



Pope's Purgatory (Saint's Outlaws MC: Coral Cay Chapter)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Love is too tame a word for what I feel for Birdie.

Obsession? Possession? Whatever name you want to give it, I know one thing. Its bigger than this universe were crammed into. It transcends time and space.

Ill find her again, whether its this life or the next.

Right after I burn the world down to keep her breathing.

Welcome to Coral Cay, FL.

A tropical paradise where tourists and residents used to flock to the warm sparkling waters and sunny, sandy beaches in droves.

Until the Saint's Outlaws MC rolled into town to set up shop.

Now it's the land where sinning is fun, violence is a lifestyle, and enemies tend to go swimming with the sharks.

Loyalty will earn you respect, love will give you life, and betrayal is paid for in blood.

The men love hard and the women love harder.

The club is about to take a wild ride.

Are you ready to join them?

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The iron-like scent of blood wafts around us as it drips from the tip of my blade. It pools beneath the body of the Steel Slayers member at my feet in shimmering crimson rivulets from the grotesque smile I created across his throat.

His fear lingers in the air, feeding the reaper writhing under my skin.

Darkness whispers its hunger for retribution against the man laid at my feet. His quick death has done little to appease the unholy prancing along my veins.

When Cyanide tossed him at me, I knew this was the one who left the picture of my Birdie and his sister, Valkyrie.

I bet their cunts are as pretty as they are. It'll be fun to see how much damage we can do.

We took it as the threat they'd meant it to be.

A few months after my twenty-second birthday, my grandfather, Gavel, and his VP, Mad Dog, informed us they were stepping down from their positions. They wanted to put it to a vote to hand the reins of the club over to a completely new generation. Gavel wanted me to step into his position, and Mad Dog wanted Cyanide to fill his. Surprisingly, Cyanide didn't want it and recommended Malice take it instead. Some old-timers didn't like what was being proposed much and fell into the minority of nay votes. Most of the older members had been with my grandfather and Mad Dog when they established the Coral Cay chapter of Saint's Outlaws in nineteen-eighty-seven. They're fucking tired, they said. They want to let the young take over so they can just enjoy the ride. Most votes landed on yay, and a new line of officers took up their

positions as the old ones stepped down.

‘Course, we found out not long after why Gavel and Mad Dog wanted to step down earlier than expected. Mad Dog was battling stage four colon cancer, and he didn’t want to spend that time undergoing treatment. He wanted to live out what time he had left riding at his best friend’s side and not worrying over running a club they knew would be left in good hands.

He and Gavel had more than a friendship, but only a few of us knew. They didn’t hide it, but they didn’t flaunt it either. Our life is hard enough, and they didn’t want to bring their love out into a world that would crucify them before learning who they were as men first. The world is fucking cruel, and they would have been judged on their sexuality instead of the true sins they’ve committed throughout their lives.

We lost Mad Dog three months ago, and the club feels his loss keenly. Gavel has shut the fuck down. His fucking anger is the only thing keeping his lungs moving. I’m scared as hell about what will happen to him once he no longer has that to keep him company.

This war with the Steel Slayers couldn’t be happening at a worse time. We’ve been battling these motherfuckers for a fucking year now, and it feels like there’s no goddamn end in sight. My brothers, especially Gavel, need time to properly grieve the loss of a man we all loved deeply, and as long as we’re battling this fucking rival club, we can’t do that.

Our grief is great fucking fuel for our rage.

No matter how many damn Steel Slayers we torture for information, we still haven’t determined why they’re targeting our fucking club. Sometimes it feels more personal, as if Gavel and I are the primary targets. These fucking pictures we received yesterday sure in the hell feel personal. Their President, Clink, is making a goddamn

mockery of our club, and it's not something I'll stand for much longer.

Gavel and Mad Dog ruled our club with an iron fist. They were intolerant of disrespect, and offenders were punished for it ruthlessly. They were Nomads back before they decided they were ready to find a permanent spot to stick roots. The Mother chapter in Boston permitted them to pick a place to land, and they opened the chapter with their backing. I once asked Gavel how they chose Coral Cay. He laughed and said, "It's where the bitches are." Then he got serious and truthfully told me they just closed their eyes and picked a state on the map. From there, they narrowed down cities that didn't have any ties to Saint's Outlaws yet. Coral Cay came out as the winner.

When I took over as President, I didn't change much about how I ran shit. Sometimes, I wonder if I don't run this club more ruthlessly than they did. People fear me, and it's for a damn good reason. The only thing that's kept me from crossing that line and losing my humanity is the little bird these motherfuckers have threatened. Birdie is the only light left in my soul, and if it ever blinks out, hell will walk on Earth.

I undressed before I started torturing the Steel Slayer, not wanting to get my clothes bloody, so I wipe the blade of my knife on the shirt of the dead Steel Slayer before tossing it to Pretty Boy so he can slide it into the sheathe on my jeans.

Frustration gnaws at me as I lean my bare ass against the wall and scrub a hand over my face. "They're never gonna give shit up. We've been in this goddamn war with them for over a year and still have no fucking clue why Clink targeted us in the first place."

"He's a vile son of a bitch. You really need a reason, brother?" Cyanide asks, kicking the body at our feet.

A month ago, we lost, Roly, another brother who had been with us since we were all patched in as prospects. Just like Mad Dog, his loss was a hit to the nuts.

“I’d like a damn reason I’m putting my men in the fire before we lose any more. Roly was enough of a hit for us, especially so close to losing Mad Dog.” I shove away from the wall and squat down to heft the dead body over my shoulder. Blood leaks from the various wounds I’d inflicted during my fit of fury, landing in warm, thick puddles along my back, ass, and arms. “Wash that blood down the drain while I deal with the shark bait.”

Butcher typically handles this job, but tonight was more personal. I wanted the goddamn pleasure of playing in his guts before he becomes food to fill the belly of hungry sharks.

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Life didn't reward men like me with something as beautiful and pure as Birdie Fitzgerald.

Not for long, anyway.

I should have remembered that because then I wouldn't have been caught off-guard when the threat against her and Valkyrie came in. This was why I never wanted to start something up with her after becoming President.

But shit was inevitable between us. There's always a collision between two souls destined to be together. I didn't realize that until it was too late.

The moment she came waltzing into her dad's living room as I was visiting her brother, I knew I was fucked. Birdie stole the last bit of soul I had left.

She scared the hell out of me because being with her put a target on her back. Making her mine gave me a weakness, and in this life . . . that's something that'll get you dead in a fucking hurry.

It didn't take long before Cyanide picked up on my obsession with his little sister. I thought for sure it was going to cause a strain between us, but he surprised me when he gave me his blessing. He said he couldn't think of a better man to have at his sister's side. It prompted me to tell him my fears of her being targeted because of my position in the club, and that motherfucker gave me a look that said I was the dumbest son of a bitch he'd ever met.

“Suppose you forget we were born to this life, Pope. There's always been a target on

her back. You're the President of one of the most ruthless clubs in the States. There's no one else she'd be safer with."

We were both goddamn fools to think there'd never be anyone who wouldn't fear us. There's always someone out there with less fucks to give, and we should have remembered that.

When I cut up the last piece of the Steel Slayer, I separate the chunks of meat and tissue from the bone and toss them in their respective piles. The flesh will be sent to feed the sharks, and the bones will go to the incinerator in the basement of the slaughterhouse.

The rage has cooled to a simmer just below my skin, but I'm still far from appeased.

"You look like a damn horror flick, Prez," Ducky remarks, walking into the butchering room.

I chuckle at his look of comical horror when I smile. I can imagine what I look like, covered head to toe in thick crimson.

"Feed the babies," I order. "Where's Malice?"

"Cleaning."

"Tell him we need an appointment with the funeral director. Get a prospect in here to clean up."

My bare feet smack against the concrete floor of the slaughterhouse as I head toward the wash area. I step under the hose hanging from the ceiling and squeeze the nozzle. Leaning my head back, I groan as the cold water rains down, washing today's sins from my body.

My enemies are trying to steal the last bit of light left in my life. I'll never survive this world if her life is snuffed out, and that's going to happen if she stays in this lifestyle with me.

There's too much fucking darkness in it.

Birdie owns my soul.

I'll need to sever that bond, and it'll have to be done in the most brutal way possible. If my enemies were to tear my chest open after knowing that, they'd witness the decay of my barely beating heart.

Once the last of the blood swirls down the drain at my feet, I release the nozzle and shake my head, slinging most of the water from my hair. Pretty Boy stands by the door, waiting for me with my clothes and kutte.

"Is everything clean?" I ask, pulling my jeans on and sliding my kutte over my shoulders, not bothering with my t-shirt. I hang it from my back pocket and lean down to pull my socks and boots on. Then I stand and run my fingers through my wet hair. "Let them know we'll head to church when we return to the club. Seems we have a lot of shit to go over."

"Will do, Prez," he replies, passing my phone to me.

When I return to the slaughterhouse's main area, Ducky sets two five-gallon buckets beside the door. "Where's his head?" I ask.

Malice laughs, leaning down to lift something from the Styrofoam cooler at his feet. He lifts the head out by the hair and smiles victoriously before turning to speak to the fucking thing. "Show some respect and say hi to my Prez." He brings it closer to him as if it's speaking in his ear. "What's that? Seems you've lost your head, little feller."

We're all a little fucking crazy around here, it seems.

"Looks as if he's struggling to speak," I remark. "He's been a bad boy. Send him to his club."

Malice pouts as he returns the head back to the cooler of ice, disappointed that I cut his puppet play short.

"After you drop him back off to his club, head back to ours. Same with you, Ducky. Take the boat and feed the sharks, then head back to the club. We need to attend Church."

I run my eyes over the slaughterhouse one last time to ensure everything is in order for the dayshift before locking up and arming the security system.

The war is here, and I need to do whatever I have to for us to come out the victor.

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I've never been a soft man. That shit didn't change when I got with Birdie. She never seemed to mind, always showing me she loves the man I am. Birdie is the only one who can tame the reaper roaming restlessly under my skin.

Many nights, I've come home to her covered in the filth of my enemies with adrenaline running through my veins. She's never hesitated in opening her arms and letting me work out my aggression on her sinful body until I'm sated.

The wind whips through my damp hair as I ride toward the club. Birdie sent me a text to let me know she was waiting. I figured it'd be best not to leave her alone too long with Spunky and Dimples running around the clubhouse. My little bird doesn't get along with those two club whores because they like to act like their cunts are special. Probably are to some brothers, but I've been so goddamn obsessed with Birdie that other bitches barely register with me.

Just means I'm going to have to let her mark me tonight to show the fucking world who owns my dick.

As I stroll through the club doors, my woman barrels into me and climbs my body.

With a chuckle, I grab handfuls of ass cheeks so I can hold her to me. "Hey, little mama," I rumble, staring into her fucking stunning eyes.

Heterochromia—one green, one a bright honey.

They fucking mesmerized me the moment they locked with mine all those years ago. There's always so much fucking life in them.

Birdie's eyes are the windows to her fucking soul.

She tangles her fingers into my hair and slides her lips across mine. When she pulls back, her eyes have softened, roaming my face as if she's reassuring herself that I'm home safe.

"A ghrá mo chroí," she whispers in her father's native language.

Love of my heart.

Fuck.

A sense of foreboding constricts my lungs as I stare at her.

"Fucking love you, Birdie," I growl.

I don't say it often, so when I do, I get the pleasure of watching that light in her eyes brighten in a way that I fucking crave.

"I love you more, my beast."

"Everything good here?"

She rolls her eyes and smirks. "You know those bitches only run their mouths behind my back. They're not brave enough to talk that shit to my face."

I walk us to the closest table and sit her on it. "For someone so tiny, you've got one set of balls on you, little mama."

"Dude, do you not see the environment I'm in? If I don't, this life will eat me alive."

Her words remind me of the target on her back and fear runs through me so hard that I wrap my hand around her throat and pull her face to mine. I slam my lips against hers, devouring her mouth and swallowing the taste of her so it coats the back of my throat.

My dick is hard as stone snuggled up against the heat of her cunt. If I could live inside her, I'd bury myself there and never come up for air.

If I must destroy this woman to save her life, blood will be shed, and it won't just be mine or hers.

Birdie yanks her face away and sucks in gulps of air. I growl, upset at losing the one thing that quieted the chaos.

She pats my chest. "Calm down, my wild beast. As much as I love soaking you into my lungs, I need to be able to breathe."

"Your breaths are mine," I growl, tightening my fingers around her throat.

Her eyes bliss out and her lips curl lovingly. She lifts a hand to my cheek, and I lean my face into it.

"They are, Apollonos," she whispers, using my given name not many know. "All of me is yours. But you won't have it if I'm no longer pulling air into my lungs."

My top lip lifts at the corner in a snarl, and the brat fucking laughs at me.

"Do what you need so you can take me home and fuck me."

"I can fuck you right here, right now."

She lifts a brow. "I'm sure you can, but I'm not in the mood to be put on display today."

"Fine," I pout, watching as laughter dances over her face.

I step out from between her legs and reach between them to cup her heat. "Tonight, this pretty little cunt is mine to abuse."

Birdie pushes my hand away with a laugh and hops down, leaning her head back to peer up at me with a wicked smile. "If you're a good boy," she teases, turning away.

My hand cracks against her ass. "Fucking brat."

That beautiful laughter rings out again as she struts that sweet ass over to where her sister's sitting.

The anticipation of having those cheeks painted with my handprints as I fuck her pussy slithers up my spine, and I lick my lips while adjusting my hard dick.

For now, I have other business to attend to.

Once all electronics are locked up and the council is seated around the table, I lean back in my chair and start the club meeting. "The piggy didn't squeal tonight, boys."

"So, we're no closer to finding out what the fuck Clink's deal is?" Joker, our Road Captain, growls.

"He's a bastard. We know he doesn't need a fucking reason. This feels personal. We're being targeted specifically," I remind them.

"It goes further than us," Cyanide says. "Anyone know where Gavel is? I'm guessing

he'll have a better insight."

"Got a call that he was at Tapping It in the ring again."

I scrub my hands over my face with a groan at D-Bag's words. "Fuck. He's still spiraling. Losing Mad Dog fucked our world up, but his the most. Fucking terrified what's going to happen if he doesn't get a handle on that anger."

"Sent Vortex and Blackjack to keep an eye on him," D-Bag admits, referring to two of our prospects.

Sighing, I lean forward and rest my elbows on the table. "Right. Nothing we can do about him right now. At least he's keeping it contained to the boxing gym. The last thing we need is for him to cause us more trouble than we're already facing. Butcher, get Cypher on the phone. Need to know if he's found Clink's hiding spot yet."

Cypher and Bugsy went Nomad when we lost Mad Dog. Fucking hated losing them out of the clubhouse, but they promised to be here anytime I call. Cypher is the club's only computer whiz, so it was a hit when he took off over the road, but he's been there along the way, helping our chapter with the Steel Slayers when he can.

Clink went underground with most of his club when he started this war with us. Right now, he's got his brothers doing the dirty work, but he'll come at us head-on soon. He pops up to start shit, then ducks back into whatever hole he's landed in. Cypher's been on his ass since the last time he stuck his head out. Clink is cautious and smart as fuck, though, and makes sure there's no trail leading back to him. Each time we believe he's back at his club in Stormy Ridge, he manages to evade our lookouts and escape again.

Butcher lumbers to his feet and out to the lockbox I tossed him the keys to so he can retrieve his phone. It's kept outside the chapel doors and guarded by one of the

prospects during Church. The only one with a key is the acting President, which would be me.

The last thing we need is some motherfucker grabbing our phones and having access to shit they don't need access to.

"While we're waiting on him, Pretty Boy, how's business?" I ask.

He glances up from his computer screen. "Right as a whistle. The Body Shop and Claspers Logistics are running solid. New clients coming in every day and bringing that cha-ching, baby. Tapping It has a few fights on the books that'll bring in the green. Gavel's headlining one of them," he admits sheepishly.

I nod. "Let him. It'll do him good. How's the washers looking at Pound of Fresh?"

Anyone listening in would assume we were talking about the washers at the laundromat. We are, just not the ones they're thinking of. I'm talking about our "washers" who make our dirty money clean again.

"Running in tip-top shape. One of them had a little mishap, but I went in and fixed it," he replies with a wide grin.

"Butcher, how's Saint's Garage? You bring in any new mechanics?"

"Got a couple of interviews this week. 'Til then, I'm doing most of the work Tito left behind," he replies.

"Keep me updated. If you need any help, just let me know and I'll come in."

"All good for now, Prez."

“I’m still waiting for The Serpent to call me back about our shipment of weapons. He’s waiting for the all-clear from the port contact on his end. Malice, was there anything else you wanted added to our shipment before they move them out?”

“Naw. The armory is full of everything else. They got us the AK-47s, the crates of grenades, and the C-4?”

I nod, confirming.

He shrugs. “Then we’re all set.”

“All right. What else is in the books, Pretty Boy?”

“Got a few brothers who haven’t paid their dues. Sent them a friendly reminder.”

“Anyone heard from Basilisk’s lawyer lately?” I ask.

The brothers shake their heads, and I let out a heavy sigh. “Right. That’s what I feared. Cyanide, check in with Roger and see why the hell he hasn’t updated us on Basilisk’s case. We might need to look for a new lawyer. Are we still paying him?”

“Like clockwork,” Pretty Boy answers.

Basilisk was sent up the river last year when he took the heat for protecting a broad who was being beat on by her old man in the apartment complex he lived in. He told me he didn’t regret it and he’d do it again in a heartbeat. He’s been protective of women ever since he was forced to watch his father kill his mom when he was thirteen. I once saw him hop in a motherfucker’s face just for raising his voice to his woman. Basilisk is deadly to anyone who crosses him, but he’s the gentlest fucking giant to women and children that I’ve ever seen.

I turn to Manic. “You and Butcher ride out with Cyanide. He gets our brother out or we’ll have to take him out on our boat sometime. He’s been taking money and not providing the results he promised us.”

We go over a few other minor things before I call an end to church with a smack of the custom-made mallet against the sound block. When I was voted in as President, Birdie went out and had the custom gavel made to mark the occasion and surprised me with it on my birthday. She told me the entire thing was carved by hand. The V-twin engine on the head of it is some of the most exquisite work I’ve ever seen, and the handle is wrapped in leather with tassels coming out of it. Shit is fucking beautiful. I was worried about using it, wanting to keep up with tradition and use the one my grandfather did when he started the Coral Cay chapter. Birdie told me I didn’t have to use it, but she still wanted something to honor the position I’d been given. Gavel and Mad Dog were pissed when they didn’t see me using it. When I explained about wanting to keep with tradition, Gavel smacked me upside the head and told me to stop being stupid and use the motherfucker. So, I had his gavel mounted to the sound block he’d used and had a plaque put on it. The brothers and I gave it to him for Christmas the year after I took over. It now sits on the mantel above the fireplace in the house he’d shared with Mad Dog.

I file out of the chapel behind Malice, my eyes scanning for my woman.

Birdie is sitting at the bar chatting up Blitz’s permanent piece of ass, Roxanne. The broad is loyal as fuck, and she’s stuck with Blitz’s crazy ass for a couple years now. Not that she’ll stick forever. They rarely do with him because, eventually, they want more than he’ll give. Brother won’t give up that patch, and when they realize that, the women skip.

“Hey, little mama,” I rumble, stepping up behind her and curling my fingers around the base of her neck. “Ready to ride out?”

Birdie leans into me, her hand drifting behind her to wrap around my thigh. She tilts her head back so can she peer up into my face. “If you are.”

“Let’s go,” I order, helping her to her feet.

I’m ready to get my woman home and make good on that promise from earlier.

Nothing better than the white heat that licks up my spine when I’m buried inside my little mama.

I nod at Roxanne. “Rox, good to see you.”

She smiles at me. “Lookin’ good, sugar. Take care of my girl, yeah?”

The smirk I aim at her is full of all the sinful promises I’m going to deliver on when I get her friend home. “I’ll take real good care of her.”

Roxanne tosses her head back with a laugh. “I have no doubt.” She glances at Birdie. “Have all the fun, babe. Chat later, yeah?”

Birdie wiggles fingers at her in a wave and then I’m dragging her out behind me as she laughs.

The ride home is as enjoyable as any time I’m on my bike with my woman wrapped around me until I glance in the mirror. The blacked-out van and two bikes rolling up on us at high speeds have my fingers curling tighter around the handlebars.

I pick up speed and reach down quickly to tap out our code for danger against Birdie’s thigh.

Her fingers tap against my abdomen in acknowledgment and her hold loosens enough

to free up my movements. She's got her phone out to make a call to Manic, but when the Steel Slayers close in on us, I know my brothers won't get here in time.

We're on our own, and we're fucked if I can't hold them off long enough for our backup to arrive.

I grab my gun from the shoulder holster and aim for the bike gliding up beside me. I fire off a shot before he can, but he veers away at the last minute, causing my shot to go wide. Before I get the chance to aim again, one of them clips my tire. Birdie lets out a scream of surprise, and I spit out a curse when I have to fight to keep us upright.

No sooner do I get the bike under control than one of them lodges a bullet in my shoulder. I grit my teeth against the blinding hot pain. It's a struggle to keep my grip on the handlebar, but I manage. Birdie grabs the gun from my hand so I can worry about keeping us on the road and aims at our enemies. She takes out one of the Steel Slayers, and I watch in the mirror as his body jerks and then he and the bike are both going down.

This pisses off the others and it's open fucking fire on us.

A terrified scream peals from Birdie as the bike wobbles.

"Hold tight, baby," I yell.

Fear wraps its claws around my throat and squeezes as I struggle to keep the bike under control.

I don't give a fuck about me, but not having Birdie breathing in this world nearly freezes me.

We crash hard, the bike—and us—skidding along the pavement.

The only thought my mind latches on to is ‘thank fuck Birdie wore her riding leathers today’.

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By the time we land in the brush on the side of the road, my only concern is checking on my woman.

She held tight to me the entire time, and I can feel her body trembling around mine.

“We need to move, little mama,” I groan when I hear the bikes shut off.

“Okay,” she whimpers, slowly uncurling from around me. “The guys are on the way.”

“Gonna need your help moving the bike. My shoulder is fucked.”

I roll my eyes over her, checking for any visible injuries. Thankfully, her leather and helmet protected her from most of the damage she would have sustained.

“You good?”

“A lot of fucking pain, beast, but I’m alive and breathing. Let’s do this before they get over here.”

The strain in her voice makes me wonder whether she’s lying to me, but I don’t have time to question it right now. If I don’t get this bike off us, we’re going to be too easy to pick off.

She snaps the gun she’s still holding back in my holster. “On three.”

I hear the Steel Slayers closing in on us, so I don’t even wait to count that shit. I start

lifting, and adrenaline pulses through me as I raise the bike off us, mourning the damage to it as I do.

As soon as we're free, I yank the gun from my holster again and shove Birdie behind me. Running my hand along my side, relief settles in when I feel the knife still there. I slide it out and pass it to her. "Need you to find a place to hide, little mama. Not gonna be able to do what I need if I'm worried about you. I trust you to hold steady until I get to you. Anyone but me or one of the brothers come at you, take them out. Understand?"

"I know what to do, Pope." She yanks on my hair that's come loose and pulls me around to her for a quick kiss. "Keep yourself safe."

I watch as she takes off running to find a place to hide just as the Steel Slayers come crashing through the dense brush.

If this was any other time, I'd take the time to let them come at me first, but I don't have that luxury with Birdie around. I put a bullet between the eyes of the middle one since he was the only one that had his weapon out.

Two down, three more to go.

The others stop in their tracks. They raise their hands, but it's bullshit because there's no way a fucking Steel Slayer surrenders. It puts me on fucking edge.

"You've got five seconds to turn the fuck back around and get out of here before you end up like your brothers," I warn, my aim drifting between them.

"Clink wants your little birdie."

I shrug nonchalantly. "Clink's got a death wish. If he wants her so badly, he needs to

grow a set of balls and come at me himself. It's sad that he's too pussy to do it and he'd rather risk y'all's lives." I tilt my head. "Tell me, does it feel good knowing your President cares so little about you that he hides like a little bitch while you all do the dirty work?"

"Watch yourself," one of the others growls.

"You gonna make me, little boy?" I taunt, keeping their attention on me and away from searching for my woman. "Or is your dick not big enough? We can whip them out and measure to see who has the bigger one. Guarantee I'll win."

His body trembles with anger, and he keeps glaring at the other Steel Slayer, which tells me who the leader of this small group is.

I cluck my tongue and aim at the one I was taunting. "Seems you won't have anything I need," I tell him before pulling the trigger.

The other two stand stoically, staring at me as if they can wait me out. The only thing that tells me is they probably have help on the way same as I do.

A noise from behind me has my body tightening because I know exactly who the hell it is and I'm going to tan her goddamn ass when we get home.

Both Steel Slayers grin, their eyes falling behind me.

Well . . . that just won't do.

I shoot one in his stupid eye that doesn't belong on my birdie, and the other guy just cackles about it.

Crazy fucker.

“Such a pretty little bird, she is,” he croons.

“Suggest you remove your eyes from her or I’ll gladly pluck them from their sockets and have them for dinner,” I tell him calmly.

“Clink is gonna have so much fun with her,” he tells me with a wide smile. “You really should’ve been nicer to him.”

The familiar pipes of my brothers’ bikes ring through the breeze, and I smile back at him. “I really should have, but being nice isn’t my nature.”

I go along with him as if I have any fucking idea what the hell he’s talking about. I never had any run-ins with Clink until he started his shit with the club.

This fucker is so focused on me that he somehow misses my woman making her way around us to come up behind him, but when he feels that kiss of the blade she rests against his neck, he freezes.

The flash of surprise in his eyes has me chuckling. “My woman, she doesn’t like being threatened much. She really doesn’t like when her man is.”

“You can kill me, but we won’t stop coming for her or your club. Clink wants it all. Every single thing that belongs to you.”

“See, now, that just won’t do. He can’t have things that belong to me,” I growl, walking close enough that the barrel of my gun rests against his forehead.

He smiles, not fearing the death coming his way. “As long as it belongs to you, he’ll covet it.”

The confirmation is a punch to the fucking gut, and I don’t like the way it’s got my

mind racing.

As soon as the laugh passes the Steel Slayer's mouth, I squeeze the trigger, watching as his life quickly fades from his eyes before he falls to join his brothers.

Birdie steps away and drops to the ground. She's been running on adrenaline, we both have, and now the last one is no longer a threat to us, we're going to crash.

Malice, Cyanide, Savior, and Tomcat march toward us. Their expressions are grim as they take in the bodies lying around Birdie.

"You couldn't leave just one of them alive?" Malice asks, quirked his brow.

I shrug with a smile. "He said something I didn't like. They weren't gonna give us any information anyway."

"That's not true," Birdie says weakly. "You know now that it's you, personally, Clink has an issue with."

Her face has gone ashen as I shove my gun in the holster and drop down beside her. My hands are rushing to push the leather jacket from her, but they're trembling so hard that it takes a few tries to get the fucking stupid thing unzipped.

She cries out when I try to remove it from her, and I yank my hand back.

"Let me look at her, Prez," Tomcat says, squatting beside us.

Together, we work the jacket off her. I let out a roar when I spot the blood slowly leaking from the wound on her side.

She was shot. They shot my woman. My Birdie. My little mama.

My body rocks as I fight against the rage flooding my system. I need to tear someone apart, but I've already killed the ones here who dared hurt her. I jump to my feet and step closer to the body of the last Steel Slayer I killed. With an anguished howl, I shoot his fucking dick then his ugly damn face. Hopefully, he'll feel that all the way in hell. Let one of those demons down there kiss his goddamn boo-boos all better.

Anger still pulses through my veins, so I unzip my jeans, whip my dick out, and piss all over him. I sigh once I've relieved my bladder, and when I turn around, they're all staring at me with varying degrees of glee.

I tuck myself back in with a shrug. "When you gotta go, you gotta go."

"I love your crazy ass," Birdie says quietly, her pain-filled eyes roaming over my face in a gentle caress.

Leaning down, I cup my hand around her throat and tilt her colorless face so I can brush my lips softly across hers. "Love you too, little mama."

"She'll be okay. It's just a deep-ass graze. She got lucky. Still should go see the doc," Tomcat says.

"A graze?" I mutter, shoving my fingers through my long hair, wishing I still had my hair tie.

Birdie pulls one from her wrist and holds it up to me with a weak laugh. "Just a graze. Your dramatic temper tantrum with the bodies was for nothing."

I take it from her with a pout, pulling my hair out of my face. "My dramatics were necessary. You got hurt."

Her eyes soften. "And I'll live. Now, help me up, you beast."

“No. Not until Vortex gets here with the cage.”

“Then come sit with me while we wait.”

“Go ahead, Prez. We’ve got your back. I need to take a look at that shoulder of yours,” Tomcat tells me.

I glance down at the arm I’ve been unconsciously holding against me. “Huh. I forgot about that.”

“Adrenaline is weird like that,” Savior says, walking over and helping me to the ground behind Birdie. “You two just rest ‘til your ride gets here.” He peers over at my bike with a grimace. “Your bike is gonna need a ride too, Prez.”

“Fuckers,” I mutter. “Piss on the rest of them for me, would you?”

“Sure thing,” he answers, whipping his dick out to do just that.

“Thanks.” I sigh, resting my chin on Birdie’s head and closing my eyes, listening to the trickle of my brother pissing on the corpse of our enemy.

This was too fucking close. All it would have taken was another angle and I wouldn’t be feeling my little mama’s breaths rising and falling against my chest.

As long as it belongs to you, he’ll covet it.

Those words haunt me because every-fucking-body knows I’ll do what’s needed to ensure my woman keeps breathing.

Even if that means tearing away the very existence of our love.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:26 am

Never really thought I'd be the type of man to run from my problems, but here I am, kicked back at the clubhouse bar, getting high as a motherfucker with my brothers.

Joker rolled up a fat-ass blunt of that weed his little brother deals and started passing it around. I have no plans on going home tonight and need something to keep my mind off the fucked-up state my relationship with Birdie is heading toward. If I think about it too much, I'll lose the bit of sanity I have left. The minuscule piece of thread holding it together unravels quicker than Tomcat gets off with his broads.

"My sister is gonna have you by the nuts if you keep running, Pope," Cyanide says, climbing onto the barstool next to me and grabbing the beer Stinker, one of the club whores, sets in front of him.

"I like it when your sister has me by my nuts. It feels fucking good," I mutter, taking another hit from the blunt before holding it out to him.

Cyanide brings it to his lips, sucking smoke deep into his lungs and holding it before pushing it out into a heavy cloud as he shakes his head. "We both know she ain't gonna let you pull this shit for long before she's storming in here raising hell and demanding answers."

"Don't have any to give her that she's going to accept. You know that, brother."

That attack on us last week was more than a warning. It was Clink's fucking promise. As long as she belongs to me, he's going to want her, and that bitch will do whatever he needs to get her. Her pretty sister too. If he ever gets his hands on her, I guaran-fucking-tee she'd never come back to me the same. Birdie and Valkyrie are tough

broads, but the kind of man Clink is . . . they'd break at his hands.

I've been keeping my distance between us since then. Birdie doesn't understand, and her voice conveys that each time she tries to get me to talk to her. Fucking kills me, but goddammit, I don't know what else to fucking do right now.

Cyanide's right. Birdie isn't a woman to put up with someone disrespecting her for long. Her fire always makes my dick so hard, I could knock over the goddamn Eiffel Tower with it.

"Do you have a plan to protect them?" Cyanide asks.

I chuckle darkly and pull my hair down, shaking it out. "Oh, I do, but you won't fucking like it."

"Will it protect them?"

"Yeah, but Birdie's going to get broken in the process."

"Fuck," he mutters, picking up his beer and draining it. "Tell me."

I glance around, suddenly wary of prying eyes. Birdie has friends in here, and I can't have this getting back to her, otherwise, it's useless. To keep my Birdie breathing, I need to ensure she gets far away from me and this club.

"Let's go to my office," I say, grabbing my glass and the bottle of Devil's Mark bourbon before heading out of the common room.

I drop to my seat and kick my feet up on top of the desk. I appear calmer than I am on the inside. Cyanide's been my best friend since I was a sixteen-year-old punk rolling into his father's house for the first time. He knows I've got acid crawling through my

gut.

“You know they’re not going to leave the club and Coral Cay behind easily. This is their family,” I state, taking a sip from my glass.

“They’ll fight us like hellcats. Unless . . .” he trails off.

I nod, tipping my glass his way. “Unless we force them out.”

Cyanide sighs, running his hand over his beard in agitation. “How the fuck are we gonna do that?”

“Brutally.”

My voice is as empty as my fucking heart is.

“Goddammit,” he spits out, jumping to his feet and pacing the room.

How the fuck do I go on living when my heart is already icing over at the thought of what’s to come?

“Finish,” he orders.

“Watch it,” I growl, the fight itching under my skin.

Fuck. We’re both going to have to hit the ring at Tapping It to work this anger out of our veins.

Cyanide drops back into his seat with a groan. “Fuck. Sorry, Prez.”

“I’m going to have to betray her and it’s going to have to hit hard.” I drop my feet

and sit up, resting my arms on my desk. “Loyalty has been the only boundary she’s asked of me.”

“Ah, fuck,” he groans, seeing where I’m heading.

“Don’t fucking want anyone but her, brother, but I gotta do a damn good job making her think I do.”

“Who?” he grits out, assuming I already have someone in mind.

Cyanide knows he’s got to betray her by having my back, which means he’ll lose both his sisters. Where Birdie goes, Valkyrie goes—the perks of them being fucking twins, I reckon.

“To save her, my brother, we’re going to have to betray her, and we’re both gonna go to hell for destroying that light.”

Cyanide grabs the bottle of Devil’s Mark from my desk and guzzles some down. “Then I guess we better take as many Steel Slayers with us as we can on the way down.”

“Saints never surrender, and Outlaws never die, baby,” I mutter before draining my glass.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:26 am

“Where are you going now?” Birdie asks. “You just got home.”

“Got shit to do,” I mutter, yanking a clean shirt over my head to avoid having to look my woman in the eye.

The pain from my shoulder wound as I lift my arm helps keep me focused. Birdie can read me as well as I can her, which is why I’ve been putting distance between us. I’m not usually a man who feels guilt, but this shit has been smothering the fuck out of me the last week. Tendrils of guilt wrap around me so tightly that breaking free is impossible.

Knowing I’m going to have to destroy Birdie so I can keep her safe is fucking with my already fucked-up head.

I’ve racked my brain repeatedly for another solution, but anything I come up with still leaves Birdie dead at my feet.

I’d rather she lives her life breathing and hating me than not breathing at all.

Birdie grabs my arm. “Goddammit, Apollonos. Fucking talk to me. This isn’t what we do.”

I pull my arm from her hold. “Ain’t got shit to talk about, but I do got shit to do.”

“Pope, I’m not stupid,” she cries. “You’re pulling away, and I don’t understand why.”

My phone rings, keeping me from having to give her an answer I didn’t have.

Nothing I say is going to make shit better for either of us.

“Yeah,” I answer the call.

“Got another threat delivered to the club,” Malice says.

“On my way.”

I shove my phone into my pocket and pull my kutte on.

“Will you at least be home later? We have to talk about this, Apollonos.”

“Don’t fucking know, all right?” I growl, twisting my hair up on my head. “Got a lot of shit going on.”

“Like what?” she asks, tossing her hands in the air. “We’re not doing good, Pope. What the hell is more important than that right now?”

“Club business,” I say, snapping my chains on my wallet in place.

“Don’t,” Birdie growls. “Don’t you pull that bullshit with me. I’m not a fucking common club girl. You don’t get to treat me like that. I deserve better.”

The anger and pain in her voice slams into my chest and threatens to rip my heart out.

“Later, okay?” I promise distractedly, brushing a kiss against her lips and walking out.

We sit around the table in the chapel as I read over the note and flip through the recent pictures of Birdie and Valkyrie. There’s more of my woman than her sister, which tells me who Clink’s main target is.

“I’m fucking tired of this,” I snarl, throwing the pictures onto the table. “I need some motherfucking heads to roll. We’re gonna go out and ride until we find a fucking Steel Slayer because I want . . . no, fuck that . . . I need a head in my hand. Then I want to stake it on their gate for them all to see. They need to understand our bark is just as sharp as our damn bite.”

We roll out in formation, keeping our eyes peeled as we ride through Coral Cay and the surrounding towns. It appears they’ve all gone underground or locked themselves inside their compound after sending the latest threat, and it pisses me off. Clink and his club are toying with us. I’m no one’s fucking plaything, and the longer we go with Clink playing around, the more tallies he gets against him. He’s going to die either way. Those tallies just determine how painful and fucked-up it’s going to be.

We’re riding back into Coral Cay when my eyes are drawn to movement down the alley next to Saint's Garage. The lights hit the back of the man terrorizing a woman cowering against the wall. I grit my teeth and curl my top lip when I make out the familiar Grim Reaper logo.

Adrenaline pumps through me and excitement makes my balls tingle.

My brothers follow my lead as I swing us toward the alley. We spread out as we pull up, blocking his way out. Silence fills the air around us as we kill our engines, and the Steel Slayer whips his head our way. The whites of his eyes shine bright through the darkness when they widen.

Did he really think he could pull some shit like this in my town and get away with it? These are my fucking people, and we protect them from the other monsters who find themselves roaming our streets. The residents of Coral Cay feared us at first, but the longer the club was rooted, the more we grew on them. They trust us and come to us with shit they see going wrong in town.

Relief flashes in the woman's eyes, and I recognize her as one of the dancers at The Body Shop.

"Get gone," I order her.

She sobs and ducks under the frozen Steel Slayer's arm. He comes alive just as she scurries out of the alley and into the night.

"Nuh, uh, uh," I warn when his hand drifts to his kutte. "You won't make it before my man puts a pretty little hole in your head."

The chains on my boots smack together as I close the distance between us, creating a tinkling melody as my theme song.

I'm just a few feet away when he chooses to prove he has rocks rattling around up there and pulls his gun on me.

I click my tongue against the roof of my mouth. "There's always that bulb that never shines very bright, and I get stuck with him. Lucky for me, I suppose." I stare at him intensely, watching for any tiny movement he might make. "Well, are you going to pull the trigger or what?"

"You're fucking crazy," the Steel Slayer mutters when he realizes I don't fear the gun he has shoved in my face.

I sigh, put out that he's not squeezed the trigger yet. "So I've heard."

Before he gets a chance to keep being stupid, I whip my gun out and shoot him in his hand. His pistol clatters to the concrete as he groans, and I laugh.

"You really should've pulled the trigger when I gave you the chance. Now, look at

you with a hole in your hand.”

His eyes bounce around, searching for an escape route that he’ll never find. These are our motherfucking streets, and we’re not stupid.

Butcher glides up beside us and holds my axe out to me. “It’s all clear, Prez.”

“Excellent,” I purr, accepting my precious and twirling her around as I eye my prey. She makes such a pretty whistling noise as I swing her through the air.

Sing for me, baby.

Ah, look, there’s that hint of fear from him. It’s smart of him, really. You never know what a crazy man will do with such a beautiful, sharp blade like this.

Could cut off his head. Could cut off his toes. You just never really know. Lucky for him, I don’t mind informing him of my plans.

“Why were you cornering my employee?”

His lips twitch, and I know he’s about to be fucking stupid again.

“I wanted to see what she’d look like on her knees, stuffed full of my fat cock.”

“And if she didn’t want your pencil dick in her mouth?”

He rolls his eyes and the smirk he was fighting breaks free. “Bitches always want it.”

“But let’s pretend she didn’t,” I say, swinging my precious girl through the air as I prepare.

“She wouldn’t have had a choice,” he growls, finally showing his colors.

“As I thought.”

I nod at Malice and Manic, watching them march up to him. They each grab an arm, twisting it behind his back and holding his head in place. He struggles, already seeing his fate written in my cold, empty eyes.

“You made this so much easier by confirming you’re a piece of shit.”

“Make what easier?” he stupidly asks.

“Why, taking your head, of course,” I reply jovially. “It’s about to get messy, boys.” I step closer and draw my arm back. “See you in hell, motherfucker.”

My swing is perfect as I aim for his neck. Blood spurts, coating Manic, Malice, and myself as my precious girl lands right at his jugular, slicing through. I withdraw, then swing again.

Huh. I probably should have sharpened my blade before our ride.

Oh, well. One more ought to do it.

My last swing slices completely through, and I let out a loud whoop when Malice is left holding the Steel Slayer’s head.

“Little rusty there, Prez,” Manic remarks.

I gasp, bringing my precious to my chest and covering her with my other hand. “Shh. You’ll hurt her feelings.”

“Probably should get her a little touch-up, brother,” Joker quips.

“D-Bag, make sure my girl here sharpens up before you put her back in the armory.”

“Will do, Prez,” he says, taking her from me and stowing her in his side bag.

“Cyanide, get Screw to bring a cage down to transport the body to their club. When we get close, I’ll drag him behind me until I reach the gate. Then we’ll leave the head and the body to make our statement. Everyone good with that?”

Joker passes me some baby wipes, and I clean as much of the blood from my face as I can. It’s only minutes later that Screw pulls up and we load the Steel Slayer onto a tarp in the back.

“What about this, Prez?” Malice asks, shaking the head and slinging blood.

I grin and take it from him. “He’s gonna ride with me.”

Once I’m seated on my bike, I place the head on the gas tank and turn him so he’s facing my dick. “There,” I say, patting the top of his head. “Now, you have something pretty to stare at while we go for a ride.”

“Screw, Ducky, keep an eye on the scene until the cleaning crew gets here to make sure nothing is left behind,” Malice orders.

The others fall in formation as we ride out. It’s late and a weeknight, so most people are locked in. Coral Cay doesn’t usually bust loose until the weekend, then we’re lucky to find empty space on the streets. We try to keep most of our shit at the clubhouse or at Slop and Chop, but this wouldn’t be the first time the residents saw some fucked-up shit from us. Though riding through town with a chopped-off head practically choking on my cock would be a new one.

Simply scandalous.

We take a turn about a mile out from the Steel Slayers compound in Stormy Ridge when the head starts to slide from the tank.

I laugh gleefully, tangling my fingers in the blood-matted hair, and put him back in place. “Whoa, there, little buddy. You can’t escape that easily.”

Joker leads us into an empty wooded lot so we can get the other half of my little friend and bring him along for the ride to his home.

While the guys unload the body, I find a spot on the back of my bike to hook the chain to. After it’s anchored tightly, I scoot the body closer and create a harness around his torso, snapping the lock in place, then I give a quick tug to check its sturdiness. Satisfied, I dust my hands together and rise.

Swinging my leg over my seat, I get settled and drift my eyes between the head and the body with a twisted grin. “Geez, guys. I’ve never been the cream in a sandwich before. I’m flattered I was chosen. Be gentle with me.”

“If you’re done flirting, Prez, we should get a move on before we’re surrounded by Steel Slayers,” Pretty Boy suggests with a laugh.

I stick my bottom lip out but fire my bike up. “If you insist, Pretty Boy. Honestly, I think you’re just jealous it’s me and not you.” I shake my head. “All right, brothers. This will all go down quickly. We’ll set the body against the fence, and I’ll find the sharpest point I can to stake the head. Then we get the hell out of there. Protect yourselves against them if you must. Otherwise, it’s a drop and roll.”

I lift my hand in the air, twirling my finger to give them the signal to ride out.

Butcher and Manic peel off so they can take out whoever is manning their gates before they're able to alert anyone of our presence.

Clink toys with us, and it's time to toy with him in return.

I have all trust in my brothers, so I don't hesitate to roll up to the gates. Butcher is sitting inside the gatehouse while Manic stands outside of it with his arms crossed. My eyes scan the perimeter. For how big the Steel Slayers are, this chapter sure is fucking stupid. If a group of bikes were to roll up at our clubhouse, they'd be surrounded in a fucking heartbeat.

Seems the Stormy Ridge chapter of the Steel Slayers MC are more concerned with their personal vendetta against me than actually running their fucking club and protecting the people in it.

I swing off my bike, making sure the head is in place and not going to make a run for it before heading to the back of my bike. The corpse is a mangled lump of flesh, bone, and material that would make great food for some of the beasts roaming around the surrounding woods.

"Woo wee, boys. Look at this delicious fucking roadkill. I have to say . . . I cooked up a masterpiece."

Malice laughs. "Crazy fuck."

"Well, that was just rude," I huff, squatting to unhook the chains.

Pieces of loose skin stick to them as I lift, and I flick the meaty flesh off. It lands on the toe of Pretty Boy's boots, and he stares down at it in pure heartbreak.

"Ah, man, not the fucking boots," he whines, shaking his foot to remove it.

“Sorry, not sorry,” I quip, hefting the headless corpse and carrying it to the gate.

I toss it down then straighten him so he’s sitting up against it. There’s a perfect spiked point right above him, but as I step back, another idea occurs to me, and I smile. “Bring me the head.”

Tomcat whistles as he carries it over and passes it to me.

Dropping down, I place the head in the Steel Slayer’s lap then take his mangled hands and place them on top of it.

Then, with a maniacal grin, I step back and unzip my jeans, pulling my cock out. I make sure to soak him as much as I can as I empty my bladder.

Nothing as disrespectful as pissing in someone’s face.

The dead won’t know, but the living sure in the hell will.

I suppose that’s why it’s my favorite thing to do.

After I shake and tuck myself back in, I lean over to swipe my finger through the blood that’s starting to coagulate where his head used to sit. I bring it to his forehead and glide it up and down, back to the middle, then side to side, creating my calling card.

My enemies always fucking know who is leaving the mess behind when they spot the bloody cross.

“Message delivered,” I say, taking the wipe from Malice and holding my hand out for the sanitizer. “Let’s ride, brothers.”

I don't think for a second this is going to stop them from coming after the club or the girls, but it'll let them know I'm finished playing their games.

Once I'm sure my girl is safe, I'm coming for them. I'll be coming for all of them.

Birdie was the only thing keeping that last thread of my humanity in place. Once she's gone, there will be nothing left to stop the reaper from breaking free. He'll be searching for souls to devour, and I have a whole fucking club I'll deliver to him.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:26 am

I'm walking past the bathroom on my way out the door when the sound of retching yanks me to a stop.

My fists clench, hating the thought of her being sick. As much as I need to walk away to keep this distance between us, I open the door and lean against the frame.

Birdie is on her knees in front of the toilet, her arm around the rim as she vomits again.

I push off the door and grab a washcloth from the shelf, running it under warm water.

Worry eats at me. Birdie rarely gets sick. I can't remember the last time it happened. If I didn't know she had that IUD thing, I'd wonder if she was pregnant.

Just the thought sends pure fear through me. We can't have a kid. Not now. Not in the middle of this shit with the Steel Slayers. It'll put an even bigger target on her back and give me another weakness that can be exploited.

I squat beside her, bringing the cloth to her face and wiping away the sweat and vomit there. "What do you need?"

Birdie shoves my arm away from her face and shakily climbs to her feet. "Nothing from you unless you're ready to talk." When I don't say anything, she sighs and walks to the shower stall. "I thought so. Just go, Pope. You've gotten good at running lately, so keep going. I'm just a little under the weather."

The defeat in her tone smashes through my chest and wraps around my heart in

vicious, barbed wisps. I can't recall a time that my Birdie has let anything beat her.

There's a war waging inside me between the man who is fucking obsessed with her and wants to make everything better and the man who is fucking obsessed with her and needs to do everything he can to protect her.

"If you need me, call," I say, tossing the washcloth into the dirty clothes hamper.

She snorts, pulling her clothes off and stepping into the shower without replying.

Why would she? That snort pretty much told me to kiss her ass.

Closing my eyes against the pain trying to invade my barely beating heart, I shove my fingers into my hair and pull as hard as I can. Sharp needles pierce my skull, focusing me. My nostrils flutter as I pull air in and out of my lungs sharply.

Once I'm feeling absolutely nothing again, I stride out of the door, shutting it softly behind me. I don't even get to step away before the broken sound of a sob reaches me through the thick wood. It sends me stumbling into the wall, and I drop to my ass. I bring my knees up and rest my arms on them, dropping my head back against the wall. Water fills my eyes as I listen to my little Birdie release her pain alone.

Droplets slither down my cheeks, dripping into my beard.

Oh, baby. It's only going to get worse before it gets better.

Once the Steel Slayers are taken care of, I'll fix this. I'll hand my soul over to her since she owns the fucking thing anyway. I'll drop to my goddamn knees before her and plead my case.

Until then, I have to forge ahead on the path I've chosen.

Her crying fades gradually and the water shuts off. I lumber to my feet and hurry out the door before she catches me.

I'm climbing on my bike when the heat of her stare prickles against my skin. I lift my eyes to our bedroom window and find Birdie staring down at me with a million questions in her broken eyes. Questions I can't answer without her fighting me on the plan.

She'll never understand. I'm going to burn the entire fucking world for her, but I need her breathing while I do it. Only then will I bring her back to me.

Until then, I need to make sure I have everything in place for her to take off when the times comes. I've always taught her that if anything was to ever happen, she was to take whatever was in the safe in our home office and use it to get herself clear. Over the last week, I've been adding everything of importance that I could think of that she'd need when the time comes, because I know my Birdie, and that safe is going to be the first place she heads to when she comes back here to pack up. I keep cash in there already, but I need to make sure she has enough to take care of herself, so I've added more to it. There's a little over two hundred grand, along with a new knife, pistol, and all the paperwork to the trust that Mad Dog and Piston had set up for her, Valkyrie, and Cyanide.

When Birdie is ready to skip town, she'll have everything she needs to ensure she's taken care of until I can get to her and bring her home.

As much as I know I shouldn't, I'm unable to pull away from her sad eyes without giving her something, so I blow her a kiss and tap two fingers to my heart. Birdie places her hand against the glass before letting the curtain fall closed between us.

I fire up the bike and fly out of the driveway, my pipes leaving an angry roar behind me.

The Steel Slayers have been quiet since I left their man at their gate two days ago, but I don't expect it to last, which is why I need to bring my plan to the council and put it to a vote. None of them are going to like it. Birdie and Valkyrie are club princesses. They're loved by our people very much. This won't go over well with any of them, and it's liable to cause tension within the club. But once we take out the Steel Slayers and she's back home, they'll understand why it needed to be done.

I'm only doing what I need to save her.

I'd sent off a text earlier to the council group chat calling for Church. When I storm through the clubhouse doors full of piss and vinegar, they climb to their feet and follow me into the chapel. They scatter throughout the room, dropping into their seats around the table.

Gavel leans back, his heavily bulging arms folded across his chest. There's a soullessness in his eyes that would petrify me if I was anyone else. He's got a bandage across his nose and one of his eyes is black from his latest round in the ring. I caught sight of his hands before he tucked them under his arms, and they were covered in cuts and bruises. Guarantee his torso is also painted gnarly shades of purple, black, and yellow.

"Got a fucking problem, boy?" Gavel growls, his disrespect causing Malice and Cyanide to tense beside me.

"Know you're hurting. Fuck, anyone would be. But watch your tone. You're my grandfather, but I still won't deal with your disrespect. I'm your fucking President, and you'll address me as such in this fucking room. Am I understood, brother?" I bark, putting emphasis on the last word.

Something akin to regret flashes in his eyes, but it's gone before I can be sure.

“Understood, Prez,” he says gruffly.

Tomcat is situated and ready to record the meeting’s minutes, so I get us started. “As you all know, we’ve been dealing with threats from the Steel Slayers. Many of those threats are directed at Birdie, but Valkyrie has also been the target of some of them.”

“They’re going after the club princesses,” Gavel says, his voice gravelly from unuse.

“Do you have any idea why Clink is targeting me, the girls, or the club? According to one of their men who attacked me and Birdie, whatever I have, Clink wants. He won’t stop until he takes everything from me.”

Gavel’s brows furrow as he tries to figure out what Clink’s reasoning could be, but when he shakes his head, I let out a sigh of frustration.

“Fuck. Okay. It was worth a shot. So, that means until we have Clink in our hands, we’re never going to know the full truth.”

“What are we doing about the threats to the girls?” Ducky asks.

“This is the part y’all aren’t going to like. I have a plan in place to protect our girls until we deal with the Steel Slayers, but it’s going to be hard and it’s going to fucking suck.”

I spend the next thirty minutes going over the plan Cyanide and I came up with, and just like him, none of them are happy about it. Manic especially because he knows that when Birdie hurts, Valkyrie hurts, and where Birdie goes, Valkyrie follows. We’re not just losing one club princess when I break Birdie’s heart, we’re losing both. The brother has had a hard-on for Kyrie for as long as I can remember, but he’s never pushed them further than friendship because of their age difference and who she’s related to. Fucking hate that this is going to cause him to lose out on more time

with her.

“Why can’t we just go to war with them instead? It’s not like we don’t have the means,” Savior suggests.

“We can and we will, but the Steel Slayers are too fucking big for it to be easy or over quickly. It’s going to get nasty, and a lot of blood will be fucking shed. If I have to keep my focus on Birdie’s safety, then I’m going to be too distracted to do my job as your President properly. I’d rather hurt her now to keep her breathing and make it up to her after the war is over than lay her six feet under. Telling you right now, I will not fucking survive the latter.”

“But will you be able to survive the former?” Gavel asks quietly, his voice heavy with personal experience.

We’re all quiet as we process what this will mean for our club. One of our own is about to be destroyed at our hands, and it’s going to change everything.

Especially me.

I smack the gavel, calling an end to Church, and stay seated as I watch my brothers file out of the room. Malice and Cyanide stay behind, lending me their support as always. Manic would have stayed, but emotions are riding him hard at the possibility of Valkyrie leaving the club—and essentially him—behind to follow her sister.

I understand because those same emotions are trying to break through the wall I have them locked behind.

“This is gonna change you, Pope,” Malice points out.

“It’s going to change us all,” I reply.

I focus on the picture of our entire club up on the wall. As always, Birdie's snuggled under my arm, beaming at the camera and still refusing to wear her property kutte as I begged of her.

Birdie has a strange aversion to the property claim despite growing up in this world. Or maybe because of it. Who the fuck knows?

I turn to Cyanide. "These are your little sisters."

There's a flash of agony in his eyes before they go blank and he shrugs. "Gotta do what we gotta do. We'll make it up to them."

I fucking hope so because my life ain't much without my little Birdie in it.

Taking a deep breath, I climb to my feet. "Diamond."

"What?" Cyanide asks.

"Diamond will be the best one to use." I glance at Malice. "Bring her in here."

There are no words spoken between me and Cyanide as we wait, both of us lost in the thoughts of everything we know the next few days are going to bring.

When Malice walks through the chapel doors with Diamond, I climb to my feet and nod at him to pull the door shut. From the outside, people might assume we're bringing her in here for a good fucking time with all of us. Appearances can be deceiving, and right now, that's what we're aiming for.

Diamond stands in front of me, curiosity written all over her. I step closer, her eyes widening when I leave no distance between us. Tucking my finger under her chin, I hold her face up so she can read the seriousness on mine.

“There’s going to be a time over the next couple of days that I call for you. When I do, I need you to follow me to the playroom without asking questions. When we get in there, you’re going to dance for me and you’re going to strip. You’re going to grind on me just like you would any other brother you’re dancing for, and when I order you to show me your cunt, you’re going to remove your panties and you’re going to do it.”

“What?” she whispers, her eyes showing concern as they bounce between me, Cyanide, and Malice.

I shake my head. “I can’t and won’t tell you why I’m asking you to do this, but I need you to know I’d never do it without a good fucking reason. Understood?” Her eyes tell me she does. “You have a choice to walk away right now, and I’ll find another girl to do the job, but I’m trusting you, Diamond, because you’re the one who has the most compassion out of them all.”

“Is this going to hurt?” she whispers, and I know she’s not just meaning herself.

“Oh, it’s going to fucking destroy, but I’ve been left with no choice.”

“Okay, I’ll do it.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry I’m putting you in this position.”

Diamond shakes her head sadly. “Don’t be. You’re my President, and she’s your old lady. I know how much you love her, we all do, and I know you wouldn’t be doing this without a good reason. She’s the reason you’re doing this, right?” I can give her this much, so I nod sharply. “You’re protecting her, and I’m honored, and sad, to be chosen to help you do that.” She blows out a breath, staring up at me with guileless eyes. “Can I make a request?”

I don't say anything, giving her the all-clear to ask.

"When this is over, is it okay if I take a break? You know, fr-from it all?"

This is why I chose her, because Diamond is one of the few club whores who adores my Birdie, and this is going to devastate her as much as it's going to wreck Birdie to witness.

"Whatever you need. If you want to get away, you just pick where and I'll pay for it. If you don't want to come back, figure out what you want to do and we'll figure it out."

"You all are my family, but she's going to leave a hole in this club, and I'm just going to be a reminder of that," she states quietly.

"Look, D, let me pick someone else to do this."

She shakes her head, her face resolute. "No. Let me do this. I'm the only one with the acting skills to pull this off thanks to all those years in high school drama club. The other girls . . . it won't have as much impact as it will from me and you, ya know?"

I search her face, looking for anything that would hint she's expecting more out of this, but all I see is the same need to protect Birdie from whatever I'm trying to protect her from.

Diamond turns to seek out Cyanide. "I'm sorry you all are put in this position with whatever's going on. I just want all of you to know," her eyes find Malice to include him too, "you're great men, and the women who get to be loved by you, well, they're in for a pretty great ride. You set the bar high in my book, and I can only hope to find someone, someday, to love me that way."

The three of us aren't stupid. We've heard plenty of goodbye speeches in our lives, and when she ends it, Cyanide and Malice each give her a kiss worthy of that goodbye. I wrap her in my arms tightly, showing my appreciation for what she's about to sacrifice in the only way I'm comfortable with.

War is ugly, and this one is already leaving scars on us all.

"It won't be long and then we all have to pull off the biggest acting gig of our lives. Go have a few drinks. Devil fucking knows we're gonna need them," I order when I pull away.

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Things have been strained in the club lately as the tension mounts between us and the Steel Slayers. Hell, shit's strained at home between me and Birdie, too. All around me, there's so much fucking tension.

As the time for me to shove Birdie out draws closer, the more I'm struggling to keep the darkness from taking me over completely.

We all need some semblance of peace before our worlds are blown apart, so I let everyone know yesterday that there was going to be a family gathering at the clubhouse today. The club whores are welcome to attend, but they were warned that they better be on their best behavior, otherwise, they're out of the club. With everything else going on, we don't have time for any bullshit they might try to pull while old ladies and kids are there.

There's a bit of lightness to Birdie today as she gets ready to head to the clubhouse, and as usual, I'm drawn to that light. I've been unable to keep my distance from her. It's a dick move, stealing these moments without her knowing it's all going to go away soon, but I've never pretended to be a nice guy. This is all I'm going to have left of her when she leaves, so I'm sucking it into my lungs like an addict.

My nostrils twitch, taking in the sweet scent of that fucking fresh blueberry cobbler she's making. I nearly trip over my big ass feet as I follow the aroma to the kitchen. Birdie is bent over the oven, and a groan rumbles up my chest at the way her jean shorts hug that sweet ass of hers. Her cheeks play peek-a-boo with the hem, tempting me to drop to my knees behind her and take a bite.

It's been almost two fucking weeks since I've been buried in my woman's sweet

cunt, and I'm craving it so badly that my hands are shaking with need.

She shuts the oven door with her hip and places the glass dish on top of the stove before leaning over and turning it off.

My long legs eat up the distance between us when she slides over to the counter, and I don't stop until I'm right up against her with my hard dick resting against her ass. I grip the counter on both sides of her and cage her in, burying my face in her neck. Inhaling sharply, I moan as her scent seeps into my lungs.

"Fucking miss you," I groan, nipping at her neck.

She inhales sharply, her fingers curling into fists on the countertop. "I'm not the one who's gone anywhere."

I glide my tongue down her throat, leaving little bites along the way. Removing one of my hands from the counter, I place it on her stomach, my fingers catching the bare skin between her shorts and t-shirt. My thumb drifts in circles before sneaking under the waistband of her shorts.

Her body shudders, her ass pressing back and rubbing against the bulge in my jeans. "What are you doing?"

"Shh," I whisper against her neck, gliding my hand farther inside her shorts and past her underwear. "Let me make you feel good, little mama."

This time, when Birdie shoves her ass back, she does it hard enough to dislodge my hand. Then she twirls around and glares up at me.

"Get this straight, you beast. Your dick and magic fingers aren't something that can make this okay. We still have problems that need solved." She reaches up, grabs a

handful of my beard, and pulls my face closer to hers. “Understand that if I let you touch me, it’s because I want you to. If I let you fuck me, it’s because my pussy is hungry. I love you, Apollonos, but you don’t control me or my body.” Then she smiles and a hungry glint lights up her eyes as she releases my beard. “You’re only lucky that I’ve woken up particularly hungry today.”

She unbuttons her shorts and kicks them away before reaching back to hold onto the counter and hopping up. She places a foot on my shoulder and pushes down with a lifted brow. “Now, be a good boy and get on your knees. You promised to make me feel good. If you do well, I might even let you fuck me.”

Fuck me, why does this side of her get my dick harder than anything else?

I drop to my knees, grab her thighs, and slide her to the edge so her pussy is right in front of my face. Closing my eyes, I bury my nose in her and inhale deeply, the scent of her arousal causing the head of my dick to weep.

“You always smell so fucking delicious,” I rumble before swiping my tongue through her slit.

Birdie lets out a beautiful moan, placing both her legs over my shoulders and crossing her ankles, locking me between her thighs.

As if I wanted to go anywhere else now.

I feast on her, stuffing each quiver, each moan, each cry into my black heart so when I’m without her and alone, I’ll be able to bring them out to remember the time I held such a beautiful soul in my hand.

“God, the way you eat my pussy is divine,” she moans, shoving her fingers into my hair and pulling me closer.

I swirl my tongue around her clit before sucking it into my mouth and biting down. Her fingers tighten in my hair as her body bows and a sharp, splintering cry pours from her lips. That sweet fucking release pours into my mouth and I swallow it down greedily.

Birdie pulls my head away and stares down at my glistening face with hooded eyes. “Such a good boy. Now, get up here and fuck me like the beast you are.”

I bite the inside of her thigh, causing her to cry out in pleasure, and climb to my feet. Releasing my hold on her thigh, I move my hand to her throat and drop my mouth to hers.

We duel, her tongue showing me how fucking angry she is with me and mine accepting it.

Birdie shoves me away again, leaning forward and dropping her hands to unbutton my jeans and shove them down. Then she hooks her legs around me and guides me to her.

“This doesn’t make anything better,” she warns.

“Didn’t think it did, little mama. Just need you,” I admit.

She closes her eyes for a second, causing my fingers to tighten around her throat as I notch my cock against her opening.

Birdie opens them again and gives me a sad smile. Her fingers lift to my cheek. “I know. I need you, too.”

I glide into her, slowly letting out a hiss as her heat engulfs me. My eyes drop to where she stretches around me so prettily.

Fuck, that's beautiful.

My eyes drift back to her flushed face. "I fucking love you, Birdie. Need you to always remember that."

Her brows furrow, my words confusing her. Before she gets a chance to speak, I twist my hips in the way she likes, and her eyes roll back with a loud moan.

For the next little bit, we lose ourselves to each other.

The chaos, the fighting, the threats, and the plan all fade as I bury myself inside her.

There's time to face all of that, but right here, right now, I'm going to be a selfish fuck and steal whatever she lets me have before she hates me.

My eyes seek out Birdie once again to find her chatting with Rox and Valkyrie, a water in her hand. I've not been able to pull my attention from her since we arrived at the clubhouse, something that's not going unnoticed by my brothers. They catch the way she shoots me small smiles and the way I wink at her in return. We are who we were before all this Steel Slayers shit started and it's concerning them.

But fuck . . .

She looks so fucking beautiful when she's smiling and happy. It's been weeks since I've seen it on her, and it's hard to do anything to mess with that.

A body stops beside me, and when I glance over, it's to find Malice staring at me with worry.

"You know," he starts, causing me to tense, "she's never going to believe it if you keep acting like everything is okay between you. She knows you, Pope. She knows

you'd never fucking cheat on her. Especially not when you're looking at her like she's the only damn thing you see."

"She is," I mutter, taking a sip of my beer.

Malice lets out a growl. "This is your stupid plan, so you better fucking making sure she believes it when it goes down, Prez. I'm not okay with hurting her if it's not going to protect her."

He stomps away before I have a chance to respond. Fuck. I know he's right, but all I want to do is steal her away from all this shit. In this moment, it makes me a shitty fucking President, but the thought of hurting her is like knives stabbing into my heart repeatedly.

I can't take her away from it all, but I can take her away from this club for the night, so that's what I do.

Marching over, I grab her hand and pull her with me out of the clubhouse and to my bike.

"Pope, what the hell are you doing?"

"Come with me? Please?"

"To where?"

I open my mouth to tell her anywhere when the doors open and my brothers all file out behind me, some with their partners, some without. They all head to their bikes, each of them squeezing my shoulder and running their hand over Birdie's head as they pass.

My brows lift, trying to figure out what the fuck is going on, when Cyanide steps up beside me with his sister at his side. “We thought we’d all go for a ride. Val is riding with me.”

I swallow hard, realizing it’s not just me who needs time with Birdie before shit goes down. They all do, and I’d be a huge fucking disappointment as a President if I didn’t give it to them. What surprises me most is that Gavel is here, waiting patiently and silently beside his bike. For the first time since we lost Mad Dog, it’s my grandfather staring back at me with understanding and compassion and not the soulless man he’s become since he lost the love of his life.

Peering down at Birdie, I let loose a small smile. “Fancy a ride with our family?”

Worry flashes in her eyes, but she nods, her lips curving. “Always.”

For the next few hours, we ride across Florida, stopping at places where Birdie wants to take pictures.

“Memories,” she says, as if she knows that’s what we’re all going to be left with.

We all joke, we laugh, we fucking ride, but what we really do is love these fucking women with all we have while we can, because come tomorrow, everything fucking changes.

“Forgive me,” I whisper into the wind, ignoring the lone tear that falls down my face.

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I woke up this morning a dead man.

At least, that's the way it feels. I'm empty. There's nothing left alive inside me.

Today is the day I send both our souls to purgatory.

Not wanting to look her in the eye when I know what's coming, I carefully climb from bed and get dressed.

Birdie is worn out from me staying buried inside her all night. I was insatiable because I knew what today would bring. I knew it was the last time I was going to be inside her. I fucking knew it would be the last time I'd get to call her mine. And I motherfucking knew it'd be the last time I'd see love and happiness instead of heartbreak and betrayal.

At the bedroom door, I turn, burning every fucking detail of her sleeping peacefully into my brain.

I bow my head and close my eyes, saying goodbye to the version of me that stands in this room. When I open them, everything around me looks different. It feels different. It's dull, colorless, and devoid of life.

This place is no longer my home. It's only a reminder of the life I'm giving up to protect the one sleeping so contently in our bed.

"Fucking love you, little mama," I whisper before pulling the bedroom door shut quietly behind me.

I don't look around at this place I call home as I aim for the front door, because when I step foot inside it again, it's no longer going to be that.

My home will be long gone from Coral Cay by the time I come back here.

I'm on a warpath when I slam through the clubhouse doors. My mood is blacker than my soul, and people move out of my path as I storm through to my office. Most of the brothers understand, all of them carefully avoiding my eyes for now. But none of them appear as if they're faring any better, and if we don't get our shit together, the whole goddamn ruse will be over before it even fucking begins.

I stay hidden in my office throughout the day, taking care of shit that needs to be dealt with. I check in with suppliers, reach out to clients, and run through the logs Pretty Boy sends me each week for the club businesses.

Birdie has texted me a few times. I've read over them, not feeling shit. I shut off the caring side of myself back at that house, and there's no way in fuck I plan on turning that back on anytime in the near future. When I'm ready for her to come to the clubhouse, I'll reply. Until then, the messages sit as read but not replied to.

The brothers drop in over the next couple hours in the guise of needing this or that from me, but I know they're worried about how shut down I am.

Too bad for them, I can't find it in me to reassure them I'm fine.

I call for church later that day so we can go over our first run at the Steel Slayers once Birdie and Valkyrie are far from Coral Cay. Cypher and Bugsy have agreed to follow them to wherever they head, ensuring they make it there safely. I warn the brothers that they all need to get their shit together because one look at them and anyone can tell they're going to do something tonight they don't really want to do. Their acting skills better be on fucking par when Birdie rolls through this clubhouse later.

They stare at me as if they don't know this stranger in front of them, and I suppose none of them do. I've always said Birdie was the only light left inside me. They were used to seeing that, but this is who I am now—a man without a soul.

By the time I call an end to church and we file out of the chapel, they're all back to their normal selves.

For the most part.

As night falls, I grab my phone from my pocket and pull up the last message Birdie sent me an hour ago.

LITTLE MAMA

If you don't answer me, I'm showing up at the damn club and having it out.

I hit the reply button and type out a response.

POPE

So come.

I shove it back into my pocket after Birdie sends me a reply that she'd be here in twenty, and I search through the common room until I find the club where I'm looking for.

"Diamond," I bark. Her wheat-colored hair swishes as she swings her head around. I crook a finger. "Here, now."

When she's standing in front of me, I close the distance between us and wrap my fingers in her hair. I pull her head back until she's staring up at me and I see the

acknowledgment in her eyes that this is it. She closes them for a quick second, and when she opens them again, she's in her role. She's no longer Birdie's friend but a club girl doing what her President is asking of her.

Leaning down and ignoring the shocked whispers from a few club members, I bury my nose in her neck.

"Twenty minutes," I warn her, my voice low enough that it only reaches her ears.

She nods, lifting her hands to lock at my waist for appearances, and when the shudder travels over my body, it's not from desire, as others looking on would assume.

When I pull away, I wink at her with a smirk.

She shakes her head, tossing her hair with a giggle. "You're bad, Pope."

Diamond walks away, heading back to the other club whores and leaning in with laughter as if she's excited about what's happening.

I'm good about listening to my gut, and I'm secure in the knowledge that she's only playing her role. I saw the pain in her eyes when she realized what we were going to have to do.

I'm tossing drinks down my throat when I spot the time above the bar.

Fucking fuck. It's time.

Letting out a whistle, I plaster a fun, playful smirk on my face. "Let's take this party to the playroom, my brothers. It's time I let loose."

The words have my throat tightening, but you wouldn't know it from the outside. I

didn't take the drama classes that Diamond has, but I've had a lot of fucking practice during the first fourteen years of my life pretending to be someone I'm not to have the ability to pull this shit off.

"Diamond, babe, come," I order.

I let my eyes roll over her as she struts up to me, feigning the desire I'm supposed to be feeling. She's smiling as if she's excited about what's going to happen, but the closer she gets, I can tell how stiff it is.

She slides her hand into mine, and I follow Manic, Cyanide, and the majority of the council into the playroom. There are angry, heated stares aimed at my back, but no one will speak a word against me because of my position.

I lift a brow at Spunky. "Well, what are you waiting for? Turn some goddamn music on and let's fucking party."

Her eyes twinkle. "Do I finally get a taste of you, Pope?"

Fuck no.

I don't say that, though. Instead, I smirk and roll my eyes over her. "Diamond gets that pleasure tonight." I reach out and run my finger down her cheek. "Maybe later, though, yeah?"

Diamond snuggles closer, getting further into her role and wrapping her arm around me. "Don't worry. I'll be sure to brag about how big his cock is so you can be jealous."

"Bitch," Spunky breathes, envy written all over her face.

“Music,” I snap, my skin itching to get this over with.

Vortex sends me a text letting me know that Birdie and Valkyrie are at the gates. I told him earlier that I needed him to not let them in straight away as he normally would so we could sell this a bit harder. I make eye contact with each brother in this room to let them know this is it. Game faces slide into place and subtle nods are aimed my way.

I chug a bottle of Devil’s Mark until it’s nearly empty then text Vortex back to let them in.

“Ready?” I whisper, turning to look down at Diamond.

“No, but we’re doing this.”

I drop onto the couch, widen my legs, and let my eyes drop into a hooded stare. “Dance for me, babe. Show me what those hips do,” I order loud enough for the others not in on the plan to hear.

Nothing.

I feel absolutely fucking nothing.

Reaching up, I grab hold of her hips and bring her closer, pretending I’m enjoying this. “Grind that pussy on me.”

Birdie will know if I’m not showing any interest, so for a few seconds, I put her in Diamond’s place. The quick mind swap does the trick and my cock moves behind my jeans as I picture it being my woman climbing on top of me.

Diamond places both knees on the couch until she’s hovering over me, her hips

twisting and rolling in time with the song. Her hands run over her body as she dances, cupping her bare tits and rolling her nipples between her fingers.

I groan as I picture Birdie doing the same thing.

There's commotion coming from outside the playroom, and I know she's just found out that I'm in here, so I fall deeper into my new persona and stare up at Diamond as if I'm dying of thirst and just found my oasis.

From the corner of my eye, I see Birdie and Valkyrie shove their way through the wall of people trying to keep them out.

"Show me that pussy," I order, steadily keeping my eyes away from the devastation I can feel coming from that side of the room.

I lift my hands to anchor her hips, helping guide her to a standing position.

Diamond's eyes turn glassy, feeling the same thing I am, but she slides off my lap in a sensual move and starts to push her panties over her hips. Birdie orders her to stop, and I see in her eyes that Diamond wants to listen, but she just smirks and continues lowering them.

Birdie stops next to us, her betrayed eyes bouncing back and forth between us. "Never, in all the years I've known you, did I think you would ever be the one to rip my heart to shreds. I gave you one boundary, and you swore, fucking swore, to me that you would never break it. You knew how important it was. Despite what you obviously think, I'm not stupid, Pope. The moment you started changing, I knew something was going on. I begged you to talk to me. I deserved for you to talk to me. So, I know that all of this," she pauses, waving her hand around, "is merely a show you put on for me. But it doesn't even matter because even with that being the truth, you betrayed me. You didn't trust me enough to handle whatever it is that's going on.

There was one thing that I warned you we'd never come back from, and that was touching another woman in the manner that you just have. You destroyed us, Pope. You and only you. You took this beautiful love we had and you turned it to ash, and I hope it leaves a bitter taste in your mouth for the rest of your life."

I shrug, acting as if her words don't shred me to pieces. "It's club life, little mama."

"Bullshit," she screams, her voice cracking from the pain building inside her. "It's you being a goddamn coward. Yeah, this is club life, but it's not our life."

"Birdie," Valkyrie murmurs, grasping her arm gently, "it's not worth it."

There's a tone in her voice that has me wondering if she's speaking on something more, but I'm so fucking empty that I don't have it in me to figure it out.

Birdie carefully slides her arm from her sister's hold and turns to face the rest of the room. "You all were my family." She finds Cyanide. "Especially you. You're my big brother. You're supposed to protect me from this pain," she sobs.

Cyanide shrugs. "I love you, B, but this club is my life and you're not his old lady. You refused that claim each time he tried to make it."

There's something about his words that make her pause. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes before opening them again.

And when I see the light no longer there, I know we all have a special place in hell waiting for us.

"I thought this club was built on loyalty. I thought this club meant family. For you all to turn on me like this because I don't wear that old lady title shows me that everything I thought about this club and all of you is absolute bullshit. I loved every

single person in this club, and I would've happily given my life for any of you, but right now, I'd happily watch you burn. Congratulations, Saint's Outlaws, you're all fucking dead to me. Whatever's going on, I hope it's worth it."

Birdie turns to leave, not even bothering to address Diamond, which tells me just how deep she's cut because my Birdie would have been the first to put a broad in her place. Valkyrie halts her by grabbing her hand, but Birdie doesn't turn back around. She continues to face the wall of members standing by the door, and from the way some of them flinch, she's not hiding the fact we've destroyed her.

Valkyrie pins us with eyes shooting murderous intent. "You're all fucking stupid. I refuse to be associated with people who could hurt someone they claim to love so easily." She finds Manic, notes the girl on his lap, and smirks. "You're all the fucking same, and right now, not worth much. Most of you watched the hell we went through when our dad pulled this kind of shit. You knew why loyalty was always so big to us. Especially you, Cyanide," she sneers. "You can erase us from the club and your lives because you'll never see us step foot in here again."

The girls walk out with their heads held high.

Silence fills the room as we all process what we just did.

A loud sob breaks from Diamond, but I can't move. Can't really find it in me to comfort her despite what she just did for me and our club. There's a bit of relief when Malice wraps her in his arms.

Vortex sends me a text letting me know the girls are off club property, and I nod.

There. It's done. She's safe. She's safe because she no longer belongs to me or the club.

Pain fights its way in, but I viciously shove it out. “Get me a bottle,” I bark.

Someone shoves it into my hand, and I bring it to my mouth. It burns going down, but I keep going, needing something to erase the memory of the expression on Birdie’s face when she heard me order Diamond to show me her pussy. Needing something to erase the agony in her words when she laid herself out in front of us and showed us her damage.

My brothers clear the club whores out of the room until I’m left with only them at my side.

I stumble to my feet, needing to feel something. Needing something to anchor me and tell me I did the right thing. “Hit me,” I roar.

No one moves. They’re all staring at me in concern as they watch me lose what little sanity I have left.

Throwing the bottle against the wall, I watch it shatter and the amber liquid trail down the paint. “I said someone fucking hit me,” I scream, grabbing my hair and pulling.

No sooner do I get the last word out, Manic steps in front of me with a malicious smile and swings.

“Gladly,” he snarls, needing this as much as I do.

Before I know it, we’re all brawling against each other, violence being the only way we know to express the pain we’re feeling.

Tomorrow dawns a new day.

A new chapter of a new story.

One of a man who's about to set the goddamn world on fire to protect the woman he loves.

Until then, brother against brother, we're going to fight out our pain.

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There was a time when I could say with absolute certainty that Apollonos would never hurt or betray me—something I couldn't even say about my own blood.

Until the Steel Slayers interrupted our lives, and he started changing.

The change from Apollonos to Pope happened so fast, it left me reeling.

Despite how it may look to others, I'm not a stupid person. I know there must have been a reason for him to turn against me so drastically.

I begged him to talk to me about it until I was blue in the face only to be left crying in a shower stall as he walked away.

Then we had the family gathering at the clubhouse yesterday, and I thought things were getting better. I thought whatever was bothering him was finally taken care of because we were the couple we were before the Steel Slayers MC started their shit with Pope.

Last night, there was so much intensity between us, I felt like he was trying to make up for the way he'd been treating me.

But then I woke up alone and there was just this feeling inside me. One that left me empty because that feeling . . . it was trying to tell me that my life was about to veer off course. It was a warning that I was about to learn something about my man that would change me to the core.

It was terrifying, so I started texting Apollonos. The longer he went without replying,

the more that warning grew until it expanded so much that my lungs were closing down on me.

Then it came—that text that sounded as if it was taunting me.

I should have known from the seriousness of it that what was waiting for me on the other end would obliterate the life I knew.

The love I had for my beautiful beast blinded me to how vicious he could be when he assumed he was doing the right thing.

Other signs were glaring around me when I made the trip to the clubhouse. The way the prospect manning the gate looked at me without expression. The way he refused to automatically let me in. The signs were in the way everyone in the club was staring at me with mixed expressions. Anger, sadness, pity, sorrow—they were all emotions I couldn't understand until Dimples delightfully pointed me in the direction of where I could find Pope.

As soon as the word 'playroom' came out of her mouth, a sour taste built at the back of my throat.

There's no fucking way, I told myself, so sure he'd never betray me.

Then pieces from the last few weeks floated through my mind. Pope pulling away, the way we hadn't had sex for two weeks until yesterday, the way some people avoided my eyes when I was near, the way the club girls would giggle whenever they saw me, but more prominently, the way Diamond went out of her way to avoid me. They all glide together, creating a storyline that's threatening to break me into so many tiny fragments, I'll be lucky to find all the pieces.

And then Gavel was there in front of me, telling me no good was going to come of

me going back to the playroom, pleading with me to just turn around and walk out. Out of love for him and my grandfather, I almost listened.

Almost.

I've never really been one who ran from confrontation, though.

If Apollonos was going to be so dumb as to betray our love, he'd need to have the guts to face me head-on as he did it.

Sometimes, though, we're so sure we're stronger than we really are.

A part of me hurt when I walked into that playroom and saw Diamond grinding her pussy against him, but an even bigger part withered away when he ordered her to remove her underwear and show him her pussy.

That wasn't the man I've been in love with since I met him.

That man, the one letting another woman grind on him, the one begging to see another woman naked, that was a stranger. It was a man I no longer knew because my Apollonos . . . he wouldn't do this to me, no matter how much it would save my life. My Apollonos knew why loyalty was such a big deal for me. My Pope , however, would have no compunction doing whatever he felt was necessary no matter how many casualties were left in his wake.

Loving both sides of him was my mission in life. I only wish I would have known that my mission would leave me broken when he chose to no longer honor our bond.

If it wasn't for Valkyrie, I'm not sure I'd have walked out of that clubhouse. She's always been there, refusing to let me fall, and even though I know she's hurting from what just happened, she's still holding me together.

I wasn't the only one who lost people in that room tonight, and knowing she's feeling the pain of it has me considering how badly I want to light a match and watch it all fucking burn.

If only it was that easy for me to hurt the people I love.

Val and I are able to get both of our places packed up fairly easy within a couple hours, and in the early morning light, we steal out of Coral Cay with no intentions of ever coming back.

Life never goes the way we plan, though.

Especially when each stick of plastic pops up with a little blue positive sign.

Seven Years Later

Our battle with the Steel Slayers was as bloody as I'd expected it to be. With each good man we lost, a tally was scored upon my soul. Each death weighed heavily on my shoulders as we fought a long two-year battle with the biggest rival club in the States.

By the time the President of the Steel Slayers Mother Chapter came to us to negotiate a treaty with the Coral Cay chapter of the Saint's Outlaws, we were all weary and worn out.

The holes left in our club were fucking huge, and I had no idea how the hell I was supposed to fill them. Shit changed after Birdie and Valkyrie left. The bond with my brothers was still as tight, but we spent months on the outs, snarling and snapping at each other. It wasn't until our lack of focus almost got Manic killed that we started repairing our bond.

I missed Birdie so fucking much and rarely slept most nights. The nights I did were with the aid of a bottle of bourbon and sometimes a pair of warm legs to slide between.

When Birdie and Valkyrie left, Cypher and Bugsy were able to follow them through a few states. But when they hit the Kentucky line, the girls managed to give them the slip. It wasn't until five years ago that Cypher was able to get a bead on them. Once I had a location, I was on my way. One way or another, Birdie was coming home with me. I'd spent too many goddamn years without her at my side, and I didn't think I could stomach another night in a cold bed.

When I made it to the address Cypher gave me, I stayed back, needing to get a feel for what I'd be walking into.

Except the heart that was slowly beginning to beat again stopped when her front door opened and two little kids came running outside with a laugh. They looked so much like my Birdie, there was never a doubt whose children they were. They looked to be the same age, one boy and one girl, so I assumed they were twins. The little girl had bright copper hair just like her mama, and the boy had a shaggy mess of brown hair. Hope began to beat under my skin again as the thought that they may be mine filled my head, until moments later, when I got my first look at Birdie in over two fucking years. She was tucked under the arm of another man with a head of brown hair. The sun caught the rings on their fingers and the last little bit of Apollonos fell aside.

She was married with two kids, and the smile on her face as she watched them indicated how happy she was.

I fought the war against the Steel Slayers and came out the winner, but as I sat there, staring at the life she'd found without me, I realized I didn't win anything.

I'd lost it all.

I don't remember how long I sat there watching them, a happy family that should have been mine, but however long it was, it drew Birdie and her husband's attention. She stared at me, her face betraying how broken she felt just seeing me. Her expression told me just how much pain she still carried from my betrayal. It was a look that explained why our futures were going to be a different version from the one we'd envisioned together.

I tried so hard to convey how sorry I was for how everything went down, and when she gave me a small sad smile, I knew she'd read it. So, when her husband wrapped his arm around her and sent me a smirk above her head, I knew it was time to get out of there before I killed him and took away her happiness again.

When I got back to the clubhouse, I'd grabbed a bottle and a club whore, and for the first time since I'd met Birdie, I buried myself inside another woman.

The pleasure was weak and fleeting, but for just a few moments, I felt something other than the fucking emptiness that's followed me since I shoved Birdie out of my life.

I'm pulled from my thoughts when the body beside me begins to stir.

"You can go," I growl, climbing from the bed and grabbing the trash can from the floor so I can make sure the used condoms go down the toilet.

Laura is one of the new dancers at The Body Shop, and after a few drinks, she was able to talk her way into my bed at the clubhouse. I've only fucked a few club whores since the day I came back from seeing Birdie. Never Dimples or Spunky, much to their dismay. Normally, I pick up a piece of ass from outside the club though, hating the drama that comes along with fucking the girls in the club.

"What? Really?"

"Look, babe, I don't do this. I don't do the post-coital bullshit, I don't do pillow talk, I don't do fucking any of it. I fuck and then I send you on your way. I warned you of that last night before you decided to follow me back here. You made your choice. If you expected anything else, that's a 'you' problem. I want to fucking shower and wash you from my skin, so get your shit and get gone."

"Wow. You really are the heartless asshole they say you are."

"Why are you still here?" I ask, lifting a brow and waving toward the door. "Go."

She grumbles as she gets dressed, but she's slamming my bedroom door seconds later. Only then do I stride to the bathroom.

I stand in the shower, letting the scalding water rain down over my body and wash away the feel of another woman's touch from me. It'll never fucking go away. My body is as tainted as my goddamn soul.

My skin is red and pruned by the time I shut off the cold water and climb out to dry off.

I'm sliding my kutte over my shoulders when someone knocks on my door.

I swing it open with a snarl, but when I get a good look at Cyanide's ashen face, I straighten. "What the hell is going on?"

"I-I-It's B-B-Birdie," he gasps.

The stammered words register, sending terror straight into my dead heart.

My hand snaps out and wraps around his throat before I realize what I'm doing, and I shove him against the wall, staring him down with deadly eyes. "Fucking Birdie what?"

He tries to push me away, but I only tighten my grip.

"She's at the gate, beat to hell," he croaks, my hold on him making it hard to speak.

Thump.

Thump. Thump.

After being silent for so fucking long, my heart slowly makes moves in my chest.