harvey James.

I was sure he wasn't the only one in Florida. Probably not even the only one in Miami-Dade county.

Still, though, I hadn't been sleeping. So online sleuthing became the way I spent my

nights.

Until, finally, I found him.

His social media profiles were all locked down tight. So save for his profile picture, I couldn't see if there were any recent posts from him or not.

I mean, it wasn't like I was expecting to see one that said something to the effect of Gonna be off the grid for a while. Bad guys are after me or anything. But I figured maybe there might be comments asking where Harvey had been, asking him to check in.

Something.

Anything.

I did go through his contacts and eventually sent messages to a few people asking if they'd heard from Harvey, that I was his neighbor and hadn't seen him around and that I was worried.

That was literally all I could do at that point. I hoped it might put some red flags up. Then maybe someone else could look into this whole thing and leave me out of it.

Still, though, the discomfort, uncertainty, and fear was making it hard to sleep, eat, work, focus.

That was why I'd made myself go to the gallery even when I wasn't really feeling keen on getting myself all fancy, let alone leave my apartment.

It wasn't like me to be such a shut-in. I didn't want it to become some sort of disorder that might actually prevent me from being able to leave. I'd known someone in high

school who, over the summer vacation, developed bad panic attacks that struck her whenever she left the house until, eventually, she couldn't anymore. She'd needed to drop out of public school and become homeschooled.

And while I did feel like my fears were justified in wanting to be and stay somewhere relatively safe, I was trying not to let the fear rule my every move.

"Of course," I grumbled when I got back from the gallery to find no spots on the well-lit street. Meaning I had to park in the back lot with the three busted lights and one flickering one that always made me feel a little twitchy, then walk around the building to get to the front.

It was something I probably wouldn't have given too much thought to before. But now, I felt sweat prickling my neck as I climbed out of my car.

I eyed the dumpsters like the men would be hanging around there, beating on another one of my neighbors.

There was nothing. Save for the rustling and chewing sounds of, I imagined, rats, since the dumpsters had overflowed and spilled bags onto the ground.

My nose wrinkled at the rotting smells of hot garbage as I ducked my head and walked a little more quickly, feeling like I wouldn't be able to breathe fully again until I was behind my locked door. After a sweep of my entire apartment, of course. It was another new ritual of mine that I hoped wouldn't be hard to shake.

I was reaching to pull the scrunchie that had my key attached off of my wrist as I rounded the corner of the building.

I heard the breath of them behind me just a second too late to react.

By the time my breath sucked in, planning to scream, even if I didn't know if anyone would actually come running, hands were grabbing my arms, turning me, and slamming me face-first into the brick wall.

Too fast to throw out my arms to brace myself, to push against the wall, to slow the momentum.

The pain exploded across my nose and spread outward, making my cheeks and eyes hammer with agony.

Tears flooded my eyes and streamed down my cheeks from the impact.

The hand shifted up to the back of my neck.

This time, my reaction was just slightly faster, turning just enough so that when the pressure was applied to my neck, it was my cheek that met the brick.

There was a jagged edge to some of the mortar between the bricks that scraped against my cheek. It was a burning type of pain that was quickly eclipsed by the throbbing pain still taking over my nose.

“You need to mind—“ the voice seethe, his spit touching the shell of my ear.

“Get the fuck away from her,” another voice interjected, making my heart soar even as the hands released me, as the presence of the other man disappeared completely.

I whipped around, my whole body shaking, searching in the darkness for my savior.

I don't know what I'd been expecting. But a tall, scrawny teenager in clothes about five sizes too big was not the hero I'd anticipated.

His voice sounded deeper than his years. Which, judging by certain facial markers, I would put at only maybe fourteen.

“You okay?” he asked, moving closer.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, reaching up toward my face to grab my nose, feeling the blood immediately start to coat my palm and fingers.

“You should prolly get it looked at. My brother got his nose busted. Didn’t have money to go to the clinic, so he got this nasty-ass bump on it.”

All I managed then was a nod.

“Come on. I’ll walk you back to your car. No one’s gonna mess with you,” he assured me, and I heard a flicking sound that made my gaze move toward his hand, finding a serrated pocketknife in his grip.

“Okay,” I agreed, not knowing much except that there was no way I could make myself walk into that building, make myself a sitting duck in my apartment.

I fell into step beside the kid who, sadly, did seem capable of defending me if he should need to. But that was what this neighborhood did to kids who probably should have been doing kid stuff like playing basketball or video games. Not carrying knives and defending women.

“Why’d you take it down?” he asked as we walked.

“What?” I asked, trying to resist the urge to sniffle, not wanting the blood to trickle down my throat.

“The whiteboard. Why’d you take it down?”

That was him?

My savior was the kid I'd been bonding with via little sketches on my whiteboard?

"I got a message," I admitted.

"Same kinda message you got tonight?" he asked, wise beyond his years.

"Kind of."

"You need a boyfriend," he told me, confident that a man would solve all my problems. "Or a dog," he added. "Big, mean one."

That was something I hadn't considered. That I might have to give some thought to.

"This is you, right?" he asked as we got to the side of my car.

At my nod, he moved around the car, checking in the windows, even taking my key to pop my trunk and check that too.

"What's your apartment?" I asked him when he handed me my key back.

"Why?"

"So I can drop by and work on some sketches with—"

"No," he cut me off. "No, you don't wanna come to my apartment. I can come to you maybe."

"Sure. I'd like that. Maybe in a few days, though."

“Yeah,” he said, wincing at my face.

“Thank you for saving me,” I told him, watching him puff up at the praise.

“Don’t like guys putting hands on girls,” he admitted, a pained look in his eye that I wished I knew him well enough to help wipe away. “Go get cleaned up,” he said, pulling open the door for me.

“Thanks again,” I said, sliding into the car. Then nearly jumping out of my skin when the kid knocked on the window.

“Lock the doors,” he called.

I didn’t need to be told twice.

He took a step away as I turned over the car, then stood and watched me as I pulled away.

It wasn’t until I was on the main drag that the adrenaline seemed to slip away, leaving my whole body shaking and tears pouring down my cheeks as I headed in the direction of the clinic.

I thought I was okay.

The blood would stop; it had already slowed significantly.

I didn’t really need to be checked out.

But I needed somewhere to go to get myself together. The clinic seemed as good as anywhere else.

It was a long, low building in a strip mall. The blinds were drawn but the light was streaming through them.

The lot was mostly empty, so I got to park close and shuffle my way up to the door.

There was a metal detector and security guard. But one look at my face and he just waved me inside where I got to check in at the front desk with the male nurse whose eyes went sad as he took in my injuries. I imagined that in the nursing profession there were a lot of women who ‘ran into a wall’ with their faces. The same ones who would come back a few months later with a broken wrist from ‘trying to catch their fall’ or whatever other excuse they came up with to keep themselves safe from getting abused worse from their partners.

“It should just be about half an hour,” he told me, waving me toward the waiting room where a mom was struggling to console her pink-cheeked, feverish-looking toddler with an impressive amount of snot escaping her nose.

They were called back first, leaving me alone with the painfully bright lighting in the waiting room, staring blankly at the TV screen that was issuing a hurricane warning. Category Two. I learned from the locals that no one even blinked an eye until it was looking like a Four.

“Jade?” the male nurse called, making me pop up out of my seat. A little too quickly. Anxious. God, I felt like I was going to shake right out of my skin. “The doctor will be right with you,” he assured me as he set me in a small, but newly renovated room.

Actually, for a clinic in a rough area, the whole place seemed like it had been redone. New dark wood click-flooring instead of the old, peeling linoleum I’d been expecting, new cabinets, exam tables, and freshly painted walls.

I scooted myself up on the table, taking a deep breath through my mouth since my

nose was still lazily leaking blood.

I heard the low buzzing sound of the hand sanitizer outside of the room before the door pushed open.

And there was a really gorgeous woman with her long, dark hair pulled back from her pretty face.

She had on a long white coat on that she left open to make room for her very pregnant belly.

Her name tag said Call me Ama.

Not Dr. Something-or-other.

Her first name.

I liked that.

“I hear you... walked into a wall,” she said, glancing down at the clipboard in her hand.

“Ah, yeah,” I said as her gaze continued to scan my chart.

“Jade,” she said, her head popping up, brows pinched. I had a second where I tried to place her since she was looking at me like I was in some way familiar to her. She quickly tamped down the shocked look on her face, giving me a tight professional smile instead. “That’s a very pretty name,” she said as she walked over to set down the clipboard. She slipped on gloves, and started to pile some supplies onto a rolling metal tray.

“Alright,” she said as she got in front of me. “Let’s get you cleaned up a bit, so I can see the damage underneath, okay?” she asked, giving me a soft smile. “I would say that this isn’t going to hurt, but that would be a bold-faced lie,” she told me, getting a little laugh out of me before she started to wet gauze and wipe the blood away.

“I’m just gonna roll this up and stuff it up your nostril to stop the blood,” Amarantha told me just before doing exactly that then gently starting to probe around my nose.

“I don’t think this is broken,” she told me. “It still seems pretty well-aligned and you have no bump. I think the impact just broke the blood vessels that caused the bleeding. I could be wrong,” she was quick to insist. “But you’re not even very swollen.”

“There’s not really anything to do for it if it is broken anyway, right?” I asked.

“I mean, I know a few men who just... yank that thing back into place,” she said, shuddering a bit. “But not really. Splinting it. Ice. Over-the-counter pain meds. You’re starting to get a decent shiner, too, though,” she told me.

“I think I’ll skip the splint,” I said, getting a nod from her as she turned her attention to my cheek. “Alright, we have a couple choices for this,” she said, pressing the skin on either side of the cut. “I can put some butterfly stitches on. Or I can do some skin glue. You don’t need real stitches.”

“I guess the glue,” I decided. I hadn’t seen it myself, so I had no idea how bad it looked. But judging by the long strip of liquid bandage she put on me, it was pretty big.

“Alright. That should cover it,” she said, taking her tray over to dispose of the bloodied gauze. “You can pull that gauze out of your nose in a few minutes. I would definitely get some ice going sometime tonight,” she told me.

“I will,” I told her, my stomach twisting in knots that this was over so fast, that I had to go back to my building now. Without the kid to protect me, solve this problem.

Amarantha made her way to the door, but turned suddenly back.

“Hey, Jade?” she called, sounding conflicted.

“Yes?” I asked as I got up off of the table.

“I probably shouldn’t be saying this,” she said, gaze sliding to my nose and cheek before making eye contact. “But... go see Levee, okay?”

With that, she was gone.

I leaned back against the exam table, realizing that Ama was Amarantha. The doctor that Levee talked about. The girl he’d grown up with. Who eventually married her best friend, Seeley.

She’d clearly heard enough about me to recognize me and my name. And my file that listed my address was probably a big tip-off too.

I knew what she meant, of course. That I should go to Levee, tell him what happened, let him be the big, strong man and protect me.

Suddenly, I didn’t want that.

I didn’t want to talk about it.

I didn’t want to even think about it.

I wanted to get away.

I wanted a distraction.

I reached for my phone to text Levee before I even left the exam room.

And by the time I was back in my car, I had an address to drive to.

If I was going to escape for a while, doing it with Levee seemed the best possible choice.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jade

The biker clubhouse was very... normal.

Sure, there was a big fence, an oversized driveway full of motorcycles, cars, and one really fancy sports car.

But other than that, it was just, you know, a house.

A big one, sure, but a house nonetheless. There were even flowers in beds out front that had been lovingly cared for. Including some massive red, pink, and yellow hibiscus flowers.

I pulled in and parked, drawing in a steadying breath, knowing I was going to be lying to the face of a man I was really starting to like, and hating everything about that. Just not enough to delve into the truth.

I could tell by the look on his face that he didn't believe my lie, but he was gracious enough to let me have it, to invite me into his world, into his life without an issue.

And, well, it was exactly what I needed.

His club brothers and the girls all also avoided bringing up my face and just let me have fun with them.

Between the tequila, the conversation, the pool games, the food, and the sex, I could almost forget anything had even happened to me.

As the tequila wore off later that night, though, the pain was really starting to come back. It was a little duller than when it had been fresh, but it was a constant reminder of why I was with Levee.

Not just to enjoy time with a man I cared for. But to get away from my life.

I'd snuck out of bed at the crack of dawn after fitful, restless sleep.

Levee was still out cold, his arm falling lazily off of me as I slid away.

I'd fallen into bed still wearing the yellow bikini from the night before, so I stole one of Levee's shirts to slip over the bathing suit, then made my way downstairs.

There were the low sounds of TVs or music on in the other bedrooms, but the house was otherwise quiet.

"Fuck you, Benny," Mackie grumbled at me as he plucked at the bars of his cage.

"Good morning to you too, Mackie," I said as I moved over to his cage. "I don't know if I'm supposed to do this, but you look unhappy," I said, pushing the unlock button, then pulling the door open.

He swung out with it, climbing to the top with his feet and beak, then looking at me expectantly.

"Okay. Well, I don't know a lot about parrot diets," I told him, walking over toward the counter. "But I did see Kylo feed you bread last night," I went on, getting a tortilla, then cutting one up in pieces to give to him.

“There you go,” I said as he took it in his giant foot and started to bite demure little pieces off. “You probably just suckered me into that, right?” I asked as the back door opened, making my heart shoot up into my throat.

My fears worried it might be one of the bad guys from my building. Logic quickly followed, making me think it was one of the bikers.

I was pleasantly surprised to see a woman instead.

A black-haired, tattooed beauty wearing all black, her keen eyes taking in my face.

“Hope you put a bullet in his head,” she said, exhaling hard.

“I walked into a wall,” I said, voice sounding robotic even to my own ears.

“Yeah? What kind of wall has five fingers?” she asked as she passed behind me, making my hand fly to the back of my neck. “Thought so. Is one of the guys handling it?” she asked, beelining for the coffee machine.

“Ah, no. It’s not... like that.”

“Are you a new club girl?” she asked as she started to make a fresh pot.

“What? No. I’m, uh, a friend of Levee.”

“A naked friend?” she asked, glancing down at my legs with a smirk. “Don’t tell me he fell for the walked into a wall thing,” she said, shaking her head. “I will have to lose a lot of respect for him if that’s the case. Which would be really unfortunate since he’s my man’s best friend.”

“Oh, you’re with Cato?” I asked.

“Yeah. Rynn,” she said, giving me a nod.

“I’m Jade,” I told her.

“Well, Jade, I know it’s none of my fucking business,” Rynn started, “but if you have shit going on, you can trust Levee to help you with it. And now, we will move on because I’m not going to harp on shit that you clearly don’t want to talk about. Instead, I’ll ask your opinion on Halloween,” she said.

“Halloween? Uh, I like all holidays. Little kids in costumes? Can you get any cuter? I’m actually excited to live in a building full of kids this year.”

“Jade?” Levee’s voice called, sounding still sleepy but a little panicked. Like he was worried I might have taken off without saying anything.

“She’s in here,” Rynn called back just as Levee came into the kitchen, his shirt around his neck, but still trying to get his arms in.

“Oh, hey,” he said, body relaxing as he looked at me.

“Hey,” I said, giving him a small smile. “I let out Mackie,” I told him, waving at the bird who was finished with his tortilla and now steadily preening his feathers.

“Yeah, whoever is up first usually does,” he said, looking awkward, like he wasn’t sure if he should come over and kiss me good morning or not.

I went ahead and made that choice for him, walking over, pressing a hand to the center of his chest, then leaning up to press a quick kiss to his lips.

He hooked an arm around me after as he turned to look at Rynn. “What are you doing here this early?”

“I was hoping to catch some breakfast,” she admitted, smiling. “But I even beat Eddie here.”

“Where’s Cato?”

“He was still in bed with the cats when I left,” Rynn admitted. “But I left a note. He’ll be around eventually. Did Eddie say what he was making this morning? I have my heart set on French toast.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s all you need to tell Eddie to get exactly that,” I admitted. “I let it slip that I love creamy mushroom stroganoff. And we’re now having that for lunch today. I mean, you know, if you don’t have other plans,” I was quick to add, not wanting to overstay my welcome. But also really, really wanting to stay.

“Got nothing going on today but hanging with you,” Levee said, fingers digging a little possessively into my hip.

“Well, looks like I’m late this morning,” Eddie said as he came in the back door, his arms full of grocery bags. “Rynn, you feeling French toast, aren’t you?”

“How’d you know?”

“‘Cause that’s the only time you’re here this early,” he said, giving her a smile.

“Can I ask for hash browns too, or am I being too greedy?”

“I could go for hash browns,” I said, getting a smile from Rynn.

“I can’t let my girls down,” Eddie said, puffing up at getting to cook us what we wanted. Which was maybe the sweetest thing I’d ever seen. “Besides, it was already in the plans,” he added, pulling a bag of potatoes out.

“Can we help you with anything?” I asked.

“Your girl cooks?” Eddie asked, looking at Levee.

“I’m not like you by any means,” I said. “But I keep myself fed.” Though the soup ingredients I’d bought over a week ago rotting in my crisper spoke of a different story right then.

“Love the offer, but I wanna cook for you. Go hang with Levee.”

“Yeah, come hang with Levee,” Levee said, eyes bright.

“I can help cook,” Rynn offered.

“You will sit and keep me company,” Eddie said, clearly not wanting her help for some reason, but being as nice as possible about it.

Levee pulled me back up the stairs with him, his hand not too subtly sliding under the tee to squeeze my nearly-bare ass.

I was one step in the bedroom when his lips were on mine. He kept his head tilted to the side, careful to avoid hitting my nose with his.

My hands started to roam as his tongue toyed with mine, his minty toothpaste mixing with the cinnamon-flavored one I’d found to use in the hall closet.

My fingers found their way under his shirt, feeling the warm skin of his back, then slipping down further to slip into his pants, finding his firm ass and giving it a squeeze.

A rumble moved through him at that as he backed me against the door, grinding his

hard cock into me.

I lifted my leg, hooking it around his hip, then writhing myself against his hardness as his teeth nipped my lower lip hard enough to drag a moan out of me.

Levee's hands slipped under my shirt, teasing up my front, and slipping under the cups of my bathing suit top, cupping my breasts.

The need and impatience grew. My hands yanked at his pants, pulling them down off of his hips, then reaching to wrap my hand around his cock.

Levee's lips pulled from mine, burying in my neck as I started to work him with my hand.

After a moment, his own hand found its way into my panties, finding me already soaked for him.

His thumb moved up to my clit as two of his fingers slipped inside of me, thrusting lazily, driving me up achingly slowly.

"Levee," I whimpered, desperate for more, for the fullness of him inside of me.

His approving sound vibrated into my chest as he pulled back to watch my face as he worked me for a moment.

Then his fingers were sliding out of me, and we were moving until we were at the side of the bed.

Reaching out, he pulled off my shirt. Then in two quick movements, my bikini top and bottoms were on the floor too.

I moved up onto the bed, shamelessly watching as he removed his shirt and pants, giving me a glorious view of his perfect body, of his thick, straining need.

My own need coiled tighter in my core as he reached down, stroking himself twice as he reached with his free hand into the drawer to grab a condom.

His gaze was on me as he slid it on, the heat in his eyes enough to set the sheets on fire.

I moved flat, then lifted one of my legs, placing my foot on his stomach.

He reached for it, pulling it up straight, and pressing a kiss to the inside of my ankle before placing my foot up on his shoulder.

When I placed the other foot on his stomach, he repeated the motion before reaching down for my hips, dragging me closer to the edge of the bed.

When he slid inside of me, it was leisurely. Like we had all the time in the world. Like my body wasn't crying out for hard and fast to get me to the edge as quickly as possible.

But the intensity in Levee's eyes had me holding back my pleading for that.

Instead, I sank into the moment, savored the growing intensity, the surprising emotion that grew, spread, made me almost feel weepy as he continued to rock inside of me, his gaze holding mine.

I slid my legs down from his shoulders, wrapping them around his waist, and reached up for him.

Following my silent instructions, he lowered down on top of me, letting me pull and

hold him close.

His lips found mine as we moved together.

The journey may have been slower, but the connection made it all the sweeter as, eventually, my moans started to grow as Levee pushed me right to that edge.

He pulled back as my walls tightened around him, as my body tensed, watching me as the orgasm crested. A slow, deep throbbing pleasure that spread until it overtook me completely.

Levee kept moving through it, dragging it out, even leaning down to press a kiss to the edge of my eye where a single tear slid free before he surged deep and came with me.

He rolled off of me afterward, took care of the condom, then reached to pull me up onto his chest, his arms going around me, keeping me there. As if I had any intention of moving.

“I’m glad you didn’t leave,” he said, breaking a long, but pleasant, silence as his fingers grazed lazily up and down my spine and mine traced across a scar on his arm.

“Me too,” I agreed. Leaving off the fact that I never wanted to leave, that I wanted to stay right here like this forever.

“You have to at least hang ’til lunch,” he said.

“I’m not missing out on that mushroom stroganoff,” I assured him.

“He’ll probably make tacos for dinner too,” Levee said.

I pushed up, looking down at him. “Is that an invitation?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. No hesitation. “In fact, I feel like you should stay the night.”

“Okay,” I agreed, snuggling back down on his chest.

I couldn’t push it past that.

The goldfish weren’t exactly high-maintenance pets, but they did need to eat. They were older, more sedentary fish, so they didn’t need to eat twice or three times a day like they used to when they were young and active. And I’d fed them before the gallery.

So if I stayed just one more night, they would only be a little late for a meal. I would just make sure to get moving early in the morning.

That was probably for the best anyway, since going back to my apartment in the broad daylight felt a lot safer than going back at night.

“Then I think we should meet up at your place sometime this week. Order in some food. I can do some nude poses for you,” he teased, getting a little laugh out of me.

“That sounds like a good idea,” I agreed.

Maybe this was exactly what I needed. To get a damn life. To stop hyper fixating on the life, or death, of a neighbor I didn’t even know.

If I stopped looking into it, maybe the threats would stop too.

That, at least, was a shred of hope to cling to, right?

There was a knock at the door a few minutes later, then Rynn's voice calling through the door, "If you guys are done fucking, the food is done."

A little giggle bubbled up and burst out of me as I rolled off of Levee, smiling as he smirked down at me, realizing I hadn't been this carefree, this happy, in what felt like ages.

"Better go get some hash browns before she eats them all," Levee said, climbing off of the bed.

He kept his back to me as he found and slid on his pants, and I enjoyed the view of his ass for a second before unfolding and finding my bikini and his tee again, my heart set on a little swim again after breakfast.

"You have to let me meet the tortoise today too," I reminded him as we made our way down to the kitchen.

"You can collect some flowers and feed him if you want."

"Flowers?" I asked.

"He eats most of the ones we have growing around here. That's really the only reason anyone tends to the gardens. To feed him."

"He eats the hibiscus?" I asked.

"His favorite," Levee confirmed as we made it into the kitchen. "York, wait," he called, eyeing the man reaching for a big tray. "Jade wants to feed him after breakfast."

York nodded, reaching instead for a plate and starting to load it up with French toast,

scrambled eggs, hash browns, and sausage.

Rynn, sitting with her legs draped over the man who had to be Cato, was already plowing through her mound of French toast.

Coast was sitting with a full plate, but cradling his coffee like a lifeline. He looked hungover and exhausted. And why wouldn't he be? I was pretty sure he brought three girls to his bed the night before.

At the end of the table, Kylo was holding a piece of French toast up toward Mackie, who took it and started to eat with gusto.

Eddie was singing along to something on the radio, the Spanish not familiar to me, but it sounded happy, as he beamed at everyone eating the food he'd lovingly prepared.

It was all so... domestic.

I glanced over at Levee, who was talking to Cato, and I was struck with how they'd both grown up in my building, how they'd both come from rough upbringings with no familial support. And, somehow, they found their way to this.

It was an unconventional one, sure, but there was no denying that this was absolutely a family.

I had my own family. I loved them dearly. But I still found myself longing to be a real fixture in this one as well.

It was too early for thoughts like that, for hopes that big.

But as Coast said something that made Levee throw his head back and laugh, there

was this tightening sensation in my chest that said that while this might be new, my heart was already rushing forward into those hopes.

I grabbed a notepad on the counter that seemed to mostly be a running grocery list for Eddie, drawing the quick, sweeping lines of the room, the faces, trying to capture them all before they got up.

“Wow,” a voice said, interrupting my concentration, making me jolt and look up to find most of my subjects had started to move around. And that a few other people had shown up.

Including the woman at my side with electric-blue hair.

“Any chance you do family portraits?” she asked, looking from the sketch to the people gathered around.

“Yes, definitely,” I said, giving her a smile. “For your family?” I asked.

“Yeah, though I think getting my husband to actually sit for it would be a nightmare,” she admitted.

“This is Harmon,” Levee said, rubbing a hand across my shoulders. “She’s our president, Huck’s, wife.”

“Well, luckily for Huck, I can do it off of a portrait if you have one you like.”

“Hey, why don’t I have a face?” Levee asked as he looked down at my sketch.

“Because I don’t need a subject to draw your face,” I admitted. Or any other part of his body, for that matter. I had a sudden urge to draw his naked backside. Those thick muscles of his shoulders, the slope downward toward his waist. The firm, high ass.

The trunk-like thighs.

“Aw,” Harmon said, giving us a knowing smile. “Levee can hook me up with contact information?” Harmon asked, going back to loading up several plates with breakfast. For her kids, I assumed.

“He can,” I confirmed, giving her a smile.

“Then I will be in touch in a day or two,” she said, giving me a smile before heading out.

“The club should commission you to do a full group painting,” Levee said, leaning down to press a kiss to my neck.

“I’d do it for free,” I said, smiling as Kylo slipped Mackie one last treat before making his way out of the room as Coast pulled one of the club girls into his lap, then reached up to rub her temples as everything about her face said she had a hangover from hell.

“I would just need to meet everyone first,” I added.

“In due time,” Levee said, making my belly wobble. “Ready to go feed the tortoise?” he asked.

“Oh, yes,” I beamed, excited at the prospect.

By the time we finished gathering flowers to place with the greens, then fed and watched the massive Sulcata tortoise eat, and then made our way back to the kitchen, the mess had been cleaned up, everyone was gone, and someone had pinned my sketch to the fridge. Right there along with little kid crayon sketches.

God, I never wanted to leave.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Levee

I suddenly had a deep-seated hatred for her impeccably-named, gorgeous goldfish. Because they were literally the only reason she had to go home.

I was considering looking into automatic goldfish feeding systems.

If one didn't exist, I'd drop some good money into having someone invent one.

Just to have another day with Jade. Waking up with the scent of her all over my pillows, with her limbs tangled with mine, with her sweet, sleepy Good morning.

It was shocking how easily I wanted to slow down and hole up with her, avoiding the parties, the craziness that used to call to my soul.

It had a different calling now.

Christ, that sounded cheesy as hell.

But there was no denying it, either.

For fuck's sake, I missed her when she went next door to meet Che, Sass, and their kids. Since Harmon clearly got talking about the portraits.

I wondered if hand massages were a thing, because I was pretty sure Jade was going

to need them with all the work the club and their friends were going to be sending her way.

“Down bad, huh?” Eddie asked, smirking at me when he caught me staring off at the stairs Jade had just disappeared up to go change back into the clothes she’d shown up in.

I sucked in a deep breath, releasing it in a whoosh.

“Yeah,” I admitted.

What use was there in denying it? I’d been around long enough to see this exact shit happen with my club brothers. It was inevitable. Might as well lean into it. Seeley and Cato seemed happier than ever now that they’d settled down with Ama and Rynn.

Suddenly, I was imagining crazy shit. Like triple dates. Like barbecues in our backyards with all our kids gathered around. Playing, laughing, happy. With none of the trauma that came from our own childhoods.

It was early for those thoughts, sure. But I imagined Jade’s mind was heading in a similar direction. She was clearly enamored with the club, with the idea of being a part of it, with the desire to have her own bungalow and babies.

There was no way it was just me having future thoughts. Especially after long conversations cuddled in bed after sex and before shared meals downstairs.

I told her shit that I wasn’t even sure I’d told Cato or Seeley about my father, about my mother’s abandonment, about the abuse I suffered from my grandfather, that I still came back to care for him when there was no one else to do it.

She told me about her own, much happier, childhood, about her hopes for her career

and future.

The only thing we didn't discuss was her face. And what the fuck happened to it.

I was trying to do what Velle suggested and just be the escape she clearly needed. She did, too. She'd slept like the dead in my bed. And on that second morning, the purple circles from lack of sleep she'd been sporting the last few times I'd seen her were gone.

That shiner, though, and whoever the fuck put it there, was eating at me.

Why trust me with the stories of her past and the hopes of her future, but leave out whatever was clearly going on in her present?

Though, to be fair, I hadn't exactly been completely forthcoming about my own present either. Namely about the club. And the fact that we weren't just, you know, weekend road warriors, just friends who liked to hang out together.

I couldn't tell if she sensed that she wouldn't like the answer and that was why she didn't ask more about the club.

I mean it had to have occurred to her that I never seemed to need to go off to work. Nor did anyone else for that matter, save for those who also did legit jobs that allowed our club to wash our money.

Like Eddie, Donovan, and Che, who all worked at the shop owned by Sass.

The rest of us, though, had been at the clubhouse around-the-clock. And that didn't seem odd to her.

Maybe that was because of her own work-from-home situation, though, and not

because she suspected we were into illegal shit.

I knew I needed to tell her.

But there was a do-gooder aspect to Jade. It was a part of her that I admired. It was also a part of her that could have strong objections to what I did for a living.

It was wrong to keep it from her. I was taking a choice away from her by not fessing up.

I just... wasn't ready to lose her.

Though as I watched her come back down the stairs still wearing my tee over her dress, looking ready to head out, I wasn't sure I would ever be ready to lose her.

"Those goldfish better enjoy their meal," I said, reaching for her hips and pulling her in to press a kiss to her forehead.

"I'll tell them you said hi. And that you're resentful over their need to eat," she said, giving me a smile as I led her through the house and out the front door.

"We still getting together at your place?" I asked.

"I'm looking forward to it," she said, giving me a soft smile after opening her door and starting her car to get the air going.

"Tell me what to order and I'll bring it with me when I come," I said, wishing it was later that night, but not wanting to push it.

"How about I cook instead?" she asked, giving me a soft smile. "I can even do it naked if you want," she added, eyes warming.

“Careful, I might hold you to that,” I said as my hand went behind her neck, massaging for a second, then pulling her closer as my lips claimed hers.

It was a long, lingering kiss that I tried not to think felt a lot like goodbye.

“Naked with an apron,” she said afterward. “Just to protect the assets,” she added, getting a little laugh out of me, lightening the mood, before slipping into her car.

I stepped back but watched her car until it disappeared down the street.

When I turned back around, Velle was there watching me.

“She didn’t tell you, did she?” he asked.

“No. And I didn’t push. Was that a mistake now?” I asked, stomach tensing.

“I don’t think so. You established trust by not pestering her with questions. I think this will make it so she reaches out to you on her own about it.”

“How come you don’t have a girl if you know women so well?” I asked, following him around the back toward the pool.

“Understanding them doesn’t necessarily mean I’m any good at relationships with them,” he said, shrugging off that little confession. “I hope you’re seeing her again soon, though. That was some sizable damage to her face. Don’t like the idea of her dealing with that alone for any length of time.”

“Tomorrow or the next day,” I said, knowing we hadn’t set an exact date, but figuring I could swing that without seeming too needy.

“Good,” he said, nodding. “Could it be an ex?” he asked.

“I doubt it. She told me about her only ‘serious’ boyfriends. They sounded like the artsy, kind of beta, sort. Not the kind to put their hands on her. At least I don’t think so. She talked about them kind of fondly even though she said they just weren’t good matches.”

“Something in the neighborhood then, maybe. You said it was a rough area, right?”

“Yeah. It was bad when we grew up there. Seems to be the same now. Lots of local crews. Deals going on in broad daylight. Pimps and sex workers all night long. Not to mention all the other shit.”

“Hopefully, it was just an isolated incident. Maybe she was walking around when some sort of deal was going on and they were trying to scare her.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

But the knot in my stomach said it was more than that.

I was just going to have to wait until she opened up to me about it.

I just prayed she would do so before it was too late.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jade

The comfort and ease that had been growing with each moment spent at the clubhouse with Levee slipped away little by little with each mile I drove away from there and back to my own life.

I tried to rein in my increasingly scattered emotions, reminding myself that this was the best possible time for me to head back to my apartment.

It was bright out.

People would be milling around.

And I was going to just make a mad dash into the building and then my apartment. If I didn't slow or stop, the chances of anyone being able to corner me were really low.

Then, well, I would just keep my butt in my apartment. With the locked and alarmed door. Maybe a knife nearby.

And I was damn sure going to stop. Stop looking for Harvey. Stop trying to figure out who T was and what he or his men might have done to Harvey.

I was done.

Snooping around nearly broke my nose, cut up my face, almost did worse.

I was going to do what the message on my whiteboard demanded. I was going to mind my own damn business.

Staying in my apartment all but assured that.

I tried to tell myself that I wasn't going to become a shut-in, that I wasn't going to let the fear rule my life, that I really just needed to hunker down and get some work done. Especially with all these commissions coming in.

I knew, of course, that the fear was the driving force that was making me plan to place a grocery delivery order instead of walking around the store to browse like I always did, loving to get inspired by the sights and scents.

Or why I was calculating how many days I had left of clothes before I would need to brave the isolated laundry room.

I wondered if I could find my savior kid and invite him to hang with me while my laundry washed, giving him a one-on-one art lesson while things washed and dried.

But, for God's sake, that meant I was relying on a literal child to feel safe. I didn't care if he carried a switchblade. It was still wrong. Cowardly.

So maybe I could just wash my clothes in the sink instead.

These were the things still on my mind as I found a prime parking spot right out front of the building; I would actually be able to watch my car from my window if I wanted to.

I yanked my purse up on my shoulder, took a steadying breath, and climbed out of my car. I made sure to bleep my locks before taking long, purposeful strides toward the building. I hoped I looked like I was in a rush, not like I was running.

I imagined the worst thing I could do was come off scared. So I tried not to, though I did duck my head to avoid anyone getting too good of a look at my black eye and cut cheek.

I didn't want to have to lie to neighbor-friends about it too. I'd been doing too much lying already. It was making my stomach hurt.

I was going to need to come clean to Levee eventually if I wanted things to keep progressing with us. And I did.

Maybe after I cooked him dinner. That felt like a good time to tell him something like that.

"Look at you go," I said to William as he buzzed past me too quickly to possibly get a look at me.

He made some sort of harrumph in response to that but said nothing else as I turned to see him whip into the elevator.

Well, Levee would be glad to know he was using the chair he'd bought him and was able to do more for himself now. Maybe once I got a little makeup on my eye to avoid questions, I could drop over and make sure his hand was alright.

I stuck my key in my lock.

But I didn't get a chance to turn it.

Because my door just... pushed open.

Panic was a rope around my neck, pulling tighter as the door slid open to reveal my apartment.

My completely wrecked apartment.

A whimpering sound worked its way up my throat and out from between my lips as I stared at the scattered contents of my kitchen drawers and cabinets, at my flipped couch cushions, at my books and trinkets littering the floor.

I stood there for a long moment, listening, trying to hear if anyone was still there. Even if, logically, the person who broke in likely did it at night when no one would see them.

I inched forward, grabbing a knife off of the floor, and leaving my apartment door slightly open in case I needed a swift exit.

Then I inched down my hallway, slipping into the bathroom to check for someone hiding. Behind the shower curtain that was mostly see-through. In the linen closet and under the sink, spaces that were far too small for any adult. But fear was making me paranoid.

I went into my bedroom, yanking open my closet, glad I didn't have a big pile of clothes someone could hide under, so it was easy to tell there was no one there.

I eyed the bed next, the only place left in the whole apartment to hide.

My anxiety had me rushing forward and just shoving the mattress off of the frame, not caring that it slammed into my nightstand and sent it, the lamp, and the contents on top flying and scattering to the floor.

What was one more mess when the whole place was wrecked?

I glanced between the slats below the mattress.

No one.

With that, I ran back out into the living room, slamming my door, sliding the locks, then shoving the doorstop alarm under it.

Only then did I slide down the wall, giving in to the fear.

My heartbeat was hammering as I hyperventilated, imagining someone in my space, rifling through my things, getting to know pieces of myself I hadn't willingly shared with them.

Stupid things to worry about, of course. My favorite little teacup with ducks on it. My vibrator in the nightstand. My borderline insane number of fluffy blankets in my closet that I'd collected to get me through the cold winters back home, but couldn't part with when I moved.

I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes, forcing myself to slow down, to focus, to think straight.

Things were such a mess that I didn't even think to check if anything was missing.

Was this even related to Harvey in 7D? Could this have been just your average, run-of-the-mill break-in? Someone desperate enough to steal from a neighbor?

I forced myself to get back on my feet, moving around my apartment with a more discerning eye.

I didn't own much of actual value, to be honest. I like fun, kitschy stuff. I didn't own a single designer piece of clothing, shoe, or handbag. I didn't have top of the line electronics.

The most expensive things I owned were art-related. Paints, charcoals, watercolors, and even nice graphite pens were pricey when you wanted to get quality ones.

But someone who wasn't an artist wouldn't know that.

Still, the laptop I did have that had been on my coffee table when I left... was still there.

Which felt like confirmation of my worst fears. That it wasn't just random crime. That this was related to my attack, to the digging around I'd been doing.

I didn't know what they were looking for. Maybe they thought I was connected to Harvey in some way, that I could possibly be hiding what they'd been looking for at his place.

But then why did they clean up his place and leave mine a wreck?

Was this just a scare tactic?

If it was, it was working.

Even if I hated to admit that as I slowly moved around my apartment, putting things to rights.

It didn't actually make me feel any better to have things back in their rightful places, of course, but it felt like I was a little more in control of the situation to do it.

By the time I was done re-washing all of my still-intact dishes, silverware and such, I was exhausted.

I dropped down onto the couch, giving in to the strong urge to cry, knowing that the

longer I tried to hold tears in, the worse the breakdown would be when it inevitably came. Better to purge things as they came up than let them fester and grow.

Finished with that, I stalked back down into my bedroom, stripping out of my dress, then pulling Alaric's shirt again with nothing between me and it, the slight lingering scent of him more reassuring than maybe it should have been considering how new things were between us. But as I yanked on leggings, I decided it was okay to be a little clingy to the idea of Levee when I was going through this strange situation that I had no idea how to navigate.

I forced myself to go toward my easel, knowing that the only way to make the time slip away now that I was back home was to bury myself in my work, to let it completely consume me.

That was what I let myself do. Not focusing on any of the many works I could be doing for Zayn, Teddy, or the women of Levee's club. Just some random work that let my dark feelings out.

What I was left with was a haunting image of a woman with her hands over her face, her eyes between her fingers bulging with fear, her mouth parted in a scream. There wasn't much else to the image, the background nothing but dark swipes of my paintbrush, making her look isolated and completely alone in her fear.

It was beautiful and ugly at the same time. But when I finally put my paintbrush into the water and sat back, I felt lighter for getting it out of me and onto a canvas.

It was one of the more personal works I'd done. But I still found myself reaching for my digital camera, another expensive item that hadn't been touched, and took pictures of it in case I decided to digitize it to sell prints.

I glanced out the windows, surprised how dark it was.

I didn't flick on my lights, though, which meant the only lights on in the apartment were the one near my easel that I almost never turned off. And the one on the fish tanks.

"Oh, my God, guys," I gasped, running over to grab the food and dropping an excessive amount into the water, watching as their tails swished as they pushed themselves up to the surface to eat. "I'm sorry," I told them as they ate up everything I'd dropped. Guilt had me adding more, even if I knew it likely wouldn't all get eaten and would mess with the pH of the water. I could deal with that later, when I knew their bellies were completely full.

I glanced around my darkened apartment, feeling like it was safer not to have any other lights on. It would look like a big sign telling the bad guys that I was home.

If they hadn't seen me yet, I'd just rather they didn't know I was back.

As I sat awake another night, I was starting to think crazy thoughts.

Like how and where someone might obtain a gun quickly.

I didn't know the first thing about gun laws in Florida. I didn't even know anything about them in my home state. It was just something that had never been on my mind, I guess. I always felt... relatively safe. Sure, there'd been times when I was feeling followed at night, or when there was a strange sound outside of my home, that kind of thing. But never this bone-deep fear based not on wildly unlikely scenarios I came up with in my head, but actual events.

I was relatively sure it was on the easy side to get a gun down here. But would there be a waiting period? If there was, what were the less than legal channels for getting a weapon?

That wasn't exactly something you could, you know, look up online. And I didn't want Lily and Curtis to worry about me if I asked.

Maybe I could ask the kid who saved me if I saw him around again. I had a feeling that kids who carried around switchblades would know a thing or two about this sort of situation. Even if it still felt icky to ask a literal child that sort of question.

In the end, I got through the night. And as soon as the sun started to stream through the windows, I went back to my easel, working the day away on the canvas for Zayn.

Things always felt better in the light.

But, inevitably, night would come. And so would the restless, nightmare-ridden sleep, the fears that had my throat feeling like it was restricting, that had me jumping at shadows and cowering away from strange noises.

I was half ready to pack up my car and drive all the way back to my hometown when my phone chimed for a text.

I would lie and say I'm coming to see my uncle and was going to drop in to say hi. But I actually just want to come see you. You game?

Was accepting his offer just a way of escaping my reality again?

Yes, absolutely.

But I wasn't going to overthink it.

He wanted to be here.

I wanted that too.

It could be that easy.

I just prayed it didn't mean I would now be putting him in danger too.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Levee

I actually had to hold myself back from speeding the whole fucking way to Jade's place.

Yeah, that was how far gone I was with this woman already.

I'd been up since almost dawn, trying to decide when a decent hour to text her without sounding too needy was.

As I pulled up outside of my old apartment building, I had a storage compartment in my bike full of condoms and four of them shoved in my pockets to get started.

But, oddly, it wasn't sex that was on my mind as I spotted Jade outside of the building holding two reusable grocery bags and talking to a group of teens.

I just... wanted to spend time with her. Hear her talk. Watch her face brighten up when she smiled. Feel her legs draped over mine. Smell her signature lavender scent.

I just wanted to be around her.

Though I wasn't going to complain if we ended up in bed. Or on the couch. In the shower.

I made my way up the path toward her, my helmet hanging from my fingers.

Her back was to me so she didn't see me approach, but the guys clocked me pretty quickly, their gazes going to my cut, to the badge on my lapel.

"Why you asking about him?" I heard the tallest, thinnest of the kids ask her. If I wasn't mistaken, his face was etched with concern.

"Asking about who?" I asked, running my hand across Jade's hips as I leaned down to press a kiss to her head.

I didn't know what the fuck was going on around this place. Especially as it pertained to Jade and the black eye she was still sporting, even if she'd tried to cover it up with makeup. But I figured that letting it be known that she had a guy around might be a good thing. Especially if that guy was a part of a pretty well-known outlaw biker club.

"Oh, hey!" Jade said, eyes wide as she shot me a smile. "Nobody. I was just talking to these guys. This is Terrance," she said, indicating the one who was eyeing me, trying to decide if I had what it took to protect her, maybe. "He's the one who was drawing pictures on the whiteboard."

"Heard you drew her with giant tits," I said, watching him stiffen.

"Hey, man, it was before I knew her," he said, holding his hands up.

"I get it. I was an idiot kid too once. Mind if I steal her? She's gonna cook for me," I told him.

To that, the kids shrugged and moved away.

"Terrance, don't forget," she called, making the kid turn back, nodding at her, then heading off with his friends.

“Don’t forget what?” I asked as I held the front door open for her.

“I asked him to draw me a few types of sketches so I can give him some tips,” she said, giving me a sweet smile. “You made good time. I was supposed to be naked in an apron before you got here,” she admitted, completely unbothered by saying that in front of two women who were walking down the hall toward us, tittering with laughter as soon as they passed.

“This way maybe I can be the one to take the clothes off of you,” I said.

“Mm, I like that idea,” she decided as we got into the elevator.

I didn’t waste any time. As soon as the doors closed, I grabbed both sides of her face then sealed my lips to hers, kissing her until her whole body went lax and little whimpers started to escape her.

The doors chiming as they opened had us breaking apart and walking back down the hall toward her apartment.

I wasn’t a religious guy, but I was saying a little prayer that my uncle didn’t choose that exact moment to have some sort of accident or come rushing out of the apartment.

Luckily, there was no one around as Jade put her key in the lock.

She seemed oddly tense as she pushed the door open. Almost like she didn’t know what she might be walking into.

Or maybe I was overthinking shit.

She waited for me to move inside, then closed and locked the door.

I waited just until she had the bags on the counter before I was leaning down to grab the backs of her knees and lifting her up off of her feet.

I set her right there on the counter and moved between her thighs as she spread them for me, taking her lips again.

It wasn't long before her hands were grabbing at me. Sinking into my ass. Moving around to work by button and zipper free.

My own hand slipped up under her skirt, thankful for her love of them and the easy access they provided, and pressing against her already-wet panties.

When her hand slipped into my underwear to grab my cock, my own fingers moved under the material of her panties, teasing up her slick cleft to work her clit as my other two fingers thrust inside her waiting pussy.

Jade leaned back so fast she whacked her head into the upper cabinet but it was pleasure and need that was on her pretty face as her hips rocked against me, as her hand fisted my cock.

“Levee, please,” she begged, running her thumb over my head, making a little shiver move through me.

I felt a similar urgency. Like it had been months, rather than just a day and a half, since we'd been together.

My hand left her panties to fish for a condom. And I watched as she hopped down to yank down the barrier.

She was hiking up her skirt as I finished with the protection.

I grabbed her leg, lifting it up and spreading it wide as I stepped closer, then positioned and surged inside of her.

My groan at feeling her tight walls close around me was drowned out by her loud moan.

I was barely planted to the base when her hips started to rock in restless circles, too needy to care about anything but the orgasm that was steadily building already.

Jade's arms went around my neck, holding on tight as I fucked her. Not hard. But fast. The sounds of her moans were muffled against my shirt as she tightened around me, then started to clutch at my cock as she came.

I wasn't done with her, though. Not yet.

She was still clinging to me as I grabbed her, pushing her back against the counter so I could pull off her shirt.

My hands were on her in seconds, squeezing her tits, rolling and twisting her nipples until she was rocking against me again, desperate for more.

Only then did I slide out of her, turn her, and bend her down onto the counter.

I pulled up her skirt, fisting it at the center of her back so I could watch her ass, so I could see myself slam deep inside of her.

Her arms shot out to brace herself so she didn't go flying at the force of the thrust, knocking over a crock full of utensils. Neither of us gave a fuck, though, as she let out a deep moan.

My hand landed a slap to her ass, getting another groan out of her. So I did it again.

And again.

Until she was wiggling desperately against me, begging for the movement she needed.

My hands moved to her hips, using them to slam her back against me as I thrust. Hard this time. The sounds of our bodies meeting filled the room, mingling with her breathy moans and my heavy breathing.

“ Lev ...” she cried as her pussy tightened around my cock, making it hard to keep fucking her.

“That’s it,” I groaned. “Squeeze my cock,” I added as her orgasm slammed through her.

I fucked her through it then came on the tail-end of it.

Jade collapsed against the counter. And I needed to throw my forearm across the cupboards above us to keep on my own damn feet, I came so hard.

“Well,” she said a few moments later, still a little breathless, “that kind of defeats the purpose of the naked cooking.”

“Like hell it does,” I said as I pulled away, giving her ass a playful pat before pulling her skirt down.

I made my way to the bathroom to clean up and when I came back out, I fell back against the wall as I saw her turned away from me.

Completely fucking naked.

Save for the little strings of her apron she was trying to tie behind her back.

A strange growling sound escaped me as I approached her, reaching for the ties to do it myself.

“I didn’t think you were actually going to do it,” I admitted, finishing with the ties and leaning down to press a kiss to her bare shoulder.

“Of course I was,” she said, turning around, then taking a few steps away. “You like?” she asked, waving down at herself.

She’d pulled her hair up in a clip so it didn’t hide any of her. Which meant she literally was only wearing a yellow and white striped apron that just barely covered her nipples in the front, the swells of her tits visible at the sides. And the hem of the damn thing? Just barely covering her pussy.

“Fuck, doll,” I sighed, gaze moving up and down her. “How the fuck are you real?” I asked, shaking my head as she beamed at me.

“Don’t get too excited. This might have to be tit,” she said, waving at hers, “for tat,” she said, gesturing at me.

“Meaning what?”

“I might need you to do something traditionally manly while naked for my viewing pleasure,” she said.

“Might scandalize the club, but I can do some basic bike repair in the nude for you.”

“And share that with everyone else?” she asked, moving over toward the kitchen. “I think not. I think I might really be into some naked workouts,” she said, smirking at

me over her shoulder.

“Some biceps curls... shoulder presses...”

“That is an interesting fantasy,” I decided as I moved over to lean against the counter as she moved her items out of the bags.

“Well,” she said, reaching up under my shirt to pat my stomach, “seeing all this in action would be really hot.”

“I’m all yours anytime you want me,” I said. It was meant to be a silly agreement to do the workout fantasy. But, fuck, it felt a lot deeper than that.

After that, Jade set me on music duty as she started to prep the food.

It was somewhere around the time that she was using her hands to I don’t know... marinate something or mix ingredients, who knows, that I couldn’t seem to hold back any longer.

I made my way toward her, dropping down on my knees behind her.

“What are you doing?” she asked, sounding breathless.

“Shh,” I demanded as I pressed her thighs wider to make room for me. “Be a good girl and keep making dinner,” I said as my tongue traced up her cleft from behind.

She tried at first to keep going, but it wasn’t long before she was bracing her forearms on the counter top, her hips rocking as I licked and sucked.

By the time my fingers slid inside of her again, she was already getting so fucking close.

I kept feasting on her, taking her through one orgasm and toward another.

By the time the second one coursed through her, her thighs were shaking and her moans had become airy whimpers.

“Definitely a lot of perks to naked cooking,” I decided as I got back to my feet, my hands sliding up her sides to tease her breasts before moving away to have a seat at the table.

Forcing some strength into her legs, she turned to look at me, shooting me a bleary-eyed, but playful, grin. “I think I’ve suddenly become allergic to clothing,” she declared, getting a laugh out of me.

“I have no objections to this new allergy of yours. Definitely better to be safe and not wear anything ever.”

To that, she laughed as she got back to work, refusing my help when I offered a few times.

“What’s with the third plate?” I asked as she plated all of the food. “The fish eating with us?”

“I’m going to bring a plate over to your uncle after we eat,” she said. “Seems like the right thing to do.”

“I’m gonna have to insist you put on clothes for that,” I said, making her smile spread.

“I’m actually going to get something on now,” she said, reaching to untie her apron, then pull it off. “Hot food on bare skin doesn’t sound fun,” she added before turning and walking away.

Did I watch her ass the whole way? Sure as fuck did.

She came back out in silky sage pajama pants and another of her cut-off shirts, this one in black.

“You won’t be offended if he doesn’t eat it, will you?” I asked as we sat down to eat.

“No. He does seem pretty against anything with vegetables in it,” she said as she waved at our veggie lasagne. “It’s more about the gesture. Does he know you’re here?”

“He... doesn’t,” I admitted hesitantly, worried about how I might offend her with that.

“Do you not want him to know we’re involved?” she asked, not sounding the least bit offended.

“I’m cool with everyone else knowing,” I told her. “Uncle Will just... has a way of making me regret telling him anything about my personal life.”

“I get that. Also, it’s maybe one thing if he heard me getting busy with someone over here. Might be a complete other for him to know it’s the two of us.”

“Fuck, didn’t even consider that,” I said, wincing.

“I know, right? We’re adults and everything. But it’s still weird. I kind of get why my brother insisted on separate rooms when he would bring a girl home for the holidays.”

“Yeah. We can tell him if you’re not comfortable concealing the truth.”

“No,” she said, almost a little too eagerly. “No, it’s totally fine,” she said more calmly.

But before I could even think to ask her more about it, to probe around the issue, she was changing the conversation to her excitement over her new projects, about how much fun she’d had at the clubhouse.

After dinner, she’d dropped off the food I was sure I would scrape in the trash the next time I visited him. And then we both made our way to the bedroom, seemingly both exhausted.

We didn’t even have sex, just fell into a mass of tangled limbs and exhausted minds and slept for several long hours.

I was the one to wake up first, my arm dead asleep from her sleeping soundly on it.

Carefully, I slid it out, then flopped the limp down on my leg as I sat off the side of the bed, waiting for the pins and needles to let up.

It was then that I noticed that her top nightstand drawer was open a few inches.

And inside was her whiteboard.

It hadn’t been stolen?

She’d ripped it down?

Why?

Feeling like a creep for snooping, I started to pull the drawer open, catching the bottom word only.

Bitch.

I was trying to quietly open the drawer more to see what else the asshole scrawled on it, but it was just then I heard a eerily familiar screeching sound of tires.

Then the expected pop pop pop.

“What...” Jade said, jolting awake, staring blearily at me as I suddenly turned, grabbing her, and yanking her onto the floor, sliding my body over hers. “What’s going on?” she asked, sounding breathless.

“Drive-by,” I told her, hearing more pops, then ones that had to be returned fire. Like the whole fucking building wasn’t full of innocent people who could catch a stray bullet.

Idiots.

“We’re okay down here,” I assured her. “Just needed to get away from the windows. The brick is pretty good against most bullets,” I added, realizing how this very situation had been a frequent event of my childhood. And how now, as a fucking arms-dealing biker, I got shot at or around significantly less.

Underneath me, her heartbeat was slamming in her chest, her breath coming out in frantic huffs.

“You’re alright,” I assured her as the sounds of gunfire stopped, followed by the peeling away of tires.

We stayed there like that for a long moment, though, until I heard the police sirens making their way closer and closer.

Only then did I roll off of her, get to my feet, then pull her to hers.

“You okay?” I asked, reaching up to rub her lower lip with my thumb.

“I... yeah. You move fast,” she said as she sucked in a deep breath.

“Got a long history of hitting the ground when bullets fly around here. Speaking of shit around here,” I said, not wanting to let the whiteboard thing go when she’d already been hurt around here once. “Why is your whiteboard in—“ I started, but cut off as Jade slowly lowered back down to her knees, her hands sliding up my thighs. “What are you doing?” I asked, my cock already getting excited as her hands went around to my fly.

“Thanking you for saving me,” she said, shooting me a wicked little smirk as her palm rubbed over my cock through my pants.

“I think we should talk—“

“Thinking is overrated,” she said, reaching inside to pull out my cock, then swallowing me to the base in one hot as fuck move.

Did I allow myself to get completely distracted by getting my cock sucked?

I sure as fuck did.

And I swear to God that by the time she let me come down her throat, she’d somehow managed to suck every thought right out of my head.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jade

Levee stayed for two days before his brothers and president started to request his appearance back at the clubhouse.

I was almost needy enough to beg him to take me with him. To let me throw the fish in a temporary tank, put them in my backseat, and come live with him for the time being.

Not just because I loved being with him. Which I did. Of course. I was pretty sure we did nothing but have sex, nap, and eat the entire time he was at my place.

We'd had so much sex that my freaking thigh muscles were sore like I'd suddenly taken up an intensive gym routine.

So, yeah, I wanted to be with him.

But I was also scared to be without him. As much as I hated to admit that even just to myself.

That said, I couldn't tell him that. Especially after using oral sex as a way to get him to drop the topic of my whiteboard. And then, to make matters worse, grabbing that whiteboard when he was asleep and shoving it at the bottom of my hamper, praying he'd just forget all about it.

Thanks to the sex stupor we'd both been in, he had.

But now that I'd let this long go this long, I felt like it was almost impossible to bring him in on the matter.

Or maybe I was just telling myself that because I was too chickenshit to open up about it.

I sighed as I wrung out the third crop top while leaning over my tub.

I was going to leave my apartment again. Just not, you know, yet. I wanted to give it a few days, make sure everything had blown over.

I carried my clean clothes out into the living room to hang dry as I went back to my neglected canvas, getting back to work for a few hours.

The sun was set as I dragged my weary bones over to the couch, dropping down, and deciding it was a better place to sleep than in my bed. Where the empty space next to me would taunt me with its cool absence.

I must have been dozing pretty soundly, my body having gotten used to Levee's nearness and safety, making me less apt to wake up at every small noise.

So I was out cold enough not to hear the scratch of my lock, the slight creak the door made as it opened.

I didn't even hear the footsteps as they drew nearer.

It wasn't until a hand clamped over my mouth that I jolted awake.

I'd like to claim my instincts kicked in automatically, that I wasn't completely slow

and confused for a solid few seconds, sleep still clinging to my mind and body.

But as the hand pressed harder, holding me down against the couch cushions, awareness slammed into me.

Too late, of course, to scream, to alert neighbors. And because Levee had been there with me for a few nights, my trusty knife was in the knife drawer where it belonged, not beside me.

A panicked whimper escaped me, muffled against my attacker's hand.

"Can't leave it alone, huh?" he asked, making me blink at the darkness, trying to adjust to it, to get a good look at him.

If I could just really see one of them, I could draw up a sketch to bring to the police.

My hands shot out instinctively, reaching toward his face. Being met not with flesh, but the scratchy material of a ski mask.

"Didn't want it to come to this," he added as his free hand slid to my throat.

No.

No, this couldn't be happening, damnit.

The pressure on my throat had my heart rate tripping into overdrive, beating harder in my neck, in my head.

I would love to say that some innate instinct to survive kicked in, that I suddenly developed some sort of superhuman strength, or that some karate moves from a TV show popped up into my head, allowing me to get this man off of me in mere

seconds.

None of that would be true.

I flailed, slapping my hands into his face, balling up my fists and punching his arms.

None of it had any impact.

And my face was starting to feel fuzzy.

Time seemed to slow down.

But my mind raced. A million thoughts rushed around, crashed into each other.

Leaving me with just two separate, singular thoughts.

I was never going to see Levee again.

And I was going to die without even knowing who my killer was.

It wasn't sudden bravery on my part that made any sort of difference. It was the impatience of my attacker that gave me the slightest chance to live.

Frustrated that I wasn't, you know, dying quickly enough, his hand that was strictly covering my mouth lifted to, I assume, try to cover my nose as well to cut off all of my air.

But in doing so, there was just enough room for me to suck in a breath and scream bloody freaking murder.

"Shut the fuck up," he snapped, pressing his hand more firmly against my face,

making my still-sore nose scream in pain.

But that was nothing compared to the way panic and fear reached a fever pitch as I suddenly couldn't draw in any air.

This was when some sort of real survival instinct kicked in, making me strike out, writhe, try to pull my legs up to kick out.

The struggle only seemed to make me run out of oxygen even faster, though.

That fuzziness from before became blackness closing in on my vision.

This was it.

This was the end.

But even as I felt like I was being pulled under, there was a loud sound in my apartment.

It wasn't my attacker. It was further away.

My door, maybe? Smacking against the wall from being thrown open?

Was someone coming to my rescue?

But even as I thought I might have heard a voice, I realized they were too late.

I was gone.

—

Even at the brink of death, the body's instinct to survive was strong.

I wasn't conscious of starting to do it, but as I sucked in a violent breath, I folded upright on the couch.

My heartbeat, so close to giving up, started to slam so hard in my chest that it seemed like it was punching against my ribs.

My hand flew to my chest as I sucked in fast, frantic breaths. Both the need for oxygen and the panic had me hyperventilating.

I couldn't say how long it was until I could think a single thought other than breathing and panic.

When I did, though, I shot off the couch, ready to fight, to run, to...

But the attacker was gone.

In his place?

William.

Sitting in his electric wheelchair, using it to bar the door.

"He's gone," he said, making me sink back down onto the couch, my legs shaking so hard I was worried I might fall.

"You're... sure?" I gasped between deep breaths.

"Yep," William confirmed, watching me with a faraway look. "Ran off like he had a fire up his ass. 'Course, I would too," he said, reaching to tap something down by his

leg.

It was only then I realized what about an old gentleman in a wheelchair could scare a man into running away from his crime.

The shotgun he likely had raised in his hand as he came barging in.

The door slamming against the wall.

That was William, of all people, coming to my rescue.

I tried to think the best of most people. But I kind of expected that if William heard me being brutally murdered, he would grumble about the racket and turn up his TV program.

This was... pleasantly surprising. And, you know, life-saving.

“Thank you,” I said as tears flooded my eyes, realizing how close I was to never seeing my family again, never seeing my work in a gallery, making love with Levee again, having and raising the babies I so desperately wanted.

To that, he just grunted as I pressed my hands to my eyes, trying to press hard enough to keep the tears from streaming down my cheeks.

He said nothing else as I tried to breathe through the adrenaline surging through me, making it impossible to think straight.

When I was finally breathing more slowly, evenly, I glanced back over at William.

He watched me for a long second, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

“I think it’s time to call my nephew.”

“Levee?” I asked, brows drawing together. “No.”

“Yes,” William shot back.

“No, he doesn’t need to be involved in this.”

“Hate to admit this shit but he’s the only one who can deal with this.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Call him.”

“I wouldn’t even know what to say,” I said, my heart aching at the idea of admitting just how much I’d been keeping from him.

William exhaled hard and his wheelchair made a mechanical buzzing sound as he moved forward toward the coffee table.

He reached for my phone and typed in a number I was shocked he knew by heart.

“You need to get here now,” he said, cutting off whatever Levee might have been saying. I could hear the murmur of Levee’s voice, making William look at me. “Alive. Just barely,” he added, then ended the call.

Then, without another word, he turned around and went back to his station just inside the door.

We sat there in tense, awkward silence, neither of us knowing what to say to try to ease the mood.

The mood I imagined would only feel even more strained when a very out-of-the-loop Levee arrived.

As the moments stretched on, I seemed to come back more into myself. Which made me more aware of the sensations going on in my body.

Namely, the suddenly sore throat. Like that first day of the flu when each swallow felt like you were choking down glass.

Was that what happened when someone got choked?

My nose was throbbing.

And the whole area around my mouth felt tender from the hand clamped there.

Small complaints in the big scheme of things.

But I could think of little else as my little clock that featured a different wild bird at each hour loudly clicked away the minutes.

Until, finally, there was a frantic knocking at the door.

“Jade!” Levee called through the door as his uncle moved away from it, then reached to open it.

Levee rushed inside.

“Seems like you two got a lot of shit to tell each other.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Levee

The second I heard my uncle's voice on Jade's phone, I knew shit had hit the fan.

The only thing I could think to ask was Is she alive? As my stomach cramped, as my heart dropped.

As soon as I had that information, I was running.

Out of my room, down the stairs, into the kitchen, where several heads turned to me in unison.

“What's—“ Eddie started.

“Call Cato and Seeley. Tell ‘em to meet me at my uncle's place.”

With that, I was out of the house, on my bike, and speeding like fucking hell to my old neighborhood. The whole drive, my mind raced with a million possibilities of what kind of trouble she could have gotten herself involved with, what could have happened to her.

Whatever it was, I knew it couldn't be good if my uncle, of all people, came to her rescue.

I mean, I once saw him look the other way while a group of men street harassed a girl

who couldn't have been older than fifteen.

Sure, that was back when I was around that age too. Maybe the years had softened him a bit. Even if I hadn't seen any signs of that myself.

He probably just had a soft side for Jade.

Who wouldn't?

Except, of course, whatever fuck had put his hands on her.

Rage burned in my gut, made its way up my chest and throat.

By the time I pulled up at my old apartment building, I'd swear there was a hole in my esophagus from the heat of my anger.

Sure, I'd seen proof of someone putting their hands on her once already. I'd seen part of the nasty message on her whiteboard.

But it didn't make it any more fathomable that anyone could put their hands on someone like her. Someone full of sweetness and sunshine. Someone who always wanted to do good for everyone else.

Whoever this person was, they were a fucking monster.

The time of night didn't matter, there were always people milling around. I recognized that one tall, skinny kid I'd seen Jade talking to. His gaze, especially, was on me as I jumped off my bike and literally ran in the fucking building.

My heartbeat was hammering in my chest as I rushed down the hallway toward her apartment, pounding my fist on the door.

“Jade!” I yelled when the door didn’t immediately open.

There was the buzzing sound of my uncle’s electric wheelchair as he moved out of the way to open the door.

I noticed the shotgun next to his foot as I moved into the apartment.

“Seems like you two got a lot of shit to tell each other,” he said.

I ignored that.

Talking, that could come later.

I made my way over toward Jade who was sitting on the couch, just barely holding it together.

I dropped my ass down on the coffee table, reaching out to place one hand on her knee and the other went to her chin, lifting it, trying to get a good look at her.

I’d expected her to be beat to shit or bloodied with the way my uncle had described her as barely alive.

It wasn’t until I saw the bruises starting to darken her neck that I understood his meaning.

Someone had strangled her.

The signs were all there.

The bruises, the red eyes, the little red spots all around her eyes. Then there was her swollen lip, like maybe a hand had been placed there as well.

“Should have stopped to get you some ice pops, huh?” I asked, trying to ease the tension in the air between us.

The little snorting sound that escaped her quickly turned into a whimper, then full-on sobs.

“Hey, it’s alright now,” I assured her, moving onto the couch, and pulling her over my lap, holding her together as she fell apart. “I’m gonna fix this,” I told her as she slowly started to stop crying. “But I’m gonna need you to tell me what happened first.”

“I was sleeping,” she started, face still pressed against my shirt that was damp from her tears. “And then he was in here. His hand was over my mouth, then my throat. I couldn’t get him off,” she said, voice getting tighter again.

“Did he say anything?”

“He just... he was mad I wasn’t leaving it alone.”

“Leaving what alone? What’s been going on?”

“Someone left a nasty-gram on her whiteboard,” Uncle Will said, making both of us look over at him. “Yeah, I saw it,” he said, nodding. “See more than you think I do. Hear more too,” he said, the innuendo hanging heavy, making Jade squeeze her eyes shut in embarrassment over what he was saying he’d overheard.

“What did the whiteboard say?” I asked.

“Told her to mind her business,” Uncle Will said.

“Whose business are you minding?” I asked, scooting back just far enough to watch

Jade's face.

"7D," she admitted. "Harvey. His business."

"How about we start at the beginning?" I suggested.

"One day, I was bringing trash to the dumpster. And I came across four guys beating on a guy. I yelled. The guys ran."

"7D was the guy?" I asked.

"Yeah. He... wasn't exactly thankful for the interruption," she admitted. But I thought that was the end of that."

"Then?" I prompted when she didn't go on.

My uncle's wheelchair drew closer, and he held out a glass of water toward her.

She drank some of it, wincing as she swallowed, but went on. "Then one night, I heard a... scuffle upstairs. Then a loud thud. And when I went to the window, I saw a bunch of guys carrying something really heavy between them."

"A body kind of heavy?" I asked.

"That's what I thought, yeah. And I couldn't shake my curiosity. When I went up to check, the door was open. There were signs of a struggle. And blood on the floor.

"While I was in there, I heard people coming. So I ran and hid under the bed. They tossed the whole apartment."

"Was that when you were attacked the first time?"

“No. I managed to get away that time unseen. Or so I thought. But I, uh, I didn’t know what to do. So I asked the super to check on him. I thought that, you know...”

“He would see the mess, see the blood, and call the cops for you.”

“Yeah.”

“That didn’t happen.”

“He said there was nothing to worry about.”

“But it didn’t stop there?”

“I... went to look one more time. The whole place was cleaned up. I guess... someone saw me. Wanted me to stop looking into it.”

“So they attacked you.”

“Yeah. I think it would have been a lot worse if Terrance hadn’t just so happened to pass by at the time and stop him.”

“If you stopped looking into this, why were you attacked tonight?”

“I didn’t exactly stop. I stopped snooping,” I admitted. “But I... I contacted some of Harvey’s friends and family online, mentioned that I hadn’t seen him around. I figured they might look into it for me.”

“Do you have any idea who might have been behind all of this?” I asked.

“Could be anyone,” Uncle Will said. “Lots of bad apples ‘round here.”

“Someone named T, I think, is in charge of the other men. I heard them talking when I was hiding under the bed. I heard Terrance and his friends mention T when I was passing too. But, uh, you showed up before I could ask anything else.”

“T. That gives me something to go on,” I said, nodding.

It wouldn't be too hard.

In an area socioeconomically depressed as this, if I threw a little cash around, someone would point me in the right direction.

“No, you can't do that,” Jade insisted, worry etching parallel lines between her brows.

“Think it's your turn to confess some shit,” Uncle Will said, making Jade's pretty face scrunch up in confusion.

“What's he talking about?” she asked.

Guilt nagged at me.

But I reminded myself that we'd both been keeping secrets.

“So I told you about being a member of a biker club,” I started.

“Yeah...” she said, brows pinching. “I've been to the clubhouse,” she said as if I could have forgotten.

“I didn't exactly mention that it was my work too.”

“How?”

“There were different kinds of bikers. Ones who just happen to have a bike. Ones who are in clubs and like to hang out together. And then ones who do it as a job.”

“How can that be a job?”

“For some clubs, it’s drugs, prostitution, enforcement...”

“And your club?” she asked.

“Guns,” I admitted, making her eyes widen.

“Guns? You sell guns? Illegally?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, prepared for her shock or outrage. But not for the laugh that suddenly escaped her.

“What’s funny?”

“I was wondering earlier where I might buy a gun,” she admitted. “Turns out I’ve been sleeping with a dealer and had no idea,” she added, her laugh going a little hysterical.

Uncle Will shot me a raised brow look just as I heard the stomp of footsteps moving down the hall.

My uncle reached for his shotgun as someone knocked on his door.

“It’s Seeley and Cato,” I said, giving Jade a squeeze before moving off of the couch and across the apartment to open the door. “In here,” I said, getting nods from them as they moved into Jade’s place.

“Oh, honey,” Seeley said, looking at Jade’s throat.

“Will,” Cato said, eyeing my uncle’s shotgun.

“We need to go do some... knocking on doors,” I told my oldest friends.

“Sounds fun,” Cato said. “Jade, do you think you’d want some company? Think Rynn would like to come hang out.”

And Rynn was capable of taking care of herself. Of the both of them.

As much as my uncle’s shotgun was some form of deterrent, a more highly-trained person with a gun would be even better.

“Or, if you’d rather, you can go hang out at Teddy’s fancy-ass penthouse,” Seeley offered, knowing Teddy would never turn down a woman in need of a place to stay. “With Rynn, if you’d like.”

Jade looked torn. Likely wanting an escape, but not feeling comfortable accepting help.

“I hear Teddy has the best selection of ice cream and ice pops in the greater Miami area,” I said, lying through my teeth, but Teddy had people who could get him anything he wanted at any time, day or night.

“You could also discuss his hopes for the art at the hotel while you’re there,” I went on.

“Okay,” she agreed, nodding.

“Why don’t you feed the fish and pack a little bag while we call Rynn and Teddy?” I

said.

With that, we moved out into the hall, my uncle included.

“Thanks for coming to save her,” I told Uncle Will as the apartment door closed behind us.

“Heard her scream,” he said, shrugging. “Don’t even know if this thing works anymore,” he added, tapping his gun. “But it did the trick.”

I nodded at Seeley, who reached for a handgun, giving it to my uncle.

“Just in case,” I said. “That one works. We’re gonna handle this, but I want to make sure you’re prepared if anyone comes for you now that you’re involved. Never know how brutal local crews around here can be.”

I gave the guys a quick breakdown of the story before calling Teddy to request that Jade stay with him for a bit before making my way back into Jade’s apartment.

She was standing in front of the fish tank, a bag at her feet, watching the fish swim up to the surface of the water and eat the food she’d dropped in.

“You okay?” I asked, moving in behind her to wrap my arms around her waist.

She wasted no time turning in my arms, wrapping her arms around me and holding on tight.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before.”

“Me too. About my shit,” I told her.

“In both of our defense, things are... new,” she said, nuzzling her face into the crook of my neck.

“Yeah,” I agreed as my hands drifted up and down her spine. “ Hey, I’m an arms-dealing biker isn’t exactly first or second date conversation.”

“Neither is Hey, some bad guys might be after me ,” she agreed. “I don’t want you to get hurt trying to put a stop to this.”

“I won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’ve got Cato and Seeley here with me. Trust me, we’ve handled bigger shit.”

“You’ll be careful, though, right?”

“Don’t worry. I got every intention of coming back to you,” I said, leaning down to press a kiss to her head. “You have everything you need?”

“I think so. But I can’t be gone more than a day or so with the fish.”

“It shouldn’t take longer than that. But if it does, someone will feed them, I promise.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “Oh, wait. I should grab my sketch book in case Teddy wants to talk about the art,” she said, pulling away to go grab her book.

“That’ll be Teddy,” I said as I looked out the window and saw a sleek limo pull up out front. As soon as it parked, someone climbed out of the passenger side.

Security, I’d bet.

“He rides in a limo?” she asked, following my gaze.

“He usually uses a town car, but he likes to pamper the women. Ready?” I asked as she clutched her sketch book to her chest.

“Yeah,” she agreed, nodding, but her body language was tense.

I put an arm around her then grabbed her bag before leading her out of the apartment.

A part of me wanted to stop and spend the time to comfort her. The other part just wanted to end this shit once and for all for her, knowing we’d have as much time together as we wanted afterward.

We walked out of the building flanked by Cato and Seeley, getting the eyes of all the people hanging about outside of the building.

As soon as we got to the limo, the guard opened the back door to reveal Rynn sitting there.

“We have slushees!” she declared, holding out a pink and blue swirled one. “I got you blueberry and strawberry. It’s the best combination,” she said.

Some of the tension left Jade’s shoulders then as she took the slushee and climbed in.

“I will be in contact soon, okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed. “Be safe.”

“I will. Let Teddy spoil you. He likes it,” I told her, slipping her bag in at her feet, then closing the door.

I waited until they pulled away from the curb to look at Cato. “Is Rynn armed?”

“Always,” he said, nodding.

“Okay. Let’s get to work then,” I said, looking over at Seeley. “Who do you think is gonna talk?”

“The group of kids,” Seeley said, nodding back toward the building.

“I think that tall one is Terrance. He’s the one who saved Jade,” I said, reaching for my wallet, though I didn’t know how much cash I had on me.

“I stored up,” Seeley said, reaching for a wad of fifties.

With that, we made our way toward the kids. Two of them scattered immediately. But Terrance eyed me closely as we approached.

Seeley pulled a couple of fifties off of the wad. “Point us in the direction of a guy named T,” he demanded.

Seeley was good with this shit. Taking charge. Getting information. It was why he’d been the one to get involved with the Henchmen first, got on their good side, made himself invaluable, then asked to bring us in with him.

As much as this was my situation, I had to admit that Seeley was better to take the lead.

Until we found the fuck who put his hands on my girl. Then it was my time to shine.

“Not fucking with T and his crew,” another of the kids said, rushing off to catch up with his friends who—wisely—cut out already.

“She okay?” Terrance asked.

“Someone almost strangled her to death tonight,” I told him, watching him quickly tamp down the shock and concern that moved across his face. As much as I hated that this neighborhood did that to kids so young, it was good he’d developed a poker face early.

“Our only lead says we need to talk to someone named T. You gonna tell us where to find him?” I asked as Terrance’s glance moved to our cuts, the one-percenter badges on them.

“Building South,” he said under his breath, lips not even moving. “Can’t fucking help you, man. Leave me the fuck alone,” he said, louder, backing away from us.

“Fine,” Seeley said, playing along, slipping his cash into his pocket once again. But as we walked away, he made sure the kid was watching as he dropped a couple of fifties behind the trash can.

Building South was at the end of the long, cracked sidewalk.

The building we all grew up in was only one of three in the immediate vicinity. North, South, and East. There’d been plans for a West, but I guess the funding never came in.

“You have no idea about this T guy?” I asked Seeley as we walked.

He’d always been someone who kept a finger on the pulse of all the local crews, somehow knowing more than anyone else even long after he moved out of the area.

He shook his head, though. “Fell off the past year or so. With Ama and... everything,” he said.

“It’s fine, man,” Cato said, shrugging. “We’ll figure it out.”

It wasn’t exactly complicated to find someone in this area. Especially if that someone was some sort of boss in a small-time crime syndicate.

Even if you weren’t from the area, even if you didn’t have experience spotting them so you didn’t accidentally cross them. Even if you weren’t a criminal yourself.

“What do you think?” Cato asked, jerking his chin toward a trio of men standing around close to the street sidewalk, likely for easy hand-off of whatever drug they were selling.

“Good as place as any to start,” Seeley said, heading in that direction.

“Thirty per pill,” one of the guys said without even looking our way.

“Fifty for information,” Seeley said.

“Ain’t a narc, man,” one of them shot back.

“Then we can do it this way,” Seeley said, pressing his gun to the guy’s back. “Where’s T?”

There was a whistle, making Cato and I turn to see a man who was just a dark shadow and a burning cigarette in the dark until he moved closer.

You never knew what to expect of a leader of a crew around here. They could be old men or kids still in high school.

T was somewhere in his thirties with a stocky build hazel eyes and a bump in his nose from being broken and not reset properly.

“The fuck is this?” he asked with a surprisingly thick Southern accent.

“Didn’t say shit, T,” the guy with a gun pressed into his back insisted.

“Believe it,” T said, looking over the three of us, his gaze landing on our cuts, making a muscle tick in his jaw. “Don’t want no smoke with your club.”

“No?” I asked, stepping forward. “Then maybe you shouldn’t have put your fucking hands on my girl.”

“Your girl,” T repeated, brows pinched. “Don’t know what you heard, but I don’t put my hands on no girls. Real gentlemanly and shit,” he said, shrugging it off.

Criminals were good liars. We had to be. But nothing about T suggested he was making shit up.

“What girl is yours anyway?” T asked.

“Gotta be that new chick,” one of the other guys said. “Walking ‘round with a black eye and cut-up face.”

“Nice pull,” T said, nodding at me. “But like I said, I don’t put my hands on girls. My crew don’t either.”

I glanced at Seeley and Cato. After decades of knowing one another, we could have whole conversations with just a look.

We were all thinking the same thing.

This didn’t feel quite right.

“Alright. Let’s pivot then,” I said. “What’s your deal with a guy named Harvey? 7D?”

“Oh, that fuck,” T said, snorting, shaking his head at us. “He owes me.”

“Money? Drugs? What does he owe you?”

“Both,” T admitted, surprisingly forthcoming.

“Did you kill him?”

“I wish,” T said. “Nah. He got good and beat to shit. Then... poof,” he said, making an exploding gesture with one of his hands. “Haven’t heard from ‘em since.”

That was why they’d gone back to his place. To look for him. When they didn’t find him, they ransacked the place to try to find money or pills.

But someone had still been threatening Jade.

Telling her to mind her business.

If it wasn’t T’s business she was minding... well... that just left Harvey himself, didn’t it?

“You haven’t seen Harvey since the night your guys roughed him up?” I asked.

“Wish I had,” T said, shrugging. “If you see that shit, send him my way.”

“One more thing,” Seeley called as he tucked his gun away again.

“Yeah?” T asked.

“What does T stand for?” Seeley asked with a smirk.

To that, T shook his head.

“Thaddeus.”

“Yeah, I’d go by T too,” I said with a laugh as we moved away.

“What’s the plan now?” Cato asked when we were back at Jade’s building.

“Check out 7D’s place,” Seeley said, reading my mind.

The thing was, as we were making our way to the door, the door to his apartment opened.

All three of us reached for our guns in unison, making the wall of a man stop short, body stiffening.

His hands shot up as he looked between us.

“You’re not Harvey,” I said, remembering Jade’s description of someone more average-sized.

“I’m the super,” the man said.

“Booth,” I recalled from Jade’s account of events.

“Yeah.”

“What are you doing in 7D’s apartment?” I asked.

Booth, as it turned out, wouldn't be able to win a single hand of poker. His guilt was written all over his face.

"You working with him? Hiding shit from T?" I asked.

"No! No," he said, more calmly. "Don't get involved with anyone around here. Not like that. Harvey, he's my sister's kid. Just... keeping an eye out. That's all."

"Yeah?" I asked. "Then how'd you miss him beating up and trying to strangle my girl?" I asked, watching him lose his color.

"I didn't know," he said, shaking his head. "I wouldn't hide him if I knew he was fucking up that bad."

"Where is he?" I asked.

Booth looked conflicted for a second. "My room. In the lower level," he said. "Who's your girl?" he asked, looking at me.

"6D."

"With all the hair," he said, making my brows pinch.

"Ah... yeah, I guess."

"Guess she got you to deal with the drain now then," he said, reaching into his pocket to produce a key. "To my place," he said, looking torn, but seeming to know that we'd get to him one way or another, and not wanting to be collateral damage in the process.

With that, the three of us made our way to the stairs.

“What’s with the drain comment?” I asked aloud.

To that, Seeley smirked. “Clearly never lived with a woman,” Seeley said, shaking his head.

“Got special drain covers,” Cato piped in as we made our way to the lower level.

We knew our way around the place like the backs of our hands.

It was a sprawling, mostly-dark space full of tools and cleaning supplies with the super’s apartment far to one side.

On nights where our homes were miserable in unison, we’d sometimes sneak with some blankets and pillows and have a sleepover down there to get a break from it all.

Sure, it was filthy and musty and there was the telltale scratching and shrieking of rats existing down there with us, but that was still better than our families most of the time.

“Fan out,” Seeley said, nodding us each in different directions.

It was surprisingly noisy for a lower level, even in the middle of the night. Floors of TVs, music, conversation, fighting, footsteps.

After a few dozen feet, I couldn’t hear Seeley or Cato any longer.

Adrenaline surged through my system as I inched closer toward the apartment, not sure if he knew we were coming, if he was going to react like a caged animal.

But just as I was about to reach for the door, it swung open.

And out walked 7D.

Completely fucking oblivious until my gun cracked across his cheek, making him stagger back and curse.

I was on him then, rushing him back into his uncle's apartment as my fists crashed into him again and again.

My knuckles hit his nose, making a crunching sound, and covering my fist in blood as it poured.

Somehow, though, that only made visions of Jade with her bloody nose flash through my mind, reigniting my rage as I kept pummeling the fucker.

Even as he fell to the ground.

My hand went to his throat, wanting him to know the fear and helplessness that Jade had felt when he'd been on her exactly like this. His head getting fuzzy. His chest getting tight. Knowing this was the end.

In the end, though, someone saved him just like someone saved her.

Two sets of hands grabbed me, pulling me off of Harvey, dragging me backward until I stopped struggling.

"Couldn't let you kill him," Seeley said as I tried to slow my frantic breathing. "Prez doesn't even know what the fuck is going on," he added.

"You made your point," Cato added. "He's not gonna go near Jade again."

Seeley shoved me out of the apartment and kicked the door closed.

“I want him out of here,” I insisted, wiping his blood off on my shirt.

“Between this ass-kicking and T, I think he’s outta here. One way or another,” Cato assured me. “And you can be with Jade for the time being to make sure of that.”

That was true.

I could be at her place or she could come to the clubhouse. I didn’t care if I had to put up a fucking tank for her fish in my room.

As we walked back out of the lower level, my mind was suddenly on more permanent things than who was staying where to make sure she was safe.

Like browsing around the local listings for that bungalow she’d once mentioned.

An investment for all the money I had lying around. A place I could slowly over time move her into. Until it wasn’t just mine anymore, but ours.

“You can’t go get Jade looking like this,” Seeley said as we moved outside under a streetlamp. “And we have to talk to Huck now.”

As much as I wanted to run back to Jade, to pull her into my arms again, to tell her nothing was going to happen to her ever again, I knew Seeley was right.

First, because Jade was not the kind of woman who was going to enjoy the proof of my violence all over me.

Second, because we didn’t operate alone. Not anymore. We knew what it meant when we joined the club. We no longer had the complete freedom to do whatever the hell we wanted. We were supposed to get permission before we did shit. If shit got too crazy too fast for that, then we definitely needed to have a sit-down with the president

to fill him in on all the details, so he could decide if there would be any blowback on the club.

“Besides,” Cato said as we all made our way toward the street where our bikes were waiting for us, “you gotta let the girl enjoy Teddy’s penthouse for a while.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jade

The ride wasn't long from my neck of the woods to the much nicer area that Teddy called home, an area full of high-rises with windows that were likely painful to look at when the sun was hitting them all.

Still, on the short drive, it seemed like each second made my throat hurt more and more, making me take constant sips of the slushee Rynn had gotten me to ease the burn.

"Here we are," Rynn said. "Wait 'till you see this place," she added as the door opened at my side, and I started to slide out so Rynn could get out as well.

She grabbed my bag as we went, then walked confidently toward the doorman, telling him that Teddy was expecting us.

While, yes, I'd grown up in a comfortable suburb, I'd never been anywhere that dripped wealth like the lobby of this place did.

"I'm pretty sure Teddy actually bought the building a while back," Rynn told me as we climbed into a private elevator.

"He's like... ultra-rich, I'm guessing," I said, thinking of the hotel he was in the process of renovating.

“Old money,” Rynn said, nodding. “The kind of people who host dinner parties and attend charity galas. Have hospital wings and college libraries named after them. I miss the days when the wealthy used their money for the common good,” she said.

“Teddy still does,” I insisted, not even knowing the man but feeling like he deserved to be defended. “He helped a friend of mine get out of jail on a case he should never have been arrested for.”

“Oh, Teddy is the salt of the earth. I mean, he practically singlehandedly funds Ama’s clinic too,” Rynn told me as the doors opened and we made our way into an absolutely massive space.

The kitchen was to the far left was all sleek stainless steel with an enormous island.

Directly in the center of the space was the living area with a big fireplace that I imagined was just for ambiance, given the hot climate, and several large couches around a coffee table.

Toward the back wall under the windows was a bar cart.

Closer to the entrance was what seemed to be a bedroom.

“Nice, right?” Rynn asked, nodding as she toed out of her shoes and moved toward the living room, curling up on the couch, making herself at home.

I toed out of my shoes and followed her to the living room, feeling weird at being in someone’s home when they weren’t around.

My gaze caught on a small wooden two-stair step stool near the couch.

“Does Teddy have pets?” I asked.

“Teddy? No. He’s not home enough,” Rynn said as she picked up the tablet from the coffee table, turning on the TV above the fireplace. “Do you have objections to campy Halloween movies?” she asked as she scrolled through the options.

“If they’re not too violent,” I agreed, swallowing more glass, then taking the last sip of my slushee to ease the sensation.

“Addams Family then,” Rynn decided. “But the second one. It’s clearly the superior one,” she went on, talking about the summer camp and the serial killer nanny. I wasn’t sure if she was that passionate about the movie or if she was just trying to make me comfortable.

Either way, it did manage to put me more at ease as the movie started to play.

We were only maybe twenty minutes into it when we suddenly weren’t alone anymore.

My heart leaped, hoping it was Levee, that he was going to curl up with me and make me feel better.

“Teddy, I bought a movie,” Rynn told him, shooting someone behind me a smile.

“Another slasher?” a man’s voice called back.

Before I could turn, the owner of the penthouse came into view.

Teddy was a little person in a finely-tailored suit and a black bowler hat that I was pretty sure would look absurd on anyone else, but he somehow managed to pull off.

“This is Jade,” Rynn said, waving toward me as she laughed at something on the TV.

“Jade, it’s a pleasure,” Teddy said, that old-fashioned charm just oozing off of him. “Though I wish we could have met under better circumstances,” he added, his gaze going to my throat.

“Oh, you know these club old ladies,” Rynn piped in. “There’s some kind of rule that the guys can’t meet us if there aren’t life-or-death things going on.”

There was a rustling sound behind me, making me turn to find the man from the limo moving into the penthouse with several bags in his hands.

“I took the initiative to get several types of ice cream, ice pops, cough drops, tea for if warm is better, and throat spray,” Teddy told me. “Don’t,” he called to Rynn, his lips twitching, seeming to know she was about to say something untoward.

“That was really nice,” I said, hearing how raspy my voice sounded.

“Which can I get for you?” Teddy asked.

“I can—“ I started.

“Nope,” Rynn cut me off. “He won’t let you. Might as well settle in, Jade. He’s all about the pamper.”

“She’s not wrong,” Teddy agreed, reaching to remove his hat.

“An ice pop would be great. I can eat it in the kitchen, though,” I said, moving to stand.

“No, stay,” Teddy insisted. “Rest.”

“How is he single?” I whispered to Rynn when Teddy was out of earshot.

“I know, right?” she asked. “One of life’s many mysteries.”

Teddy was back just two minutes later, bringing not only an ice pop in a fine china bowl, but two thick white paper bags with their names scrawled on the fronts.

He dropped one besides Rynn before handing me my ice pop and placing the bag beside me.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Goodies,” Rynn explained, pulling out a pair of fuzzy socks with a skull pattern on them. “How’d you get skulls this time of year?” she asked, beaming at Teddy.

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” I insisted after taking a small bite of the ice pop.

Despite my objection, I reached for the bag. Inside, I found socks featuring paint splatters, a face mask, a bath bomb, a weighted sleep mask, silk pajamas, and a tub of face cream.

“This shit is six- hundred dollars a tub,” Rynn whispered, mouth falling open.

“No way,” I said, untwisting the top. “I didn’t know face cream that expensive existed.”

“Right? But Teddy is in a different tax bracket than we are. Right, Teddy?” she called.

“I’m afraid to agree,” Teddy said, making Rynn smile.

“I was just saying you’re stupid rich.”

“I’m... comfortable.”

“That’s what the super-rich say,” Rynn said, making me let out a little laugh.

The evening went on much the same way, with me trying ice pops, tea, and, finally, the throat spray for some relief.

The condo was the lap of luxury.

Teddy was the most gracious of hosts.

And Rynn was surprisingly good company.

But I couldn’t stop my mind from wandering to Levee, wondering if he was okay, if he might get himself into some sort of trouble because of me, if he was going to come and get me before the night was through.

Eventually, though, once the conversation died down and the movie I’d seen many times before started to play, the adrenaline crash left me too tired to even try to hold my heavy lids open any longer.

I woke up to whisper-soft fingers teasing over my forehead, making me swat at the intrusion. Until I heard a soft chuckle.

“Whoa, it’s alright,” Levee said, placing a hand on my shoulder and pushing me back down when I tried to shoot up. “Just me,” he said, voice low.

He put a finger to his lips, then pointed to the side. And then there was Cato, leaning down to lift Rynn into his arms.

She woke immediately, though, pointing toward her bag on the coffee table. “If you

leave that face cream here, I'm leaving you," she told him.

To that, Cato smiled, but leaned down to grab the bag with his pinkie finger before carrying the very much awake Rynn out the door.

"Where's Teddy?" I asked, not wanting to leave without thanking him for everything.

"Right here," Teddy said as I sat up, making me search to find him standing in the kitchen holding a small plastic cooler. "I was just packing up your ice pops."

"You didn't have to do that," I said, even if the pain in my throat had a different tale to tell. I gave him a grateful smile, though, knowing he would insist I take them. "Thank you so much for every—"

"Sweetheart," Teddy cut her off, holding up a hand. "Save your voice. I can hear how much it's hurting to talk."

I did manage to give him a quiet thank-you before following Levee into the elevator.

"Scale of one-to-ten, how disappointed are you not to spend the night in one of Teddy's luxe-ass guest rooms?"

"Okay. Maybe a five," I admitted, reaching to open the lid of the cooler Levee was holding, suddenly needing another ice pop to numb my throat. It was right then that I finally noticed Levee's hands. "Your knuckles."

Levee waited for my gaze to lift to his.

"You're not gonna have to worry about getting hurt again," he said.

I wanted to say I felt torn about that. Because, as a whole, I'd been a pacifist my

whole life. In my mind, there was always a solution to a problem that didn't involve violence.

That said, my throat felt like I was gargling glass each time I swallowed. And I knew down to my bones that, if not for William coming to my rescue, I wouldn't be able to standing there with Levee again.

"Does that bother you?" Levee asked, reading my mind.

"It should," I said.

"But?"

"But... I don't know. I think maybe in this case, it's karmic."

"There you go," he said, giving me that boyish smile I was starting to love so much. "Now, do you want cherry-limeade, or blackberry lemonade? Just so you know, there is a right answer."

"Cherry-limeade. Obviously," I said, holding out a hand until he dropped the wrapped pop in my palm.

"You passed the test."

"Without even studying," I agreed, taking a bite of the ice pop and enjoying the way the cold immediately soothed my sore throat. "So, what now?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

“What you want.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re safe now. If you want, you can go back to your place. Alone. Or with me.” Even just the thought of that made my stomach clench. “Or you can come back to the clubhouse with me.”

“Is that even a question?” I asked. “But I do need to feed the fish before we go. And get some things.”

“Think you’re gonna need to set up a tank at the clubhouse for those fish,” he said, wrapping an arm casually around me as we walked through the lobby of Teddy’s building before making our way out onto the street.

“Or I need to move closer,” I said, letting myself lean into him as we walked.

We could work on that,” Levee said, turning to press a kiss to the side of my head.

And something about the way he said it made me hope he was thinking the same thing I was.

Which was something like forever.

And a white picket fence.

Levee - 1 Day

“Shut it off,” Jade grumbled, her voice muffled by my shirt, since she’d been sleeping on my chest.

“It’s Mackie,” I told her, running my fingers through her hair, the silken strands slipping between in a strangely comforting way.

“The bird?” she asked, still not fully awake.

“Some mornings, he likes to greet the sun. Through his megaphone of a mouth.”

“Beak,” she said, pushing up to smile down at me.

I couldn’t stop my gaze from sliding to her throat. Seeing the bruises there—darker than when we’d gone to bed the night before—made the simple joy of waking up with her get replaced with something darker.

Suddenly, I wished I hadn’t stopped pounding on that bastard, that Cato and Seeley hadn’t been able to convince me to leave him with breath still in his lungs.

“Right,” I agreed, beating back the dark mood because she’d been through enough.

“Beak. There’s probably something going on in the kitchen that’s freaking him out.”

“Like what?” Jade rolled off onto her back, then stretched long and slow as a cat, making her tee slide up, exposing her pink panties and a sliver of her stomach, making my cock go from half to full mast.

“The usual culprits are the broom, vacuum, or mop.”

“So, he has something against cleanliness.”

“He does devote a lot of his time to throwing shit all over the floor...”

Jade sat up, turning over her shoulder to smile at me, the sunlight on her face making her already ridiculous pretty face look devastatingly gorgeous.

“I’m gonna go see,” she said, giving my thigh a squeeze before scooting off the bed, then leaning down to grab her shorts and shimmying them up her thighs. “I could use another ice pop.”

“I’m coming,” I said, taking a few deep breaths to remind my body that now wasn’t the time for fucking, and that we’d make up for lost time when she was feeling better.

We were halfway down the steps when we found the source of Mackie’s rage.

The blender.

“Hey, honey,” Eddie greeted Jade the second her foot stepped into the doorway of the kitchen. “Got you something special this morning.”

“You didn’t have to make anything specifically for me,” Jade insisted.

“Course I did. When one of our hunnies is hurt, we take care of ‘em,” Eddie insisted. “Got my official taste tester over here,” he said, gesturing toward one of the club members’ babies sitting in a high chair with several globs of what seemed like pureed fruit on the tray before him. He was happily slapping the yellow pile with enough gusto to send some of it flying into his hair.

“That’s how I feel about mango too,” Coast said, coming into the kitchen, shirtless, his jeans still unzipped. And I swear there was a fucking hickey on his lower stomach. Or maybe it was just a kiss in red lipstick. I wasn’t exactly looking long enough to tell.

“I’m making frozen fruit bowls,” Eddie said, puffing up like he always did when talking about new food projects. “We have mango bowls, blueberry, blackberry, strawberry, and, of course, the O.G... acai.”

“You are a god among men, Eddie,” Jade said, her voice getting raspier the more she spoke.

“Sit. Sample. Ease that sore throat,” he said, grabbing several bowls out of the fridge and bringing them over to the table.

Jade was no sooner sat with her bowls and reaching for her spoon before Mackie was climbing down his cage and patting across the table toward her food.

“If you gotta share, give him the acai,” Kylo said as he came into the kitchen from the backyard with an empty plate after, it seemed, going to feed the tortoise.

“Just a little bite,” Jade told the bird as she held out her spoon with a tiny glob of acai on the end.

But Mackie was smarter than that. He ducked under the spoon and grabbed a whole beak full out of the bowl before running away.

“That’s like me with chocolate,” Jade said, nodding at the bird before sampling the food herself. “Ohmygod,” she groaned.

“Good?” Eddie asked, shoulders going back.

“The best. I’ve had dozens of these,” she said, getting another spoonful. “This is the best by far. You need a restaurant.”

“Don’t tell him that,” I demanded.

“Why not?”

“Because, then, he might not cook for us anymore,” I said, dipping a spoon into the strawberry bowl as I slid in next to her.

“Don’t listen to him,” Jade said, stabbing her spoon into the mango. “You need to share this gift with everyone. Even a food truck would be amazing. When the money comes in from Teddy and Zayn, I’ll invest,” she said.

But, hey, a lot of truth was said in jest.

And I could see the wheels spinning in Eddie’s mind.

Jade - 2 weeks

I was getting a little sick of going back and forth from my place to the clubhouse.

Which made me feel guilty because I really did love my apartment. And after William saved me, I felt pretty awful not being around for him in case he needed me.

Especially on days like this when I got in to find him trying to do something that he wasn’t physically able to anymore.

Find something in the lower cabinets in his kitchen.

Of course, I had to get it for him. Then wash it, so he could use it. Which led to me

cleaning out the cabinet, scrubbing it out because it didn't seem like it had met soap or a sponge in decades, while William grumbled about it from his perch in the living room.

"Can't do no better than my nephew, huh?" he asked, making me have to pause and take a deep breath before I said something unkind that I'd regret later.

"Your nephew is the kindest man I've ever met," I said instead of rising to the bait. "I really wish you would be willing to see that about him," I added.

"What? 'Cause he threw some money at a chair?" William asked, waving at the electric wheelchair that was charging beside him.

"Because he saw a need and acted on it," I corrected. "Caretaking isn't really about the money. There's no sum that would make someone do it if they didn't want to. Levee cares. Even if you make it difficult."

"Just saying that because you're fuck—"

"Don't," I cut him off, "finish that sentence. And don't cheapen the relationship I have with Levee. I really don't think you mean to. Mean is just... knee-jerk to you. From what I hear, it ran in the family. Until it ran into Levee."

William could do nothing but harrumph to that, since he knew it was the truth.

I genuinely didn't think William was the asshole he so often came off as.

My mom used to say that what people first think—or say, in the case of people with no filters like William—was what you were conditioned to think or say. And that the second thought was what you truly thought and who you genuinely were.

I'd always liked that insight because no matter how I tried, there were times when the first thought that came to mind was an ungracious one. It made me feel better to realize that the thought that immediately followed it was a correction, was who I really was.

And William had clearly shown moments of decency. If only he could let his pride go, could break the cycle of abuse he'd been around his whole life. And, well, you know, learn not to be ignorant.

Maybe it was too much to ask, but I had a lot of faith in people.

"Do you like it here, William?" I asked, looking over at him in his shabby apartment that hadn't seen an update in thirty-some-odd years in a neighborhood that Levee said only seemed to be getting more dangerous as more people fell on hard times.

"It's home, ain't it?"

"But do you like it?"

"What's it matter if I like it or not? It's where I'm stuck."

"But if you weren't stuck. If you could move somewhere else, would you?"

"Suppose so."

"What would you like to be different?"

"Guess I'd like to be somewhere quieter. Noise all day and night here."

He wasn't wrong about that. Though I kind of enjoyed the activity.

“I want a bungalow somewhere,” I confessed.

“Yeah? What’s the use in dreaming? Ain’t gonna have it.”

That was where he was wrong.

I would have it.

So I was going to go ahead and keep on dreaming.

And if that dream suddenly involved having Levee in that little bungalow with me, then so what?

For the time being, though, I had to keep hopping between my place and the clubhouse so I could take care of my fish. And, you know, not leave my apartment empty for too long, since that kind of thing got noticed in a rough area.

That said, the wheels were in motion.

I was about to send Zayn his commissioned art. And I’d already been in touch with Teddy’s associate about the hotel.

Maybe it wouldn’t be just a dream for much longer.

Levee - 3 months

“You’re a lucky fuck, man,” Cato said, nodding as we stood at the curb in front of the house I’d just bought.

He was right about that.

The thing was, with being a member of the club, you had to live somewhat close to the clubhouse. And it wasn't really an area where you found bungalows. Let alone one big enough to eventually have a family in. Especially if that family involved the 'litter' of kids Jade had been very clear about wanting.

I hadn't given kids that much thought before her. The more I saw her with kids now, the more I wanted to see her with one of my kids.

I could picture it right in the house I now had the keys to. Coming home to see her in the front covered porch, rocking a baby like I'd seen her do with other babies countless times before.

Or walking in to find her sitting at a canvas in her art room, the sun streaming in through a myriad of suncatchers, casting rainbows across her skin and hair.

I could see both of us sitting at the table in the dining room, watching the chaos as four small children chattered and laughed.

"Though I don't know why the fuck you would want to stick your uncle in the guest house."

It wasn't exactly my idea.

The longer Jade and I dated, the more she got involved in the caretaking of my Uncle Will. And because Jade had the heart the size of a blue whale's, it made her want to do more and more for him, even when he was nasty to her.

To her credit, the more she worked at him, the more my uncle's sharp edges softened. And, amazingly, the more he actually wanted to start taking care of himself. Hell, she actually had the man eating the fruit that I'd been bringing—and then throwing away—for years.

Because of all the improvement, she'd been dropping hints at the idea of having Uncle Will closer, so we could keep a closer eye on him.

While I would never want Uncle Will in my actual house, I was alright with the idea of him staying in the guest house. It would certainly make it easier to take care of him.

It wasn't a big guest house. The real estate agent had referred to it as a "granny pod," and said the previous owners had installed it for the same reason I would need it for. Taking care of an aging relative. It was basically one big room—living, kitchen, and bed all in one—with an oversized bathroom that was handicap equipped. It even had one of those no lip bathtubs, so you could roll a manual wheelchair right into, if necessary.

I was really fucking lucky to find this property. And then to win the nail-biting bidding war.

In the end, money talks, though. And I had more than enough of it, thanks to years of making a nice salary while having almost no living expenses.

"So, when are you going to tell her?" Seeley, at my other side, asked.

"Once we get it cleaned up," I told them.

It was perfectly livable.

But Jade had been dreaming of this place for a long time. I wanted to get some of the overgrown weeds and shrubs cleaned up. Maybe fill the garden beds with some gorgeous, colorful flowers. Get the floors inside refinished because the tile was chipped enough in places that I was worried one of us might cut our feet if we went barefoot. Everything inside needed a fresh coat of primer. Then it would be ready for

Jade to pick out paint colors.

Objectively, yeah, we were still kind of new, in the grand scheme of things. But we hadn't spent a full twenty-four hours apart since that night I picked her up from Teddy's place. And, frankly, I never wanted to. Having a home we could both move into that was close to the clubhouse was the easiest solution.

And the first step toward forever.

Jade - 5 months

"Where are you, doll?" Levee called, the screen door cracking against the frame as he spoke. "Gotta get that fixed," he grumbled.

"Don't you dare," I called, looking over my shoulder as he walked into the dining room where I was painting a mural on the wall.

It was a big endeavor that stretched the whole room from just above the board and batten and to the ceiling. But it was a true labor of love. And it featured a bunch of little nods to our relationships, to the found family we both loved so much, to the hopes for our future.

"Don't I dare what?" Levee asked, stepping into the rounded doorway looking as sexy as ever in a white t-shirt that was sticking to his skin underneath, thanks to the unexpected rain shower that had started to pelt at the windows a couple minutes before.

"Fix that door. I love that noise," I told him, angling my head up for a kiss.

"You love all the broken things around here," he said, reaching out to frame my face with both his hands, then kissing me long and sweet. Until I felt it in my toes.

“It’s what gives a home character. I knew exactly what steps in my childhood home creaked. Which came in handy when I was sneaking in after staying out too late. Or how to fiddle with that one tap that didn’t ever want to work right, but we never fixed. Or the chew marks in the molding from our childhood dog. It’s those things that make a house a home.”

“I’d like to come to think about it like that,” Levee said. “The ‘quirks’ my apartment had growing up weren’t the kind of things that would make me nostalgic.”

And I really wanted to be able to help him feel that way about our new home and all of its sweet imperfections.

After all he’d been through, and all he’d done for others without expecting anything in return, he deserved some magic, some joy, someone to try to take care of him for a change.

Which was why there was a hearty stew in the crockpot, even if the air conditioning was running at full-blast, and a surprise waiting for him in the bedroom.

“We have about two hours until dinner is done,” I told him, sticking my paintbrush into the water, deciding the mural was just going to have to wait. “And I have something fun in the bedroom.”

“Does this something fun vibrate?” he asked, smirking.

“After what you did to me with the remote control vibe panties? I think not,” I said, slapping him across the chest.

But we both knew that, as torturous as it had been to wear those vibrator panties to the clubhouse during a big, loud party with the remote in his hand, I wouldn’t change the memory of him watching me hiding behind a tree, legs shaking as the orgasm

ripped through my system, for anything.

“But your clothes do have to be off for this,” I told him, looking to the back of the house to make sure the curtains were drawn before I whipped off my shirt, leaving me bare from the waist up.

“I have no objections to that,” he said, peeling off his own drenched shirt as I moved past him, kicking out of my slides, then hooking my fingers into the waistband of my skirt.

I waited until I was in the doorway of the bedroom to push the skirt off, leaving me in nothing but a bright yellow thong that I knew his gaze was taking in greedily.

“Pants off,” I demanded, turning to watch him as I slid my panties down as well.

He did as he was told. Then tossed his underwear off for good measure.

He had no idea what I had in mind, but he was already hard in anticipation.

I took a step to the side, waving toward the floor.

“What is this?” he asked, brows pinched as he took in the massive piece of canvas set up on a blue tarp and surrounded by several containers of washable paint.

“Well, you know how we have this stupidly large wall above our bed?” I said, waving toward it.

“Yeah,” he said, looking over. “Are we painting something for it?” he asked, knowing that I hadn’t found anything I liked that was big enough for the space.

“In a way,” I said, smirking as I walked backward toward the canvas. “We are going

to make some abstract art.”

“But you don’t really like abstract art.”

“Not normally, no,” I agreed. “But this is abstract art we are going to be making with our bodies.”

“What? Like ass and tit prints?” he asked, making me snicker.

“Probably some of that, sure,” I agreed, grabbing two colors of paint and pouring each onto a throw away plate so I could smear my hands into it. “But we are going to put our hands in paint—mine pink and purple, yours black and gold—and we are going to get down onto this canvas and make love. And see what kind of art we make during it.”

I never saw Levee move so fast.

His hands were in the paint and then on me in moments.

Then we spent the next hour lost in each other. Until we’d rolled off onto the cold blue tarp, panting, and looking over at the art we’d made.

“Now, every time someone comes into the bedroom, they’re gonna see it,” Levee said, eyes bright.

“It’s fun to have little secrets,” I told him as I reached for his hand then walked with him to the shower, where we scrubbed each other clean before dinner.

Each day we spent together, the more I couldn’t wait to spend more with him.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:17 am

“What?” Jade asked, picking up on my excitement as we made our way up the front path toward the bungalow after two weeks away visiting her family in cold, snowy Massachusetts.

As much as we both had loved getting to experience some winter, we both sighed in relief as we stepped off the plane and felt the welcoming heat again.

“I may or may not have arranged to have a surprise for you waiting when we got back,” I told her.

“I knew you were up to something!” she said, narrowing her eyes at me. “Telling me you had to keep texting the club when they knew we were away with family.”

“Yeah, a harmless little lie. I hope,” I added as I reached for my key. “We gotta have Kylo come over and pick some of these hibiscus for the tortoise,” I said as she turned to admire the gardens she’d been tending to so lovingly.

It had been surprisingly fascinating to watch Jade settle into the house. Painting, shopping, decorating, gardening.

Nesting, the women of the club had called it. I figured that was exactly what it was for Jade, too, since she’d been very clear about wanting our lives and this house to be full of babies eventually.

I didn’t really have a single decorating bone in my body, so I’d been happy to let her have free rein with the place.

She'd filled it with color, art, plants, and love.

Which made me want to make a contribution of one design feature. Only I needed to have it done when she wasn't around because, according to the experts I'd hired to do it, they needed a few weeks to do it properly.

"Okay. Turn me in a direction," Jade said.

"Our bedroom," I told her.

"Oooh, are we going to make art again?" she asked.

We'd made that a bit of a habit.

The love canvas. Erotic photography. Nude portraits. We had a lot of fun mixing her passion for the arts and our shared passion for each other.

"While I'd be down for that," I said, especially after two weeks with her parents where having sex under their roof felt wrong as fuck, so we'd needed to sneak off to do it in the freezing car, "that's not it."

"Well, where..." she started as she turned into the bedroom.

I didn't need to tell her where it was.

Because the thing took up a whole damn wall.

While we'd been away, I'd had two crews in. One to redo the primary bathroom because it was horribly dated. So I'd gotten us a bigger shower niche, a soaking tub for two, a separate water closet for the toilet, and a double vanity. The other, I'd had in to replace the wall between the bathroom and the bedroom with a massive custom-built fish tank. One big enough to expand her collection.

“Levee!” she cried, voice thick. Sure enough, when she turned, her eyes were watery. “It’s so beautiful. Oh, they look so happy!” she said, walking closer to admire her fish as they swam around, their fancy tails swishing.

When we’d moved in, there hadn’t been a good spot for the fish tank, since goldfish needed giant tanks and the living and dining rooms had awkward layouts. We’d ended up sticking the tank in one of the spare rooms. Which I knew Jade didn’t like. First, because she liked looking at them. Second, because she was already starting to paint pretty, childlike murals on the walls in those rooms.

“The tank guys said there are enough gallons now for at least six or seven more goldfish, if you want.”

“Oh, I want,” she said, reaching back to grab me, pulling me in behind her.

My arms went around her and she melted into me as we both stood there admiring the tank.

It was a good business move for her, too, to get more fish. Her goldfish prints had been selling like wildfire lately, thanks to some viral social media videos.

While she didn’t need the money now—thanks to several pricey commissions for Teddy, Zayn, and their associates—it was important to her that her art did well, that it found the people who would appreciate it.

Plus, I loved the damn fish too.

And I was kind of excited to figure out what she might name the new ones.

“I love you,” she said, turning her head so I could lean down and kiss her.

“I love you too,” I said.

And, fuck, I did.

More than I knew I was capable of.

“I have a little surprise for you too,” she said, untangling herself from my arms. “I’ve also been keeping a secret for two weeks. Well, three, I guess, now,” she said, taking my hand, and pulling me with her toward her studio that was, basically, a sun soaked closet. It was something else I wanted to fix one day. But we had time.

“In here?” I asked, looking around.

It was the usual kind of organized mess as it always was. Paints, charcoals, pastels, canvases, easels, and sketches pinned randomly to the walls.

“Yes,” she said. “I tucked it here before we left,” she told me, going to the wall with the most finished canvases leaning against it, fishing toward the back, and taking out a canvas, careful to keep the painted side turned to her. “Ready?” she asked.

“Definitely.”

She flipped the canvas, holding it against her front.

And there the two of us were.

Well, no.

Three.

Because I was standing behind her in the picture. And both our hands were on her rounded belly.

“You’re pregnant?” I asked, gaze shooting up to her face, finding her already

watching me, trying to gauge my reaction.

“Yes,” she said, fucking beaming at me.

Suddenly, I saw it.

The ‘glow’ people were always talking about. And I was suddenly confused how I’d missed it over the past two weeks.

“I know we meant to wait until we actually made this part official,” she said, waving her engagement ring hand at me.

“Who the fuck cares about timelines?” I said as I crossed the small space toward her, framing her face in my hands. “We’re gonna have a baby.”

“We are,” she said, a single tear slipping from the corner of her eye. “And I just know he or she is going to be as kind and generous as their daddy.”

Daddy.

Fuck.

That made my heart unexpectedly skip.

“And as loving and lively as their mom,” I said, leaning down to steal her lips.

Jade - 7 years

“Whoa, slow down there, speed racer,” I said, holding the baby I was wearing in a wrap closer as William’s motorized scooter buzzed past us on the path, nearly ramming into me in the process.

“Oh, that thing don’t go that fast,” William said from his position beside me as my five-year-old came to a stomach-dropping stop on his scooter.

“That thing is not meant to be a toy,” I said, shaking my head as my son backed it up with that obnoxiously loud beep-beep-beep that seemed more appropriate on a delivery truck than someone’s mobility scooter.

“Anything with a motor is a toy to a boy his age,” William said with a shrug as he lowered himself heavily down onto one of our multicolored wrought iron chairs.

“He could break it.” Or his head. Though, to be fair, driving a scooter that maxed out at four miles per hour was probably the least dangerous thing I’d caught that wild child of a boy doing that week.

“So Levee gets a new one for me,” William said. And it was still refreshing to me how when he spoke of Levee now, it wasn’t with the thinly veiled hatred it used to be.

A lot of that hate, it turned out, stemmed from some ridiculous idea that Levee’s dad had stolen a very valuable baseball card from William and his father. Which, to their mind, meant that their whole lives were stunted because they couldn’t sell it and move up in life.

The thing was, though, when we’d been cleaning out William’s apartment to move into the guest house on our new property, we’d found the stupid card sitting against the wall behind the console table that didn’t seem like it had been moved in fifty years.

In the end, the dog poker picture in his living room had been worth more than the baseball card. But William had surprised both me and Levee by using his windfall to work on himself. Going to orthopedic doctors, physical therapy, and back specialists. Until, eventually, he got his pain cut down to just occasional flares when he’d

overdone it.

That was when he'd gone from the electric wheelchair to the motorized scooter, saying it gave him more freedom to go out and shop, thanks to the baskets on it.

It was amazing what a lack of pain, a change in environment, and some independence could do for a grumpy old man's demeanor.

Sure, he still teased Levee. But it was in that way that older generations did. Not meant to be malicious.

And, incredibly, William had been a pretty good grand uncle to our kids. No, he was never going to be babysitting them for us. Because the stubborn old guy would still occasionally say things that I—and society at large—would find inappropriate, if not outright offensive, and it was important to me that either Levee or I were around to explain to the kids why it was wrong.

But, still, he wasn't mean and snapping at them. If anything, he was the one reminding me to let the kids be kids, to stop being a helicopter. To let them learn for themselves that bugs taste nasty and the laws of physics did, in fact, apply to them, no matter how much they wanted to believe they could fly.

"That one is you, just shrunk," William said, nodding his chin toward our second child. A pretty little dark-haired girl in a rainbow dress, just standing there staring at the swarm of butterflies on the milkweed I'd planted a few years before.

"Thank you," I said, because I knew it was a compliment. And I had to admit that our little girl was an artistic, empathetic, soft soul. Though I did think that came from both Levee and I, not just me.

"That one," he said as my son flew off of the scooter to run after a poor iguana that had just been trying to sun himself. "That one reminds me of me at his age."

“Determined to end up in urgent care?” I asked, glad when the iguana scaled a tree before my kid could get to him.

“Eh, bumps and bruises are good for a growing kid.”

I’d always figured I would be a mom much like my own. Very hands off, laid back, easy going. It turned out that fate had different plans. And after my first baby, I’d been pretty debilitated with postpartum anxiety. I was always worried something terrible was going to happen, that I was going to screw up, that my sweet, innocent baby would pay for my mistakes.

It had taken a lot of meditation, yoga, and therapy sessions to learn to tamp down those fears.

They were still there. In the knee-jerk reaction to always step in to keep the kids from getting hurt or having their feelings hurt.

It took actual effort to hold myself back, to let them learn about the world around them—in all of its wonder, beauty, and occasional ugliness and pain—and just be there to help them through their feelings about it rather than try to protect them from it.

Levee, on the other hand, had taken to fatherhood with an ease that was unsurprising to me, but also a giant relief. Because when I was panicking, frantically trying to navigate the rough waves that was parenthood at times, he would just effortlessly take the oars and steer us toward calmer waters.

“That doesn’t bother you?” William asked when the baby I was still wearing started to fuss.

“They’re kind of easy at this stage,” I said, tapping a hand up the baby’s back. “If they’re fussing, they want to eat, be changed, to be burped, or be soothed to sleep.”

I thanked the universe every day that I'd been lucky enough to have relatively 'easy' babies.

"It's when they are old enough to get tired but want to fight it so they can play that they get really difficult. But also more fun."

"You really like the mom thing."

It wasn't a question, but I felt like I needed to answer anyway. "I had three things I really wanted in life. To get people to appreciate my art, to find the love of my life, and to be a mom. I am the luckiest woman in the world to get all three."

"Never wanted kids myself. Didn't have the patience."

"I don't know. You've been pretty patient when you're teaching the kids about tools and stuff like that."

"Want 'em to grow up knowing the difference between a socket wrench and a ratchet."

"Daddy!" my little girl cheered when she heard the rumble of Levee's motorcycle coming up the street.

"Stay in the yard," I called as the kids rushed to go meet their father.

I heard Levee slow as he got close to the driveway, used to this routine with the kids, and mindful not to be going too fast in case one of them ran into the driveway as he pulled in.

"Welp, I gotta go get myself ready," William said, using the table to help him stand. Sure, his pain was much better, but he was never going to be as strong and stable as he'd been before he'd hurt his back.

“Ready for what?” I asked.

He wasn’t as much of a shut-in as he used to be. He even found a couple of buddies that he hung out with at the local diner here and there.

“I have myself a date,” he declared, puffing his chest a bit.

“Oh, yeah? Good for you. Do you need a ride?”

“She’s gonna pick me up. In her convertible,” he said, looking dangerously close to smiling.

“Well, have a great time!” I said as he started away just as Levee came around the side of the house holding our daughter’s hand and holding our son upside down with one arm anchored around his midsection.

It didn’t matter how many times I’d seen Levee with the kids, it always gave me that little heart squeeze.

“Heya, doll,” Levee said after turning our son over his forearm to land on his feet, then leaning over to press a kiss to my lips, then the top of the baby’s head. “How was today?”

“Narrowly avoided a scooter accident and an iguana was quick enough to save himself some annoyance. Oh, and your uncle has a date.”

“A date? With a woman?”

“Well, you know, I didn’t ask. But I’m assuming.”

“Wow. I mean, he has become... wholly tolerable, but I did not see that coming. Okay, give me the baby. You go get some much deserved time in your studio.”

I was not going to argue with that.

I unwrapped the baby, gave him to Levee, then leaned up for another, longer, kiss.

“Eddie is gonna drop over some dinner later,” he told me as I started to retreat.

All day with my kids. Some time alone to paint in peace. Dinner provided by Eddie.
And a night, later, curled up in Levee’s arms?

I couldn’t think of anything more perfect.

Jade - 10 years

“Lily!” I called, rushing forward toward where she was standing beside Curtis on the sidewalk in front of the art gallery. “You look gorgeous,” I said as I wrapped my arms around her.

She did, too.

Moving up in life had genuinely agreed with her. Gone were the bags under her eyes and the twitchy way her eyes would always scan around back when we lived in the same building, always on the lookout for someone who might put her kids in danger.

Instead, there was an ease about her that came from moving to the suburbs in a lovely duplex with another couple next door who they quickly turned into their own extended family.

I didn’t get to see Lily and Curtis as much these days, given we’d both moved in opposite directions. And the kids were all old enough to not really want to spend any time with their “Aunt” Jade.

But just this once, we’d decided we all needed to reunite.

Not for my gallery showcase.

Oh, no.

This was for Terrance.

The kid who'd once drawn giant boobs on my whiteboard and protected me with a switchblade had been carefully working on his craft over the years, honing it, making it something truly remarkable.

Better, I thought, than me.

It had been years before that I'd decided I had to stop giving him lessons because he'd learned everything I could possibly teach him.

We'd stayed in touch, though.

And now, now it was time to celebrate his amazing hard work.

I'd pulled out all the stops, calling not only Lily and Curtis but Mrs. Jackson, her husband, their girls, Teddy, Zayn, the club, friends and work associates I'd gotten close with over the years. I wanted Terrance's showcase to be successful beyond his wildest dreams. He certainly had the talent.

And I knew too well that sometimes, success was more about who you knew than anything else. Through Levee, I knew a lot of life-changing people. And now, I was happy to pass those connections on.

"And look at you. You're ready to pop!" Lily said, reaching out to touch my belly.

I was.

My belly was so round that it felt comical. I was two days past my due date. But I'd made a deal with this baby that if it could just hold out until after the showcase, I would spend each day feeding him all of the ice cream he wanted.

"Hopefully, just a few more days," I said.

"Well, now, you know you need to let me come over and get some baby snuggles on. We're well beyond the baby thing now."

"Anytime you want," I agreed, thinking of how full circle this particular night felt. "So, you ready to go buy some lovely art?" I asked as Curtis reached for the door.

"Wait up!" Levee called, rushing toward us with Zayn just a step behind.

"Does Terrance do commissions?" Zayn asked. "Daniyal has a birthday coming up..."

Levee - 19 years

"I have a feeling this means I am maybe one year away from him declaring he is going to prospect the club," Jade said, leaning her head against my shoulder as we watched our oldest back out of the driveway on the brand-new motorcycle he'd just bought himself.

"Nah," I said, rubbing her hip. "We have at least five more years before that. No one prospects this young. Gotta get some life experience first. Besides, you love the club," I reminded her.

"I do," she agreed. "But I've also seen all the danger that has gone around for the past twenty years."

That was fair. But we always came out on top.

“That one isn’t far behind,” she said as our second son came flying down the driveway on his skateboard.

He’d given into Jade’s demand that he wear a helmet, but refused to use any of the knee or elbow pads she’d bought for him. If a week went by when he wasn’t scratched up, bruised, or bleeding, it was a miracle. But he’d been that way since the day he started walking. A daredevil. Rough-around-the-edges, but with a good heart.

The third son, that was the one I felt was a bit more like me. Laid-back, allergic to hard work, but kind. Oh, and the damn kid also inherited my youthful aversion to cleaning his room. And it usually took me or Jade bitching at him to clean up the shit that started to get furry on the plates in his room to get them in the dishwasher.

Our only girl, though, she was all her mother. Soft, sweet, kind, artistic. Too good for this world.

“I’m just getting my suit, then I’m going to the club,” our son said, carrying his board under his arm as he went into the house.

“The other two are with friends,” Jade told me as, no more than two minutes later, our kid was back outside and tearing down the street on the skateboard at a speed that even made me anxious.

“Really?” I asked, glancing back toward the house. “It’s empty?”

“I think this might be the first time ever,” Jade said, turning to give me a soft smile. “I don’t know if I’m finding it sad or exciting.”

I understood what she was saying.

We’d spent the last nineteen years eating, sleeping, and breathing parenting. And now, well, we were only a couple more years away from all those kids being out on

their own.

It was a bittersweet thing, having your kids grow up. Bitter, because not having them around was going to hurt like hell. Sweet, though, because we knew we'd done a good job with them, that they had everything they needed to live successful lives outside of our home.

"Well, seeing as they will all be home before bed, I think we can go ahead and be excited," I said, letting my hand drift down to grab her ass.

"I like the way you think," she said, turning in my arms to wrap her arms around my neck, then leaning up for a long, lingering kiss that quickly went from sweet to heated.

Reaching down, I gathered up her skirt to just below her ass, then lifted her up.

Her legs went around my waist as I turned and walked us into the house.

The same house that I'd once wanted to work out the kinks of. But now, I couldn't imagine it without its sweet little imperfections.

The gouge in the living room molding from our eldest riding his little motorized car into it early one Christmas morning.

The lines on the doorway into the kitchen, marking all four of the kids' growth.

The window in the bathroom that once creaked and let us know one of the kids had decided to sneak out then climb back in through it.

The hall closet door that featured a mural done by our five-year-old daughter while Jade and I had accidentally slept in one Sunday morning.

And, yeah, that screen door that still cracked against the jamb as I carried Jade inside.

That sound now made me think of little kids running in and out all day long, letting bugs and lizards in that we would spend the night chasing and relocating.

I couldn't imagine a home without every single one of those features. That evidence of all of the years of love and happiness that had existed inside. The generational cycles that had been broken.

All of it, every last bit, thanks to the amazing woman with her kind soul and giant heart.

And her incredibly convenient love of all things easy-access skirts, I thought as I carried her into the bedroom and kicked the door closed behind us.

XX