



Psycho Reign (Sons of Khaos #3)

Author: *N.O. One*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: This girl will be the death of me.

Between club business and my Cherry's need to make my life difficult, the dangers are real.

Bodies from the morgue are still going missing, and the drug problem in our town is out of control.

All of that takes the back seat as our world comes crashing down on us, destroying the hope we've been building.

With shattered hope comes war and destruction.

When they come for us, we push back, always. And when we push back, death follows.

Problem is, how can we kill someone we can't find?

We hunt, we avenge and, in the end, we reign.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter One

Mackenzie

“I need you...” My words trail off, broken by a sob that wrecks my heart.

“I’m on my way, babe.” The jangle of keys sounds through the phone, followed by rustling and a door closing.

“Thank you.” I sniff, trying to push down the never ending tears.

“But, babe, I need to know what I’m walking into here. Stay on the phone with me while I drive. What happened?” The engine of Spencer’s car rumbles to life, and there’s more shuffling as he places his cell in the holder—at least, that’s what I’m assuming. It’s something I’ve seen him do plenty of times before when I’ve been in the car with him. His tone is calm and soothing, and once again, I’m so grateful to have him as my best friend.

The words are stuck in my throat and I want to believe this is all a horrible nightmare, that I didn’t read the letter stating Aleko is not the father of my baby. That I didn’t throw those words at him full of spite and hatred. That I don’t need to leave this place for all our sanities.

Spencer stays silent as I quietly sob for I don’t know how long, doing what I can to contain the overwhelming heaviness spreading through my limbs.

“I...It...” I take a deep, steadying breath, one stuttered from all the crying, but now

that I'm talking to Spencer, it's a little easier. "The baby isn't Aleko's." Oh God, just saying the words has tears streaming down my cheeks once more. My whole face feels almost numb from the emotion.

"Oh, sweetheart. Did you tell him?"

"More like screamed it at him right before he left for New York without saying goodbye a couple of hours ago. Oh, then he locked me in my room." I huff a laugh through my tears, even though this isn't the slightest bit funny.

"He what?"

"Yup. So I need to leave. We're staging a break-out." I'm aware my decision is rash, but I feel like this is for the best. Aleko and I raced forward with this whole relationship thing with the speed of light. I mean, what do we really know about each other?

Spencer laugh-snorts down the phone. "Of course we are. Your man's cleaning crew did a great job at freshening the cabin up after your last stay, so we'll go there. You gonna meet me by the gates or am I coming in? What's the plan? Because I know you have one. When we're settled is when we'll discuss what a bitch move it was to tell him like that, but we'll get you outta there first."

Whatever I did to be blessed with a best friend like this, I'd do it again a thousand times over. He doesn't question my madness—and make no mistake, that's what this is—he just blindly supports me in everything. I can only hope that, one day, I can do the same thing for him. Well, not exactly the same things because we've done some fucked up shit over the last few months, but if that's what he needs, I'll be there.

"I'm still locked in. Bash is just outside the door." I take a moment to breathe, because my body is still on a comedown from sobbing so hard, my cheeks streaked

with drying tears and my vision a little blurry. “Grab Mom on your way in, bring her to my room. They should keep it unlocked if you’re here. Then we’ll go from there.” I don’t actually have a fully formed plan yet, but I’m working on it. All I know is that I have to leave. I need the time to get my head on straight and being surrounded by all the things has just been another excuse to pretend the real world doesn’t exist.

“Okay, I’m coming down the road to the compound now.” The tick-tick of his turn signal is calming, and suddenly, I don’t feel such despair at my situation, knowing he’s so close. “Waving to the guys in the garages...avoiding the motorcycles...pulling up out front. I’m gonna hang up, babe. Be with you in two shakes.”

The line goes dead and I breathe a stuttered sigh of relief before finding a bag to stuff some underwear into. The prez’s wife, Vanessa, gave me a shitload of maternity clothes, mostly dresses and sweats, so I put that to the side to take with me too. It’s difficult one-handed, with the other clinging onto my crutch, but it’s doable, and with my meager possessions, it doesn’t take long.

Muffled voices just outside the door make my heart race in anticipation just before the click of the lock sounds and it opens. In rushes Spencer, his arms held out for me before he crushes me inside them.

It’s like the floodgates open all over again and I squeeze him right back as tears spring free once more.

I can sense other bodies in the room, so I lift my head to find Mom standing there, eyes wide, confusion and sorrow written all over her face. With one last squeeze around Spence’s waist, I hobble on my crutch toward my mom, allowing her to wrap me in her embrace next. I can’t control the sobs even a little, and I don’t know how long we stay there. At some point, Spence stands beside us and holds us both.

Eventually, I take yet another deep breath and pull away, moving to sit on the edge of the bed. The pounding in my head is so thick it's making my eyes heavy, or that could just be all the tears.

"Darlin', what's goin' on?" My mom's soft, soothing Southern drawl is everything I've wanted to hear for the last several years, and now that I have it, I still don't feel complete.

I look to Spencer because saying the words out loud again is too difficult. He responds with a wink and a light smile, letting me know he's got this.

"The baby isn't Aleko's. They've had a fight. She wants to move into my cabin. I think those are the main points you need for now."

Mom's eyes widen, brimming with unshed tears as she looks at me, but I think my own tears are beginning to dry up. My body just can't cope with any more.

"Oh, darlin'. I'm so sorry. But do you think leaving is the best idea?"

All this talk is making me a little jittery, because if any of the brothers find out what I'm planning, they'll put a stop to it straight away. Luckily, it seems as though the prospect, Bash, has disappeared from his post outside my room.

"I have to, Mom. Being here is too much. I'm a prisoner all over again. I promised myself I wouldn't allow that to happen after...Jake." Determination begins to take hold and I'm more certain than ever that this is what I need to do.

This baby isn't Aleko's baby. I would never expect him to want to live with me the way we have been. His obsession with me seemed to grow with the news of my pregnancy, and I don't want him to feel pressured in any way to stand by me through this.

There are a thousand reasons running through my brain as to why I shouldn't leave, but there are almost as many for why I should.

He locked me in this room like a prisoner.

Me leaving gives him the chance to let me go, because if I'm here, he'll feel obligated.

The baby isn't his.

I've done and said unforgivable things.

It's my fault that Grinder is still in the hospital.

The list goes on and on...and on and on...

Yes, I'm mid pity-party for one.

I'm such a bitch.

"I really like it here. The people are wonderful, so welcoming, it's like a little community. I honestly don't know how I'd fare in the outside world anymore." My mom's head lowers a little. "Especially after, you know, the incident with the vice president."

Okay, so Mom has every right to be holding her own pity party too, but I'm kinda proud of her for being so open about it. We all kind of swept it under the rug a little to avoid triggering her, so I'm thinking this is progress. I sigh. The progress is because of her environment and all the time she's been spending with Sabrina. Albeit silent time.

“I understand, Mom. I—”

“Sweet girl of mine, there is nothing for you to understand. This is my issue. I’m just talking through my worries. When do we leave? Should I pack a bag?” I’m not sure when we all sat down, but mom now stands, stepping forward from the armchair, and bends to kiss my cheek. “Just let me know the plan, darlin’. Okay?”

Tears slide freely down my cheeks once more, but this time, it has nothing to do with me and everything to do with my brave and courageous mom.

After everything she’s been through...

There’s a part of me that thinks I’m making a mistake, but I’m pushing that deep down and trying desperately to replace it with the common sense I know I need. Following my damn heart is not an option, but neither is listening to reason. My mind is already made up.

Nodding to my mom, I smile. “I still have a stash of cash beneath the floorboards at Spence’s cabin. So if we need anything new, I can buy it, but pack a small bag of essentials. We need to keep this between the three of us for now though, so try not to let Sabrina see what you’re doing. We’ll have to wait for an opportunity to leave, so you have time to be selective.”

“You got it, darlin’.” Mom nods her head knowingly before leaving the room.

Spence turns in his chair to look at me sitting on the edge of my bed, and he smirks. “Never a dull day in the life of Mackenzie Wilson, ey?”

The visit from Spence turned into an all-day affair because Bash perched himself outside my door like a damn guard dog, making me feel akin to an evil villain who’d had their plans foiled. So, we ate in my room, watched some K-drama on TV, then

settled down for a ‘sleepover.’ One of the Khaos Khunts, Violet, dropped by with an air-mattress and some bedding for Spence, but that’s still piled in the corner of the room because the bed is big enough for us both. Bash disappeared a few minutes at a time for a few trips to the bathroom or for food, but it wasn’t until another of the Khunts, Eden, came to offer him a beer and a blow-job that we really had our opening.

When Spence and I discussed my plan over lunch, I hadn’t considered that Bash would still feel the need to babysit me tonight seeing as Spencer is here, so Eden turning up and dragging him, no doubt, to her room on the other side of the building is a blessing.

I send Mom the thumbs up text that we decided earlier would be our signal, and my gut churns with a mixture of guilt and self righteousness.

There’s a gentle knock on my door before it opens and Mom peeks her head through the gap.

“Are we ready for my second break out?” She grins, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. It’s clear that she’s struggling with something, but maybe the money I have saved will pay for some help—not the kind where she ends up locked up again, more like a weekly visit to a therapist or something. She places her bag beside mine, against the wall by the door.

“We are. Spence is gonna head out first and will text me if it’s all clear before he gets the car started. As soon as we get his text, we go. Straight across the hall, down the stairs, through the lobby and out the front door.” My head still feels foggy from all the crying earlier today, but it’s nothing a little sleep won’t cure. I mirror Mom’s grin, putting on my happy face. The one that says I’m worry-free, not a care in the world, and it’s all total bullshit.

Again, that small part of me that thinks this is a bad idea tells me I'm being impulsive, but I tamp it down because I can't—and won't—change my mind now.

"It's on like Donkey Kong." Spence winks and pokes his head through the doorway, looking to either side of the doorway for any signs of people. Without glancing back, he bends to pick up our bags from the floor and slides through the gap, then he's gone.

"You sure you want to do this, darlin'?" Mom sits beside me on the edge of the bed and lays an arm across my shoulders.

No.

"Yeah." Standing, I grip my crutch and pick up my cell from the bedside table just as it begins vibrating. The screen goes blank before I can fully read Spence's message because the damn battery died, but I got the gist.

We're good to go.

It's raining heavily when Mom and I eventually get outside. The cold night air bites at my skin, but we head straight for Spencer's car near the exit. The garages are closed down for business, seeing as it's two in the morning, and we have been lucky enough to not come across anyone yet. Mom grips onto my elbow as we move faster, and I open the back door for her before getting into the passenger side.

"This what you really wanna do?" Spence's hands are poised to start the car and he raises both brows as he looks at me.

Again, no. But it's what I have to do.

I nod, incapable of voicing what I want because of how unsure I am.

“Then let’s go, ladies.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter Two

Aleko

“D ayum!” Bear whistles as he rotates his head one way then the other, taking in all the opulence mafia money has to offer. “I feel underdressed.”

Bear and I are flanked by Shade and Crow as we make our way down the golden-hued halls of the Mancini Hotel. Not just any location, either. This is the home base, the Manhattan headquarters where all the shady shit happens in the comfort of leather chairs and cherry oak conference tables.

“It’s not just a feeling, Brother.” Just as I speak, some pearl-clutching blonde who spends more money on her hair than we do on our bikes looks us up and down with a scowl until she reaches our faces and does a double take. The man walking her out, his palm at the small of her back, doesn’t even give us the time of day as he barks orders over his phone. I don’t miss the way her gaze follows us, and this time, it has nothing to do with fear and everything to do with her pussy needing a man who actually pays attention to her.

Some say my obsession with Cherry is unhealthy, I say not being utterly consumed by the one person you love more than life should be criminal. Sure, somewhere in there there’s a healthy middle ground, but I’ve never done anything half-assed and I ain’t gonna start now.

Except, isn’t that what I did last night? Leaving Mackenzie in our suite after she dropped the bomb on me? Sure, it was time for me to hit the road, Prez’s orders, but

instead of trying to make things right, I walked away. I gave her the space she begged for with a crater sized hole in my chest and the weight of the world on my shoulders. For the first time, I chose club business over my girl and let my anger and disappointment over her cruel words decide my next move.

That's on me and I will fix it when I get back. I will grovel, but she'll also have a painful reminder on her ass that words matter and tone is everything.

"It's not even your fucking baby."

"Does Mancini know we're coming or is this a surprise visit?" I scoff at Shade's question because no-fucking-body surprises the New York City Don on his own turf, but I'm also thankful his words pull me out of the spiral the echo of her words might send me into.

"Nah, I ain't got a death wish, man. I texted him last night when we got to the clubhouse. Used a card he gave me years ago that I've kept safe, knowing one day that I'd need to cash in a favor." I shrug because we all know that day is today. Twirling the sucker in my hand, I push it back between my lips and crunch, the sweet cherry taste filling my senses.

"Well, guess we'll find out how much pull this guy has soon enough." Looking over my shoulder, I wink at Crow, trying to reassure him.

"Don't worry, Brother. You don't become this guy without the resources to get shit done." And he definitely gets shit done, that's for fucking sure.

"We'll let you take the lead on this then, Psycho. Good thing Sledge and Grinder aren't here. Those crazy bastards probably would've gotten us killed." We all chuckle at Crow's words. Fucker ain't wrong.

“Welcome to Mancini Hotels, how can I be of help?”

Stepping up to the counter, I lean in and read the nametag on the middle-aged woman at the front desk. Bear stands just a couple of feet to my right while Crow and Shade have a silent contest on who’s gonna bag the chick first. Lopsided grins and all.

To the employee’s credit, she keeps her eyes on me and stays professional every second of our interaction. Holy shit, it’s not easy resisting the charms of Shade, but Crow? I’m guessing this woman loves her job more than orgasms.

Poor thing.

One thing is for damn sure, Mancini runs a tight fucking ship.

“We have a meeting with—” My answer is cut off by the low, deadly voice of the Don himself.

“Thank you, Shann, I’ll take care of these gentlemen.”

We all scoff. Gentlemen? Shit, there ain’t nothin’ gentle about any of us. Well, except maybe Bear. He’s more teddy than grizzly and definitely a woman’s winning choice when alone in the woods.

“Aleko Kastellanos. To what do I owe this pleasure?” We shake hands, sizing each other up like men in our positions tend to do. When danger seeks us out, every encounter is a possible threat and shaking a man’s hand tells us which instinct to rely on if shit goes south. Fight or flight.

“Well, let’s just say the New Jersey garbage has been thrown into our backyard.” After shaking hands with my brothers, Marco turns, whispers something quickly into another man’s ear, then nods for us to follow.

“Sup, man?” Fucking Crow sizing up the mafia henchman. Christ, I’m not sure even he could survive that battle. Obviously, the guy doesn’t answer, just follows him with a gaze so hard it could turn a lesser man to stone.

The whole way up, we don’t talk. Not in the hall, not in the elevator, not as we head down the private quarters of his office floor. It’s quiet up here. The piano tunes overhead aren’t invasive, just a little music to guide you to your final destination.

Once in his office, big enough to fit our fucking bar room, Mancini walks to his desk. Instead of sitting in his huge leather chair, he leans his ass against the massive desk, fingers curling around the edge and legs crossed at the ankle. Completely in control.

To the side, the emotionless brute force of his bodyguard stands motionless against the wall, his piece peeking out from inside his wool peacoat.

To the untrained eye, Mancini has the posture of someone completely at ease. He’s not. It doesn’t escape me that, without even moving his eyes, he seems to know every move we make. Scary motherfucker, that’s for sure. Calculating...without a fucking doubt.

“The Irish?” Straight to the heart of the problem.

“Yeah. Those fuckers seem to think the south is the new Atlantic City.” No sooner than the words are out of my mouth, Shade growls. Legit sounds like a lion.

“Hmm, the Irish think everywhere is Atlantic City. But what does that have to do with me?” Cocking his head to the side, he waits for my request because, let’s face it, people come to Marco Mancini when they need something. Money, help, advice.

My gaze catches on the framed photo at the corner of his desk. It’s not facing us, it’s angled toward the man who usually sits in the big ass chair.

The woman in the black and white picture is holding what seems to be a newborn, their faces only a couple of inches apart as the woman, Mancini's wife, I'm guessing, seems to be soaking up the feeling of newly found motherhood.

Is that what happiness looks like? How can such a tiny thing bring such huge feelings?

In this brief moment, I learn the most important lesson of my life. That baby is the testament of pure love, the result of math gone wrong when one plus one equals three. The pain I felt when Mackenzie threw those fucking words at me is born from the knowledge that our math didn't go wrong.

Yet...I don't fucking care. We'll have others after this and the baby inside her will still be mine and hers. Ours, always. Those motherfuckers aren't taking anything else away from my Cherry.

But right now, that picture is going to help get what I want.

"That your wife and kid?" It's a stupid question, but hey, could be his sister, right?

Mancini doesn't answer right away. His stare turns to steel as his gray eyes bore into me like he's trying to assess if I'm a threat to his family. I have no doubts he'd kill me in a fucking nanosecond if he believed it to be true.

"My girl is pregnant, about sixteen weeks along, now." I can't help the uptick at the corners of my mouth at the mention of my Cherry Pie and I don't miss the slight softening of Mancini's stance, the way his muscles relax just a tiny bit.

"Congratulations," is all he says, waiting for me to make my pitch. The cock of his head to the right tells me he's listening.

“Thanks. Problem is, these fuckers took my girl. My pregnant girlfriend. Tied her up, shot her.” Okay, that was her being a fucking savior and getting in the way of a bullet meant for someone else but tom-ayto, tom-ahto. “Then they came to our strip club, beat and raped our employees, then threatened the entire fucking town if we didn’t let things go. Meaning, we don’t interfere with whatever the fuck they’re trying to do.” Pausing to see if Mancini is biting, I startle at the sound of Shade’s voice.

“We think it has to do with pills. College kids keep overdosing on them.” I nod at my brother’s words, my eyes never leaving the Don’s face.

“Hmm...” The boss of Manhattan rises to his full height, walking to his corner bar before pouring five glasses of...water? Wasn’t expecting that. Surely, these rich types drink the finest whiskies at all hours of the day, right?

Slowly, he brings the glass to his lips and drinks, his Adams’s apple bobbing with every swallow. This is a power play, I know it all too well from living with my psychotic brother for so long. Except, I truly believe Mancini is more about thinking shit through before speaking and this is allowing him the time to analyze the situation. Something my brother never learned to do.

“A few months back, one of my capos stumbled upon a pill factory out in Queens.” There’s no need for me to respond, Mancini is linking all the shit together, but one thing is for sure: I don’t believe for a second that the mafia “stumbled” upon anything. “It all looked legitimate from the outside but the math wasn’t adding up. When she came to me with the situation, I told her and her crew to investigate. I don’t do well with illegal pills being distributed without my permission.”

“Did those pills happen to have a smiley face anywhere?” The hope in my tone can’t be ignored; I want this to be linked. Being backed by someone like Mancini would change the whole fucking situation down in Rockford Beach.

“Si, on the plastic bag. They’re the same in your town, aren’t they?”

“Yeah.”

Mancini hands me a glass while Crow and Bear get up to grab their own.

“Here’s what I know. The pharmaceutical company is legit, completely legal with unassuming employees running the day-to-day business of actually trying to save lives.” Walking to a deep oak filing cabinet matching his desk, Mancini rolls open a drawer, his fingers walking through the documents until he stops on something, pinches the papers, and pulls them out. “Everything you need is in this file.”

My eyes land on the manilla folder and I swear to fuck I’m frothing at the mouth. Mancini pushes a button on his phone and not two seconds later, a man’s voice sounds. “Sir?”

“I need some photocopies, please.” When he ends the call, he looks back at me with ice in his gaze. “Needless to say, these documents are mine and mine alone. You use the information, then every single word in here is burned to ashes. You get me?”

“ Capisco .” I ditch the Hollywood Mafia capeesh bullshit and go straight for the proper Italian.

“Bene.” As he hands me the file, his fist grabs onto my cut, pulling me close enough for his mouth to be at my ear. Behind me, three chairs scrape against the tile floors and one bodyguard whips out his gun, pointed straight at my temple.

Well, that fucking escalated quickly.

“You ever use the subject of my family in a business meeting again, I will pump your body full of so many bullets, there won’t be a piece of you they’ll recognize when

they try to fish you out of the Hudson. Capisci?” Yeah, I definitely understand.

I grin, genuine respect for this man’s willingness and ability to kill for his family. “Yeah, man, I completely capisco. The Italian is wrong but you get my gist.” His grunt tells me that disrespecting his mother tongue physically pains him.

Releasing me, he pats down my cut like he’s just left dirt on it or some shit. The mafia stereotype is killing me and I’m about two seconds away from laughing my ass off. But I don’t, ‘cause I’m not fucking stupid.

“Is it okay to ask outside of business?”

Raising a brow at me like he’s asking if I’m serious right now, I mirror his brow and raise him a lopsided grin.

Everyone in the room relaxes, including the silent killer at my side.

“You’re still that cocky little shit from eight years ago, aren’t you? The one who shot his brother right in front of my face.” The memory brings with it a scowl. “Took me days to get the brain matter out of my shirt. Ended up throwing it away.” Yeah, like he’s counting the number of shirts he’s got. Dude owns half of Manhattan.

“Well, no regrets for me. The world is better off without him.” We both nod and hum our agreement.

“Tell me, how is your girl? Baby is okay, yes?” The concern behind his gaze is real and I appreciate it, truly.

“Yeah, they’re both okay but I’m pissed off, you know?”

“Yes. I know the feeling all too well but, Aleko, that anger and that fear that’s

building a nest inside your heart will only grow larger and larger until it's all you can feel. Until it consumes you. Don't let it. Remember that we choose women who are strong enough to stand on their own. If we cut their wings, they're no longer custom made for us." I frown, the guilt of everything that went down last night and the weeks before bubbling up inside my gut. "You get me?"

"Yeah, I do." I think?

"Also, be prepared to turn into something you never thought you could ever be."

What now?

"A father?"

"A man worthy of love. That baby is going to own you, heart and soul. Hell, I'm planning Aurora's first birthday by renting out the Rockefeller Center. My wife has found some kind of love for ice-skating, which is really fucking strange, but what she wants, she gets. So now, here I am...planning fucking birthday parties."

"Isn't she a little young for that? I mean, she won't remember a damn thing." Crow speaks the exact words rattling in my brain.

"It's not about what they'll remember, it's about creating memories, documenting them, so that later, when they look at all the pictures, they know how important their existence is to us."

Looking around the room, pretty sure I won't be planning any extravagant parties like this since it's not our jam, I nod at my brothers when the file is securely tucked under my arm.

"Hopefully, our baby will love the beach parties and barbecues just as much."

“I’m sure. Bene. Give me a week and I’ll have people down there who can get the job done quickly and quietly.”

Translation: He’s sending the fucking Reapers.

Score .

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter Three

Mackenzie

The Khaos guys really did a great job of cleaning this place after what happened here with my brother, Jake. The rotten smell of sewage and flesh no longer clings to every surface, although I'd become immune to it by the time Aleko dragged me away.

Spence went back to his place soon after dropping Mom and me off and showing us where his Gran's old gun is—by the front door—in case I ever need it. Steve was impatiently waiting for him, and I'm beginning to lose my faith that he'll stay quiet about what we've done. About the way he helped me fake my death. The mortician is quickly making his way onto my shit list with the way he's been making Spence feel lately, but my best friend asked me to stay out of it. So out of it I shall stay...for now.

It's Friday morning, and we've been here for a whole day and night. Yesterday was spent attempting to dust one handed, with my crutch in the other, and ordering in some food supplies—which is much easier with Mom here, seeing as I'd rather not answer the door. Last night, I didn't sleep a wink. For one, I was uncomfortable as fuck on the pull-out sofa bed, and two, trying to sleep without Aleko is like trying to breathe without oxygen.

Impossible.

I just hope he finds the note I left him before thinking the worst, like that I've been kidnapped again or some shit. There's no chance in Hell that he'll understand why I have to do this, but I'm beginning to think I don't quite understand either.

Age and hormones are the excuses I'm giving myself, and I'm pretty convincing...to everyone around me.

"Would you like some pancakes, darlin'?" Mom's in the small kitchen area, poised beside the stove with a pan in one hand and a spatula in the other. It makes me smile as I remember the time I threatened Aleko with a wooden spoon by mistake—the spoon was a mistake, not the threatening part.

"Please. I'll put a pot of coffee on then wash and cut the strawberries." Being in the kitchen again is something I enjoy, and this is a job I can do while sitting at the breakfast bar.

It's fucked up, but I sometimes miss my old trailer with my shitty little kitchen, my makeshift garden of lethal plants, and the smell of freshly baked cookies after a twenty-four hour shift as an EMT with Spence.

Revenge is supposed to be sweet, but all it's done so far is screw with my entire life and leave me in a shit hole. Jake would be happy. He's still fucking with me, even from his shallow grave in the woods—or wherever the Sons' clean-up crew took him.

This situation is new for me and my mom, and I think we both just need time to decompress and acclimatize to what's going on. We make breakfast in comfortable silence before moving over to the small couch—that happened to be my bed last night—and settling in front of the TV in the main space. There isn't any cable, but we have some basic channels and we manage to find an old show I remember Mom and Dad watching a lot of when I was a kid.

"This was one of your dad's favorites. The reveal at the end was always the part he looked forward to the most." Mom sighs, a light smile on her face that I haven't seen in far too long. "I wrote to them, you know. To see if they'd come and fix up that old beater your dad had in the garage with his bikes. Never heard back from them,

though. He always had more time for the motorcycles, but he was adamant he wouldn't get rid of the car. That he'd finish it one day." Mom's smile fades and her eyes lose focus on the TV show. "The day after I mailed that letter is when it all fell apart. He came back into town, everyone discovered the truth of my lies, and ultimately, it's my fault. It's my f—it's...my...fault." Tears begin streaming down Mom's face as she stutters out her words, like she's reliving a terrible memory in real-time.

My heart aches for her, because if she's talking about Dad's death being her fault, then she's held onto this for so long. It's not surprising she fell apart and continues to do so. And the extra trauma on top of being locked away and abused for so long and I have nothing but respect for the fact she's still living.

Scooching closer to Mom, I wrap my arms around her and pull her into me. She moves willingly, resting her head against my shoulder, where I feel small wet droplets from her tears.

"It's not your fault, Mom. Dad had an accident on his motorcycle and there's nothing you could have done to stop it." But maybe I could've. If I had leaned in another direction, or held him differently, called for help sooner instead of being a scared little girl...then he could still be here.

I don't say all that, though. Not to Mom. She doesn't need my trauma on top of her own. That'd be too much of a mindfuck. I am curious about what lies were told, and why she thinks that has anything to do with an accident, but now definitely isn't the time to question her.

After a few minutes, Mom's breathing regulates and she sits up, using her hands to wipe at her eyes. Our pancakes are long forgotten on the coffee table in front of us and the show on TV is rolling the end credits.

“Sorry, darlin’. I don’t know what came over me. I think I’ll go upstairs and lie down for a while. I’m feelin’ kinda tired.” She leans across to kiss my cheek before standing.

“Please don’t be sorry, Mom. Yo—”

“Darlin’ girl, I love you. I’ll come down soon and we can make up a nice casserole.” She gives me a sad smile, picks up the plates, and takes them to the kitchen area before heading upstairs.

I swear, Mom still thinks there are many mouths to feed, but it’s just the two of us and I didn’t have it in me to tell her that a casserole may be a lot.

Curling my legs and feet beneath myself, I settle into the couch and scroll through the few channels we have. I can’t help sliding a hand across my stomach, wondering how big it’ll grow with the baby inside me.

Thinking about where exactly the baby came from is something else entirely. I’ve thought about getting an abortion, just taking a pill or having an operation or whatever I need to do to make myself not pregnant anymore. But as horrifying as the circumstances of my pregnancy are, I can’t and won’t do it, my heart won’t let me. The baby inside me is a part of me, and that has to count for something.

I just hope Aleko understands.

The casserole was separated into several portions and is now in the freezer, ready for a rainy day. Mom’s words. She wasn’t herself the whole time and went back up to bed soon after we ate, leaving me to make my sofa-bed up again. I may just use the money I have saved to buy a new bed for down here, because doing that every night is not fun or conducive to a relaxing pregnancy. I’ll find a place to put it against a wall or something.

A loud banging startles me awake and I try not to scream, reaching for the closest thing I can find to use as a weapon. What if the Toxic Rebels that are left have found me and want their own revenge?

The remote control for the TV and my crutch will have to do. If I can quietly make my way upstairs to Mom, then we can hurry to the basement. There's a lock on the inside that can keep out whoever is trying to break the door down. I can hear yelling, but it's raining heavily outside too so I can't make out any words.

Oh God, I'm not ready to die today.

My heart is thundering in my chest as I make my way to the stairs, and I almost fall backward as Mom comes hurtling down them toward me. She hurries past me and to the front door, picking up the old rifle Spence pointed out to us earlier as the door flies open.

“Mom! Get ba—”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter Four

Aleko

The unrelenting curtain of rain pummeling against the fall leaves on the ground is muffling the sounds coming from inside the cabin. Seconds before the front door flies open, I hear a yell and my entire body tenses, ready for a fight. Ready to slay. Ready to protect the only woman who's ever meant anything to me. No, not anything...everything. Every fucking thing in this world revolves around my Cherry Pie and one of these days I'll force her to fucking see that.

Apparently, that day is not today.

In the middle of the doorway is no other than my mother-in-law. A shotgun—damn near older than she is—aimed at my face makes my body jump back far enough that I'm standing in the pissing rain.

Fucking great.

“Well, this is awkward.” I'm going for some levity, and when I dart my gaze up to Darlene's eyes, I expect anger or fear, but all I see is blank emotion, like she's not even here. Now, I've been on the wrong side of a barrel before but this is different. It's like she's lost in a past life or a painful memory.

“Mom, you need to put that gun down. Please.”

At the sound of her beautiful voice, my eyes dart up to her face and my heart aches

with how much I miss her. Then I remember her mother is pointing a fucking shotgun at me.

“Darlene, I may be on your daughter’s shitlist right now but I promise you, I’m not a threat.” I’ve got my hands up and I don’t need a mirror to know I look like a fucking mess standing in the rain in my leathers while a fifty-year-old woman is threatening my life with a gun I’m pretty fucking sure doesn’t work.

“Mom, come on, it’s fine. Put the gun down, okay?” Fuck, I love my girl’s voice. It’s raspy but not like she’s been smoking cigarettes for forty years. It’s the sound of satisfaction after a good, hard pounding from the man that worships her body daily. In other words...me.

To my relief, Mac’s hand on the barrel, pushing it down and away from me, brings her mother back from whatever fucked up memory she was living through just minutes ago.

Blinking through the vigorous drops of rain free-falling over my face and eyes, I let Mac handle her mother because I’m not stupid. If I speak, I’m pretty sure it’ll just take Darlene right back to that place from seconds ago and I’m not a fan of being held at gunpoint.

“Oh my God...” Darlene blinks, looks at the gun, then up at me before turning her lost and confused gaze onto her daughter. “What have I done?” There’s no mistaking the wobble in her voice, and the way her lower lip begins to shake tells me she had no self-awareness a minute ago.

“Nothing, Mom. You didn’t do anything wrong. We’re all fine, see?” Mac turns her mother to face her and I jump at the opportunity to snag the shotgun out of Darlene’s hands, propping it up against the wall after checking the chamber of the double-barrel. Empty. Fucking hell.

Just as I take a step inside the entrance to get out of this fucking rain, I feel the heat of Mac's slender hand slapping against my chest. Any other time, I would have wrapped my fingers around her wrist and slammed her against the nearest wall, ready to fuck her ten ways to Sunday. Yet, my lust-filled brain seems to understand all too quickly that this touch is not loving or sexual. She's stopping me.

The urge to groan and tell her to fucking get over it is overwhelming, but if I want to fix this problem, I need to learn to listen and accept whatever it is she needs from me.

"I have a feeling this isn't going to go the way I was hoping." Taking her wrist in my hand, I bring it to my lips and place a tender sweep of my lips across her soft skin. "I mean, it's pouring down rain out there, babe. A towel would be nice." Flashing the grin that always brings her to her knees—quite literally—I'm disappointed when she takes a step back like my nearness bothers her.

"It stopped raining." Her nod behind me pulls a slow, agonizing groan from deep inside my chest, explaining how much I hate this better than any words ever could.

"Fuuuuck me. The universe fucking hates me, doesn't it?" Because I'm stubborn and she knows it, I grip her waist and lift her to sit on the waist-height table against the wall. She may be angry with me, but I still need her to look after herself. Standing for so long, even with a crutch, isn't good for her thigh. Behind me, her mother has the gall to chuckle, her slippers slapping against the wooden floorboards as she walks away and leaves her daughter in my hungry clutches.

"You need to leave, Psycho." The slightly playful side of me—the side convinced I can just charm her back home—dies a little, and the pissed off side comes roaring back.

"So that's it?" This time, I'm the one who steps back voluntarily. "You're the only one who gets to decide where this goes? You get to throw in my face that you're

pregnant with...” Fuck, don’t say it. Don’t fucking say it. Shut your fucking mouth, Aleko . “Someone else’s baby and I’m just supposed to accept that you’re walking away? And don’t fucking call me Psycho. Don’t do that, baby, don’t try to hurt me with calculated words. Ain’t gonna work.”

Thank fuck I was able to control my rogue mouth by not reminding her that a rapist put a baby in her belly. Unlike the way Mac threw the news in my face during our fight with little care to what it might do to my heart, I refuse to hurt her in the same way. Then again, I have a lot of experience in reining in my need to destroy, otherwise I would have been put in a grave long ago.

“Did you even read my note?” For a second, the lost air about her gives me hope. Like maybe she’s rethinking this silly notion that she can walk away from me. Ever. It’s not happening, but I can’t do this like a bull in a china shop or I’ll be stalking her from a distance for the rest of our lives. Which is fine. I’ll do it if I have to. I just don’t want to, for obvious reasons.

“Yeah, Cherry baby, I read your fucking note. The part about me being too controlling, the part about you needing to breathe. I even read the part about you thinking some space for a while would do us both some good.” Boxing her in with one hand on either side of her face, I lean in and breathe my words onto her lips. “Ain’t happenin’, baby. When I told you I loved you, it wasn’t for the short term. I’m in it for the whole fucking term, ‘till death rips us apart.” I grin but it holds no fucking humor. “For real, that is.”

“Aleko—”

“Better. Now stop fucking around and let me fuck that delicious little pussy of yours until you rethink this shitty, shitty idea of yours.” One corner of my lip rises like a fucking dog ready to pounce as I snarl at the hand she puts between us.

“You need to go because I can’t think when you’re this close.”

“Well, yeah. That’s the whole point, isn’t it? You tend to make some really stupid mistakes, babe, so I’m here to help you—”

Here we go again.

This time, instead of placing her hand on my chest, she pushes me with all her tiny might, sliding off the table and using her knee to force me back. “You need to go. Now.”

I’m about to push right back and maybe even pick her up, throw her over my shoulder and fuck her right over there on that uncomfortable looking couch.

Until reason hits and I freeze.

Maybe I’m going about this all wrong. Maybe I need to use the honey method instead of the “lock-you-in-my-room” vinegar method.

“All right.” My words are calm and collected, despite the raging storm building inside my chest begging me to go all Neanderthal on her. “If that’s what you want.”

Mac stops fighting and is immediately in alert mode. “It...is.” Hmm. She sounds unsure but I’m not going to push her. She wants me to go outside, then I’ll go right outside. And I’ll wait.

“Then I’ll go.” Running my hands through my wet hair, I let the drops sprinkle all over her face and neck. Fuck, now I want to lick every square inch of her.

No. It’s time to give her space. Give her what she thinks she needs.

“You will?” She knows me so well, the skepticism is pouring from every word she utters. “You’re just going to...leave?”

“Yep, walking right out that door.” And I do. With a wink that says, clear as fucking day in mid summer, that I have something up my sleeve, I walk out the door and even close it for her...like the fucking gentleman I am.

As soon as I’m outside, I pop a cherry sucker in my mouth and make a phone call, putting my plan right into place.

“Didn’t think we’d be back here so soon, man.” Bear’s raised brow is accusing, like he knows this whole idea smells of desperate plans and bad decisions.

“Well, sometimes you gotta put on a show to get your point across, ya know?” I shrug because it all makes perfect sense to me. My little Cherry Pie is being difficult, but more than that, she’s forgetting who I am.

“So, a tent, a grill, and a generator is going to get your point across, then?” Walking to the back of Vanessa’s truck, Bear snaps the handle and carefully opens the bed up for us to jump on.

“Well, yeah. I mean, she thinks she can just give up on us, but that’s not happening. So, I wait her out.” Okay, I have to admit, it all sounded a lot more mature before it came out of my mouth. No way I’m backing down now, though.

“Wait her out, huh? You ever been in a relationship, Psycho?” Bear unlatches the bungee cords holding the generator down as I push the ramp to the edge of the truck and jump right back down. “Like you’re fishing, right? Just waiting for her to bite your hook and jump into your boat.”

“I’m not sure where that metaphor is going but I’m pretty sure I should be offended.

Or she should be offended.” Pointing my index finger at him, I shake it like he’s a naughty boy. “And yes, I’ve been in a relationship before, thank you very much.”

Bear stops moving, the tarp securely in his grasp as he turns to me and narrows his eyes. “Who with?”

I grin, pride making my chest puff out. “Philia, of course. And it’s a long ass relationship, too.”

“Fucking hell, Psycho. She don’t count, man. Jesus fuck. Inanimate objects don’t care when you act like an over-the-top obsessive asshole.” Shaking his head, Bear returns to his task as though my answer means shit.

“Yeah, well, we’ll have to agree to disagree. Help me with the ramp, will ya?” Bear unhooks the last rope and places the tarp in the storage bin we screwed to the metal of the bed for occasions such as these.

“I’m sure you comparing Mac to a fucking bike would go over real well. You should try it.” I don’t miss the sarcasm that poisons his every word, but I do choose to ignore it. Instead, I concentrate on the job at hand, picking up the wooden ramp Prez asked Crow to build a few years ago when we realized generators could be useful if they were portable.

“Look, all I’m saying is that if I camp out here, it’ll show her my dedication to her and the baby.” Picking up the ramp and placing it against the end of the tailgate, I run up the bed and start pushing the generator on its wheels. “She thinks I’m going to reject her because the baby’s not mine and she can’t be farther from the truth.”

Bear holds it, waiting for me to jump back down so we can both pull it off, carefully.

“And in this whole scheming scenario, did you think of...oh, I don’t know...telling

her all this?”

“Now who’s being an asshole? Of course I told her, but that girl is fucking stubborn.”

“Yeah, you’d know something about that, wouldn’t you?” I don’t have time to jab back when I hear the tell-tale sounds of bikes riding up the driveway to the small cabin in the woods where literal bodies have been buried.

“Oh good, everyone’s here.” Slapping my hands together, I grin and wink at Bear. “Trust me, she’ll think it’s adorable.”

Bear just shakes his head like he’s dealing with a toddler and walks away muttering. “Keep tellin’ yourself that, Brother.”

Ignoring him because fuck that, I’m not second guessing myself now, the deed is done and my mind is made up. I prefer watching my brothers secure their bikes as they get ready to settle down for the night right along with me. I twirl a fresh sucker around my tongue and grin.

Maybe I should have brought Ninja with me instead of leaving him with Vanessa, where he’s been since we left for New York, there’s no way Cherry would’ve been able to resist his little beady eyes.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Whipping around, I see the love of my life standing in the doorway like a sentry with her arms crossed over her gorgeous and newly plump tits. Fuck me, I’d love to bury my face in those babies.

“Just provin’ a point, baby. Whenever you’re ready to accept that I ain’t goin’ nowhere, you’re welcome to join us for a good ol’ North Carolina cookout.”

When Mackenzie slams the door with way too much vigor to sound like indifference,

I grin and wink at Bear.

“Trust me, it’s gonna work.” Then I see her peek through the curtains and I can practically hear her tongue licking her lips in anticipation of some juicy meat.

The edible kind, but yeah, mine will come right after that.

“Heard you were serving up some bangin’ barbecue over here.” Sledge slaps me on the back of the shoulder then leans in and whispers. “You’re a fucking wanker, you know that, right? This whole plan is destined to fail, my brother.”

“Y’all need to shut the fuck up and set up your tents before it’s too late.” Where Sledge kept his opinion to just the two of us, I’m making sure my voice carries over to everyone else.

“Boner, Bash, get the grill down, will ya?” Meanwhile, I grab the folding chairs and coolers where all the meat is, ready for a cookout, and place everything on the driest part of the property. It just so happens to be the porch.

Sorry, not sorry.

If the good old smell of grilled steaks and sausages lures my Cherry Pie out, then so be it.

An hour later, everyone is set up, the tents are scattered around, and the reasonably sized bonfire is roaring as we all sit around waiting for the prospects to finish grilling.

“The only reason I’m here, Psycho, is because I do love a good show and this one promises to be one for the books.” Prez follows his statement with a long pull from his beer can and the chuckle from the rest of my found family tells me I didn’t imagine his sarcasm.

“Y’all are going to bite your tongues when you see how well my plan works. I’m telling ya, she’s pregnant, I’ve got food. She’s scared, I’ve got determination for the long haul. She’s pissed off, I’m here repenting. It’s gold.”

“Uh...if drinking beer and eating prime rib with my boys is repenting then I need to sin more often.” I don’t respond to Slade but I throw him a look that could skin a gator.

“So while we’re here, waiting for Mac to magically change her mind, we should talk business.” Prez leans in, elbows on his jean-clad knees as his face goes from content to lethal in half a second. “Your New York contact, what’s his name?”

“Marco Mancini,” I say, lounging in the camping-style chair and bringing the beer can to my lips to take a deep pull. “He’s got our backs, said he’d send his Reapers first and they’ll assess and let him know if we’re going to all-out war.”

Before we headed back home from The City, Marco made sure to get word to me that everything was in place and that he’d make sure the Irish got the fuck out of Dodge...or Rockford Beach, as quickly as they got here.

“What are we lookin’ at, here? An army of Yankees shootin’ up our town?” Boner gets up as he speaks, loading up his plate with a beef patty and enough condiments to supply the better half of the south east.

“I mean, them fuckers are already here so may as well get a few on our side.” Crow stretches out on the chair and shrugs. “I mean, if you take away the scary-as-fuck mafia thing goin’ on, they seemed all right.”

I’m about to throw a can tab at his ass because I remember him almost shitting his pants when he saw the fire power Marco’s men were carrying, but all thoughts of fun and games go right out the door when I hear a scream like I’ve never heard before in

my life. And that's saying something.

Saying a lot, really.

We're all up in a second but I'm already running to the front door before they can get to their feet.

"Mackenzie, open this fucking door, right the fuck now!" I'm screaming, my body on high alert as I slam my fist on the wood over and over again. "Mackenzie!"

Giving up on the door, I run to the window, searching her out between the half-closed curtains until I see her.

With my hands flat against the window, a little piece of me dies inside as she throws her head back and howls like the devil is ripping her apart.

And holy shit, maybe he is.

Maybe he's ripping us both apart.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter Five

Mackenzie

I need to scream. To yell. To rip my soul from my body and fly away to a world that can't hurt me anymore. Another cramp shreds its way through my abdomen and lower back and I can't hold back. I throw my crutch across the room, where it lands with a loud clatter, knocking the glass of water from the coffee table.

Is this my punishment for all the shitty decisions I've made? If it is, it's a fucking extreme punishment. I fall in a heap to the floor, the pain from my thigh sharp, but nowhere near as bad as the cramps.

Mom rushes down the stairs just as the living room window smashes and Aleko rolls onto the floor among the broken glass. Everything is crashing around me, falling apart, and I'm a fucking idiot for thinking that being on my own was the way forward.

I asked him to stay away, to give me space, but it's as if he knows me to my very core and can anticipate my needs before I can. Seeing him on the doorstep lifted a weight I'd been carrying, hearing him apologize and profess his love gave me a warmth I desperately needed, and now he's here and I don't have it in me to send him away again.

My knees give out as another cramp tears through my abdomen and I curl in on myself. Within seconds, Aleko's arms are wrapped around me as he sits behind me and lifts me into his lap, cradling my head close to his chest. The sound of his

heartbeat inside his body is the last straw though. I've refused to acknowledge what my instincts are screaming at me, but hearing his heartbeat forces me to acknowledge the single heart beating within my own body. A huge lump bubbles up from my core and the dam bursts. I curl further into Aleko and take what comfort I can from his closeness.

"Shh. I'm here, Cherry, I'm here." He speaks into my hair, his hold on me so firm, I never want him to let go.

"Darlin', I think you need to go to the hospital." Mom's voice is soft, calm, and while I'm surprised that she's not freaking out, it's not really my priority. Everything sounds as though I'm underwater, echoing, muffled, and barely there.

"Can't," I manage quietly between sobs. I'm legally dead, as dead as the baby inside me, and it's all my fault.

"Darlene, can you call Spencer?" Aleko's firm tone is the complete opposite of mine, but it's helpful.

Aleko calms me, centers me. A lot of the stress from the last few months has been self-inflicted, born from my poorly thought through decisions. Time away from this man is exactly what I don't need. Even when I push him away, he's there.

"Sure."

Time seems to fade away, along with everything else other than the pain. Both physically and emotionally, I'm drained, I'm broken, I'm useless.

The only thing keeping me here is the man holding me so tightly I can barely breathe. This, combined with the way he's stroking my hair and the soothing tones of his voice whispering in my ear are like a comfort I've never known.

“Oh fuck, babe. I’m so sorry.” Spencer manages to break through my fog, and as he moves closer, I can feel Aleko’s growl through his chest. “I get it, big guy, but I need to examine her, okay?” Spencer talks as though he’s calming an angry lion and I turn my head away from Aleko slightly to look at my best friend through the blur of tears. “Hey, babe. Can we get you over to the couch?”

I know the procedures from my EMT training. I need to be examined, and because I’m sixteen weeks along, this is classed as a late miscarriage, which means it’s likely I need some kind of surgery. Thinking about this loss from a medical perspective doesn’t make it any easier. Knowing that the baby will never see the light of day, will never get to breathe fresh air, will never know the sound of my voice or my scent...

I’ll never feel their little fingers wrapped around my own...

I just can’t.

I’m dying inside and I don’t know if this is something I can ever come back from.

My stupidity killed my baby.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter Six

Aleko

The prickling from the tiny shards of glass lodged into my shoulder and knees doesn't even begin to compare to the agony that is etched over Mackenzie's beautiful face. I can see it clear as day and feel it like it's my own. The way her brows slant into each other and the tense set of her jaw every time her muscles clench; how she slams her lids closed for four to five excruciating moments at a time; worst of all is her fist gripping the cotton of my Henley like she's trying to transfer every one of her feelings onto it. Onto me, maybe. And I would take them. I would gladly suffer in her place because not being able to do fuck all for her is killing me.

Looking down on her as she shakes and grunts in my arms, I'm fighting my instinct to just carry her off into a cave and slay every visible and imaginary demon that would ever dare hurt her. That's the problem, though, isn't it? I have nothing to slay, nothing to hit or torture. There's absolutely nothing I can do to help her except be there.

The truth is, I'm completely out of my element here. I'm useless. And worse than that, I'm incapable of understanding what exactly she's going through. But I do know this: she's hurting. Therefore, so am I.

As gently as I can, I place her down on the couch then seat myself at one end and rest her head on my thigh while Spencer puts on his EMT face and does the best he can. His knowledge, though limited, is greater than any of ours, and I know my Cherry trusts him with her life. The fact that a man that is not me is able to see the intimacy

of her body, the place where her two greatest traumas took and are taking place, hurts me more than any fight or bullet or knife wound ever has. But I can't let my insecurities, or the fact that every inch of this woman belongs to me, affect me. This is about much more than me.

In fact, it's not even about me at all.

This is about Mackenzie. It's about the loss and the guilt she'll inevitably feel when the fog clears and the reality of our situation sinks in. It's about being there for her. By putting aside my ridiculous thoughts, I'm doing just that.

"She needs to go to the hospital. Right now. I don't care what she says...her life is more important than anything else." On my lap, my Cherry is shaking her head slowly, refusing Spencer's decision.

"And you can't do what needs to be done?" I ask this hoping maybe I can get what Mackenzie needs and also respect her wishes. If that's not possible, well, her health is my priority.

"Nah, man. I'm not trained for this. She's around sixteen weeks along, she needs a D and E and to do that, I'd need a fuckload of equipment. Aleko...I can't do this here. If she gets an infection, the consequences would be catastrophic." At Spencer's words, Mackenzie groans from the pain and my decision is made.

"Darlene, look in her bedroom. She should have a red wig in there." Fuck, I hope she does or else this is going to get worse than anything else. I turn to yell out to the brothers, but when I look over my shoulder, they're all there waiting with solemn expressions on their faces.

They know how much this baby means—fuck, meant—to me. How much Mackenzie already loved him or her. They knew this was a new beginning for us, even if my

Cherry pie was being a stubborn brat about it.

Fuck it, we may be losing the baby but I'll be damned if I'm losing the love of my life, too.

"Bear, call Doc and tell him we're coming in. He'll know how to make sure her fake identity isn't revealed at the hospital. Too many fucking people know her from before. She can't get recognized."

"On it!" From my periphery, I see my brother run out of the cabin and notice the fucking door is open. Guess the whole bashing through the window was a bit overkill, but at that moment, the only thing I could understand was that Mackenzie was suffering so logic didn't even register.

"Got it!"

My heart rate speeds up at the idea one fucking thing is going right on this fucked up night.

"Thanks, Darlene." When my eyes meet Spencer's, we both nod. It's time to go. "I'll carry her to your car, it's more comfortable than Vanessa's truck."

Spence nods, draping a sheet over Mackenzie, giving back her privacy.

"Y'all can meet us there. The closest is Rockford General," Spencer yells out as he runs to his car, I'm guessing to open the back and make space for us.

"Doc is all good, Brother. He said to go through the ER, he'll be waiting there with a wheelchair." I scoff at Bear's words. I'd like to see any motherfucker try to take her out of my arms and away from me. "I see that look, Psycho, but keep in mind...if you make a scene, shit's gonna get real and they'll be paying more attention to you. And

her.” This time, I growl because fuck him and fuck his logic.

“We’ll see.” My words are final and no one else tries to tell me what to do.

“Take care of our girl, Psycho. Do whatever you need to do to get her back to the compound. We’ve all got you.”

I nod at Prez but don’t have a chance to answer before I hear Darlene tell him that she’ll have their things ready to go back. Seems my mother-in-law didn’t want to be here any more than I wanted them here.

Once we’re in the back of Spencer’s fancy car, I sit back, keeping Mackenzie curled up in my arms, and wrap the seat belt around the two of us. It’s not comfortable but it’s safe, cocooning even. It’s all I can give her right now.

“We’ll close up here, Psycho. Don’t worry about a thing.” I barely hear Shade make his promise before Spencer puts the car in reverse and nearly knocks all of our bikes to the ground in his hurry to get the fuck out of here and to the hospital.

“I’m sorry.” Her whisper takes me off guard but my entire body tenses as my brain registers what she means.

“I love you, Cherry, but don’t ever fucking apologize to me about this again.” Squeezing her to my chest, I kiss the crown of her head to hide the tears that are now cascading down my own fucking cheeks and dampening her hair.

I will make it my mission to ensure she never feels the need to say those two needless words ever again.

As we approach the hospital at a speed that seriously makes me respect Spencer even more than I already do, I reach to the right and snag the wig, realizing too late that I

have no fucking clue how this shit works.

I mean, how am I supposed to get her blonde hair in there, all hidden away?

Stirring in my arms, Mackenzie pops the seat belt off—prompting the angry beep from the sensors—and places her hand on mine.

“I’ll do it.” Her voice is devoid of any feelings, any intonation. She’s speaking facts and making sure the job is done right.

“Thanks.” Refusing to let her go, I watch, rapt, as her fingers fly around, braiding one side then the other.

“Can you hold the ends here? I don’t have any pins on me.” At her request, I press two digits to the top of her head until she brings the wig up and slides it on from the front to back. As she reaches me, I pull my index and middle fingers away. “I don’t think this will hold very long but it’s better than nothing, I guess.”

The color and the texture are all wrong, as well as her scent, and the fact that I can’t smell her hair gives me a sudden sense of sadness. It’s like I’ve lost her, like she’s gone. Which is ridiculous. She’s right here in my arms.

Shaking off the melancholy cause I ain’t a fucking Emo, I kiss the tip of her nose and flash her my trademark smile, albeit weak and lacking any real bite to it. “You’re perfect, baby.” And I mean it. Fuck the wig and fuck the universe for throwing obstacles at her like she’s been forced to do some kind of hellish parkour and can’t stop or else the world explodes. Is it a bit dramatic? Yeah, probably, but that’s how it feels lately.

As I’m staring at my girl, the back door flies open and our club doc is there, wheelchair at his side as promised.

“Hey, Psycho, sorry about this.” He then turns to Mackenzie and with a much softer tone, he extends his hand and introduces himself.

“Hey, Mackenzie, my name is Doctor Spellar and I’ll be taking you to the OBGYN right away. Okay?” For a brief second, Mackenzie tenses in my arms, her hands flying to her wig and adjusting it. “It’s okay, I’ve taken care of everything. You can put your head down and hide behind the curtain of red hair while I push your wheelchair, no one will bat an eye. I promise.”

I don’t realize I’m growling until Mackenzie’s hand comes up to my face and her forehead presses against mine. I know what she’s doing, she’s trying to tell me to calm the fuck down without even speaking, but the idea of her not being in my arms makes me physically sick.

“Let me carry you.” I realize I’m begging, it’s in the pitch that’s usually lower, and the way I close my eyes to avoid seeing her answer is clear as day.

“You’ll draw too much attention.” It’s Doc who answers and I swear to fuck, I might stab him once we don’t need him anymore.

“Well, imagine the attention I’ll draw when I fucking lose my shit because I’m not touching her.” The worst part is that I’m not sure I’m exaggerating.

“Aleko?” Fuck me, my name from her lips is like a balm to sunburned skin. “Please hurry.” The slight crack at the end of her word does me in.

“Yeah, baby. Yeah, of course. Come on.” This time, I shut my fucking mouth and let the good doctor guide us to the maternity ward while a little piece of me dies a little with every step we take.

You’d think with how much we pay Doc, he’d have us in and out of that fucking

place in record time. Well, turns out, there are rules and we had to fucking follow them because the hospital doesn't give a shit about our feelings. Everyone here has some type of feelings and ours aren't special.

In my mind, I murdered nearly seven different people tonight. So many husbands and wives and kids should consider themselves lucky I have a semblance of self-control.

“Scarlett Green, the doctor is ready for you, hon.” My gut plummets to the floor, knowing this will probably tear her apart emotionally. The nurse tries to stop me.

She tries and that's all she does because the feral snarl that escapes my mouth could make grown bears run away crying. She neither runs nor cries but she does fucking roll her eyes at me, widening the berth for me to step through the door with Mackenzie in my arms. I guess nothing surprises her anymore.

The sterile room is lacking, it's cold and impersonal. A stark reminder that we're in a hospital, where warmth is bacteria's favorite playground.

“Scarlett, I just need to ask you a few questions.” As the nurse runs through her list, I let my mind wander to a time, not so long ago, when things were great. Well, after she lied about her fake death and right before she snuck out to talk to a fucking psychopath behind my back. In that short window, we lived in bliss.

Bliss that I'll miss, and although I am confident that we'll find that peace again, I'm also certain it won't be anytime soon. And that's okay. I'll help her heal. I'll be by her side and hold her for as long as she needs to be in my arms.

“Okay, I just need you to sit up here and lie down.” In that moment, I decide that my job here is to make sure her focus is on me. On us. On the future we're about to build together, despite the shit that's been thrown at us. Despite the pain and the danger and all the other shit happening around us.

“Hey.” Turning my body so that my back is to the nurse and the doctor who walked in just minutes ago, I bring my face so close to hers that it creates a bubble just for us. “Look at me.” Without hesitation, she does as I ask. Our eyes lock and the brimming tears that hold for just a second before giving up the fight and spilling over the corners and down her temples make my voice hitch. “I love you, Cherry Pie. This isn’t the end. This is you and me healing from loss.” More tears run down her temples and burrow into the wig as her bottom lip trembles like a child that fears for their life. “This is me showing you what love looks like, okay? It’s messy and it hurts sometimes.” My whispers seem so loud in the quiet of the room as the doctor and nurse murmur their own instructions and instruments clink and move.

“I’m scared.” As Mackenzie blurts out her admission, she loses the battle with her composure, a sob escaping with her last syllable.

“Me too, baby. Me too. But guess what?” My lips brush softly against her wet, salty ones and I realize mine are covered in my own tears as I try to reassure her.

“What?”

“We’re stronger than fear. We’re stronger than anything.” Clearing my throat to make sure my words are distinct, I press my forehead to hers and close my eyes, whispering. “You and me, Cherry Pie, we’re gonna be okay. I won’t let it be any other way.” Lifting my forehead, I pin her with a heated gaze. “No other fucking way, you get me?”

It’s when she nods that I believe my own promise.

Except I didn’t realize we still had obstacles to overcome before my words turned to truth.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter Seven

Aleko

Three days...after.

T his fucking sucks.

Tears fucking suck.

Watching my girl mourn fucking sucks.

Mourning fucking sucks, too.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter Eight

Aleko

One week after...

The pain of watching Mackenzie go through her mourning process is almost debilitating. But today, Ninja and I both made my girl chuckle, and fuck me, the brief light is everything.

Mourning still sucks.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter Nine

Aleko

Two weeks...after.

We're almost back to normal. We get up. We eat and we drink. We mingle with the brothers and spend time with Darlene.

But mourning sucks and the waves assault Mackenzie at the strangest moments.

In those moments I hold her and I fight her demons with her.

We'll be okay.

This time, I believe myself.

Even though shit's about to hit the fan...again.

Chapter Ten

Mackenzie

The coffee has almost finished brewing, the waffles are on the plates, and for the first time in I don't know how long, I feel kinda human. There was no spotting on my pad this morning, which I'm grateful for, but it also signifies that it's all really over. My baby is really gone.

I've been living in a constant zombie-like state, everything passing me by in a blur, but I'm determined to push through the torturing pain. I'm aware that I'll never be the same again, that the memory will live with me for all eternity and losing my baby is not something I'll ever get over. The pain will always be there, but eventually it'll become engulfed in happiness, in good memories, making it far more bearable to live with.

Shaking my head and taking a deep breath, I pour the coffee, put everything onto one of the bar trays I grabbed earlier, and head to our room. I stopped needing my crutch about a week ago, now able to put pressure on my leg without my thigh screaming at me, and I'm thankful that it's just one more thing I can leave in the past.

Today is about a celebration of life, Aleko's to be exact, and I need to do what I can to let him know how much he truly means to me.

I was a bitch before he left for New York—and when he came back—yet he's been the engine that's kept me running, the light to my dark, the unwavering mountain in a never ending sea.

Coming back to the compound was Mom's idea. To be honest, I didn't even realize we were here until just over a week ago. And even though leaving this place was the only thing on my mind when we went to the cabin, I'm glad we're here. The way the brothers have all rallied around Aleko—and me—has been like nothing I ever thought possible. I've been going through the motions, being polite, joining in conversations, and it may have seemed as though I was uninterested but every word spoken, every smile given...well, I can't put into comprehensible thoughts how much it's all meant to my soul.

Just as I'm about to open the door to our suite, it flies open and there stands a half-naked Aleko, eyes frantic with worry. "Oh Jesus, shit!" Relief fills his tone and his gaze softens. "Are you okay, Cherry?" He moves to hug me but I step back, the tray in my hands jostling and sloshing the coffee. When he realizes what I'm holding, up goes that eyebrow.

I could swoon, because it still does things to my insides that I hope never goes away.

"What've you got there? Here, let me help." Before he can take it from me, I shake my head.

"I've got it. Can we go back inside the suite now? I don't wanna spill any more coffee." I may have already had a cup while I was making breakfast, but that doesn't mean I want to waste what's here.

Grinning, Aleko steps aside and ushers me in. "What my Cherry wants, my Cherry shall get."

Ninja is scuffling away on the dresser, adjusting his blankets because he's no doubt going back to sleep and only woke to see what was happening. It's four-thirty in the morning. I wanted to serve him breakfast in bed before Aleko realized I had left the room; which clearly didn't work.

I put the tray on the table beside the armchair Mom loves in the corner and turn to face the man who has saved me at every turn. His bare torso, covered in those delectable tattoos highlighting every perfect ridge, his eyebrow raised, which is my When Harry Met Sally hello, and his half grin that could make anyone drool have my head in a daze.

I smile back.

“Happy birthday, Aleko.” I know he loves it when I say his name, his eyes seem to heat every time he hears it, and I want to be the reason for his heat every day for the rest of our lives.

“How di—no, don’t answer that. Which brother told you?” He’s not upset that I know because he’s still smiling, but there’s a definite curiosity there, and maybe a little shame that he didn’t tell me himself.

“Vanessa told me a few days ago. I’m sorry I haven’t got a present for you though, I tried to o—”

“Nope. Don’t do that.” In three strides, he’s directly in front of me, hands at my waist, head bent so our eyes are making full contact, and I’m a little confused.

“Er...”

“ I’m sorry. You don’t need to be sorry. Ever. Okay? The only present I need is you in my arms until my dying day. Nothing else matters.” Then he kisses me, and tears prick my eyes because it’s rough, it’s demanding as his tongue finds mine, and it’s everything in this moment.

I’ve missed this. Him.

We've kissed in the last few weeks, but it has been soft, tentative, and I could sense how difficult it has been for him to hold back—doctor's orders after my operation. Now, though, I can feel hope coursing through my veins. Hope that I didn't fuck up my chances with this man. Hope that life can go on again. Hope that we will both come out of this thing together.

I never wanted to leave him, that was never my intention, it was space I thought I needed, but I was wrong. He was a dick, locking me in this very suite, but I now know that he was just trying to take care of me as best he could. He went about it the wrong way, but it was justified because I did exactly what he was trying to avoid. I ran away.

Aleko's hands move from my waist, one reaching around to grip my ass, the other sliding up my spine and firmly cupping the back of my head. I moan into him, pliant in his hold, finally ready to give myself over fully again, before he pulls away and rests his forehead against mine, our breaths coming short and fast.

"I've been wanting to do that for weeks." He looks me in the eye as he kisses the tip of my nose. "I fucking love you, Mackenzie Wilson. Never in all my years have I needed something as much as I need you. You are my lifeblood." As if a lightbulb just came on in his head, his eyes widen and his grin grows. "I can think of one thing that will make my birthday better."

"Oh yeah? What's that then?" I rest my hands against his chest, the rhythm of his beating heart like a balm to my soul.

"I want nothing more than to give you something."

He's still grinning and now I'm a little confused.

"I'm supposed to be giving you things for your birthday. Not the other way around." I

chuckle, because this man!

“You’ll be giving me the fucking world if you’ll let me give you my last name.”

It takes me a moment, maybe two, then what he’s saying begins to sink in and I’m not sure if I’m hearing him right.

“You want me to change my last name to Kastellanos?”

“I do.” He winks, waiting for my brain to catch up with his words. When it does, my body trembles and a happiness I haven’t felt in too long fills my heart. “Marry me.”

“Oh my God, yes!” Easiest decision I’ve ever made. I smash my lips against his, elated tears now streaming down my cheeks. “I fucking love you too,” I manage between kisses.

His grip on my head gets firmer, more dominant, and his hand on my ass squeezes tightly, pulling me closer to him so his rock-hard cock is pressing against my stomach. The doc recommended one week with no sex, not that I’ve been up for it, and it’s been at least two...I’m ready.

Forgetting the waffles and coffee, I leap up and wrap my legs around Aleko’s waist. There’s a twinge in my thigh, but it’s not unbearable and I welcome the pain because I know the pleasure will far outweigh anything.

We moan into each other’s mouths as I grind up against him, the friction like a sweet nectar I’ve been craving. Aleko lets out a low growl and pushes my back to the wall beside the bed, getting impossibly closer to every inch of me. I’ve missed clawing at his skin, feeling the hard ridges at my fingertips, and our kiss deepens.

A loud shouting from downstairs breaks us apart and Aleko growls again, this time in

frustration. We're both panting, and I can't hold back the giggle when I realize what all the shouting is and Aleko curses.

"I'm back, motherfuckers!"

"Fucking Grinder."

Sexy time didn't happen. Boner wheeled Grinder around like the king of the land, making sure all the brothers staying at the compound were awake and came to greet him after being in the hospital for so long. He still has a cast on his arm and a new scar across his forehead, but he's no longer in a coma, can walk, and doesn't need the wheelchair. The fact that he's now sitting next to Boner in the corner of the bar, in their usual spot, directing Vanessa, Violet, Bash, Jonesy, and me, as we decorate, is something I'm not gonna complain about.

Grinder saved my life too. Back in the house that doesn't bear thinking about, he took the heat off me, just like Kincaid did, and he got fucked up in the process. I owe him, and if that means letting him be dictator of decorations, then so be it.

Soon after waking up anyone who was here, as well as calling everyone who had gone back to their own homes, Prez called church. I don't know what they discussed because I don't make it my business to know, but Aleko, Bear, and Prez had to go over to the club's strip joint, Rocks Off, to deal with some security things. While I hate being apart from Aleko, being an enforcer is his role here and I'll never take that away from him. I know how proud he is to be a member of the Sons, and his role is important for the safety of us all.

"Want me to blow up some of those balloons? I'm good at blowing things." Grinder's laugh is booming and he taps his can against Boner's as they both crack up.

"Actually, yeah. Good idea, Grinder." Vanessa chuckles too, passing the leftover

balloons to him. “Boner, you can help him, then hand them to Jonesy or Bash to hang somewhere outside.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Boner nods, getting straight to work because nobody argues with Prez’s wife.

Ninja climbs down Grinder’s shoulder, where he was nestled into his neck, and jumps onto the table to sniff the balloons in curiosity. It seems the brothers aren’t the only ones who have missed Grinder being around, because Ninja moved like a rocket, climbing down from the dresser and scuttling out of our suite to practically pounce on him as soon as we heard his voice this morning.

“Don’t chew on that, little guy.” Grinder scratches beneath Ninja’s chin, pulling the balloon from beneath him. I swear Ninja gives him the side-eye and turns away like the tiny diva he is before coming over to my table, padding through the paint, walking over the paper I’m working on, and settling in my lap. I have no doubt I now have tiny red paw prints on my thighs, but it’s nothing that can’t be washed away later.

It may seem juvenile to some, but I’m in the process of painting a huge happy birthday sign in preparation for Aleko’s surprise party when he and Bear get back this evening. The brothers and Vanessa are going along with my plans, no questions asked, and the Khunts are being...well, cunts. Except Sabrina, who is in the kitchen with my mom, whipping up a storm and getting ready to feed everyone.

Bear is in on the surprise party plan and desperately wanted to do a BBQ feast, so that’s the plan. But because he’s out with Aleko all day, he hasn’t had any time to prepare, which is why Mom and Sabrina are busy doing just that.

“Hey, Mac. How’re you doin’?” Vanessa sits beside me, a jumble of string lights in her hands, ready to be untangled.

“Honestly? I don’t know.” We haven’t had a chance to really tell anyone that we’re getting married yet, and I’m not sure if Aleko wants to do that together or what. “I don’t want the world to swallow me whole today. I’m breathing. And I’m preparing a birthday party for my man. I’d say better than yesterday, but not as good as tomorrow.”

“That’s the way forward. It’s okay to have sad days, and it’s also okay to be happy. Don’t let the guilt for feeling happy eat away at you, okay? Because it will try, but you’re stronger than that. I know it.” She bumps her shoulder against mine. “I’m here if you need to talk to someone that knows what you’re going through. To some extent. I mean, I never killed my brother...which was badass, by the way.” We both laugh, because as inappropriate as it may seem, I appreciate the shit out of this woman. She experienced a miscarriage years ago and she and Prez have never gotten pregnant since. I don’t know the full story, but I know it was traumatic for her and I’d never make her relive that. She had counseling though, and now I guess she’s using her own experience to help me.

For all the bad I’ve endured, the good is beginning to far outweigh it.

A few hours later, the barbeque is prepped and Bear just texted Vanessa to say they’ll be back in the next ten minutes.

I don’t know why I’m so nervous waiting for the rumble of Aleko’s engine to come riding down the long drive. Fiddling with the sleeves of Aleko’s hoodie that I’m wearing, I sip at the soda Violet gave me from the makeshift bar out here. The black hoodie covers my jean cut-offs, making it look as though I’m wearing nothing else, and I’m desperately hoping Aleko won’t be able to keep his hands off me, because I’m beginning to understand his whole obsessive thing.

He’s my addiction.

“Fuck me, now that’s a spread and a half.” Sledge and Hoops come through the doors from the building, out to the back courtyard with the rest of us—minus Bear, Prez, and Aleko, who have yet to arrive. “One of these days we’ll have a proper English buffet. I’ll treat ya to a pineapple and cheese on sticks hedgehog.” Sledge wags his brows as if he’s just given me the best news ever, and I chuckle at Hoops beside him, rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

“I’m sure your cheesy hedgehog is a wonder, darlin’. How about you show me how to make it before the next cookout?” Mom has settled here again like a duck to water. She’s only planning on hanging around at the party to eat a little before going back to her own suite—no doubt with Sabrina in tow—because she doesn’t want anyone to have to hold back with yelling when they get rowdy with a few drinks inside them. Figuring out what her triggers are isn’t easy, but sudden yelling is one of them. She’s prepared for the big surprise when Aleko arrives, she’s aware it’s coming, but anything after that could get tricky.

The rumble of engines gets louder, everyone gets quieter, and excitement begins flowing through my veins. For the first time in I don’t know how long, I’m not wallowing in my own misery. It’s a terrible place to be, and for today especially, I want to find joy in the world again.

It sounds as though there are more than three motorcycles riding in, some of them growlier than the likes of Philia, Aleko’s bike. They’re not sports bikes.

I look to Vanessa, confused, and she shrugs but doesn’t appear to be worried at all. Violet must have turned the radio up because music is now coming from the speakers in the center of the courtyard, just as the double doors open up and my heart skips a beat at the sight of Aleko. His eyes find mine immediately, his grin grows, and damn that eyebrow.

Determination clear in his features, Aleko strides toward me, lifts me by the ass and

kisses the ever-loving fuck out of me.

“Thank you, Cherry Pie.”

I’m breathless, my legs wrapped around his waist, and the public display of affection doing nothing to cool off my lust.

“Is it okay?” Alright, so with all my bravado and bright ideas, I’m worried he’ll hate the whole surprise birthday thing.

“Baby, it’s fucking perfection. Don’t ever be ashamed of doing shit like this. In fact, you’ve set the bar now. My turn next.” He winks, and if he wasn’t still holding me against him, I’d fall into a puddle at his feet.

“I mean, you made my last birthday pretty great already.” Heat creeps up to my cheeks as I remember that night, in the back of a pickup truck, when hope suddenly bloomed in my chest for the first time in years.

“And I’m gonna make the next ones even better.” Aleko kisses me again, hard and fast, before letting me slide down his hard body to plant my feet on the ground.

“You big softy.” I smile up at him, the world around us reduced to nothing as I stare into his pale blues.

“Only for you, Cherry.”

This time, our kiss is interrupted by a loud cheer when the prez hollers, “Sons, the Reapers have arrived!”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter Eleven

Aleko

A few hours earlier...

Fucking finally, I can leave for club business without the brick in the pit of my stomach at the thought of my Cherry doing stupid shit and getting herself into dangerous situations. I think we've both learned from our decision making, we've both grown. That being said, I fucking hate leaving her. Period. She does have Ninja to keep her company, though, so that left a smile on her face.

The best part, though? Coming home to her. It's fucking magical. Every time.

"Hey, Psycho, we got any news on the Reapers?" Without answering Prez right away, I look at my phone, checking the time, when I notice the new text message.

Flower : I had to pee and get more coffee. Tried to make a detour at King's Dominion but got outvoted.

Frowning, I almost type back that they're not here for a fucking vacation, but I don't know the Reapers very well and I'm not going to be the one to piss off our much needed allies cause I don't get their jokes. The only reason I even have a contact name is because Marco sent the deets to me yesterday.

"Yeah, they're about four hours out." I show the message to Prez, who chuckles as he walks away.

“This should be interesting,” he throws out over his shoulder.

Still don’t get why it’s so funny.

“Listen up!” We all turn as Prez’s deep voice fills the main room in Rocks Off. “We’ve got about four hours to make this place presentable to the public. We can’t afford to keep it closed but we ain’t putting our employees in danger, either.” Looking around the place, I nod along with everyone else. “Separate into groups. We need someone to fix the bar, it looks like someone took a fucking ax to it. Also, the lights.” Pointing to four or five fixtures on the wall, he nods to Shade since dude’s pretty handy with electricity and shit. “Those bastards went all out with our shit. Thankfully, we’ve been working on this place for the last week so these are the last of the big jobs.” Pointing to the prospects, Diablo, and me, he then twirls his fingers like a tornado. “Clean this fucking place up. It needs to shine brighter than Bear’s dome piece.”

Let the ribbing begin. Everyone’s got a comment for Bear, who took a razor to his head just this morning for a close shave. I can’t imagine him with hair. I think he looks fucking badass.

“Yeah yeah, keep it up, assholes.” Shaking his head, my best friend may have the name of a big, dangerous animal, but sometimes, I think he’s too good for this lifestyle. That being said, if he ever told me he wanted out, I’d shibari his ass to the nearest chair until he took it back.

“Before you all get to work, remember...if those Irish fuckers come back, don’t get trigger happy. They’re begging for it. Soon, we’ll have the Reapers and our sister charters watching our backs, then all bets are fucking off.” We all grunt before going to our corners and starting the cleanup.

Time flies when you’re on your hands and knees...and not in a good way. If I never

have to see a mop again, it'll be too soon.

Taking a break for a beer, I catch sight of Bear as he types on his phone. I wonder who he's texting. Has he found a woman or something? That would be fucking amazing. When he slides his phone in his back pocket, I make a mental note to ask him later.

The rumble of engines puts us all on high alert, and when I glance at my phone, I realize we've been at this for nearly four and a half hours. I guess the Reapers had more pit stops after that text message.

"Psycho!" Without a word, I raise my hand and walk to the club's front door, checking the new cameras we installed last week. There's one above the entrance and three others giving us a complete view of the entire exterior of the property. The small screen on the inside wall gives us the camera angles and what I'm seeing right now is not good news.

"Hey, Prez!" I yell out, trying not to show my excitement at going fucking Rambo on these knuckleheads. "Ain't the Reapers out there and, let's just say, the Irish didn't get the memo about the happy triggers." Reaching back, I make sure my gun is readily accessible and crunch down on my sucker, throwing the empty stick in the trashcan in the corner.

"Fuck." Prez walks up to me and watches the screens intently. "Guess we're gonna either talk or shoot."

Just as I'm about to unlock the main doors, movement on the screens gets our attention and makes us grin like the fucking lunatics we are.

"Show time, Prez." My words are low, full of anticipation, ready for a fight.

“You know what they say about looking for trouble?”

I grin, but don't finish his phrase. Prez loves his idioms and who am I to ruin the moment for him?

“I'm sure they say a lot of shit.” Also, I'm sure it was just Elvis flexing.

“Well, young Padawan, they came to the right place, and they're about to get really fucked up.” I can't help it, I throw my head back and howl with laughter.

“Fuck yeah, Prez. Let's do this.” About fucking time we shed some Irish bastard blood.

“Let's go, Sons. Time to take the trash out.” Every single brother follows Prez to the showdown that's about to happen right outside our club.

As we open the doors, the parking lot looks like a scene from an urban western, where the misfits are coming together to take down the band of evil brothers.

Behind me, Bear whistles, low and long, as we all walk out and surround the Irish, their backs to us.

“You know, Shorty, nicknames are usually supposed to be ironic.” The tiny waif of a girl sitting on the hood of a black van with tinted windows is teasing one of the Irish without a fucking care in the world.

No doubt, that's Flower. With her head shaved around the sides and back and longer on top like a tidal wave on her head, she leans back, tsking, egging him on.

“Bitch, someone needs to keep that mouth busy so you're not constantly running it.” Grabbing his junk like a fucking creeper, the Shorty guy takes a step forward and

growls. “I’ll volunteer my dick in your mouth.”

Bear steps up between us, probably ready to fucking rumble like an MMA pro, but stops in his tracks when Flower gives as good as she gets.

“Nah, I’m sure I could talk around it.” For effect, she raises her pinky finger and wiggles it like she’s demonstrating the size of his dick. “I live by the adage, ‘go big or go home.’ You, Tiny Tim, make me wanna go home.” And just like that, I fucking love this chick like I love a drinking buddy.

“Fuck me, who is this girl?” Bear’s deep drawl holds a hint of awe.

Looking over my shoulder, I grin at my best friend who seems to have hard core hearts in his eyes, à la Looney Toons.

“I’m guessing that’s Flower, my very weird contact.” We’re talking casually but our hands are firmly gripping our guns.

“We like weird.” Bear’s understatement of the year.

“Yes we do, Brother. Yes we fucking do.” My words are met with Prez’s chuckle as he takes the first step toward the Irish fuckers who work for Harrison Beaufort, the owner of Risus Pharmaceuticals, and his rapist son.

With us behind them and the Reapers in front, we have them at least three to one. This time around, they didn’t come in force, but they did come heavily armed. There are other shops around here, places of business, and if we can avoid an outright shootout in the middle of the street, then we will. But one thing we won’t do is back down.

“We told you weeks ago that we don’t like being threatened on our own turf. Y’all

need to get your shit and get the fuck out of here.” Prez walks up to the guy in the middle, who seems to act like the leader of this pack, towering over him by at least a foot. “Or else you’re going home in a fucking casket.”

At his words, the Irish all pull out their weapons, some facing us, others facing the Reapers, who don’t even flinch.

This makes us immediately react with weapons of our own, and in under thirty seconds, we’re reenacting yet another scene from a spaghetti western. Unlike last time, though, we’re not the ones outnumbered. Proving they’re not as stupid as they look, they lower their guns just as their boss steps closer to Prez like he wants to rip his fucking head off.

Yeah, good luck with that, asshole.

“Our boss wants to give you a message.” I roll my eyes at the guy’s mob boss cliché and I’m suddenly tired of this fucking charade.

“Maybe your boss should take his dick out of his favorite hole and come deliver his message himself instead of sending your sorry ass.” My words incite some growls and raised guns but I just grin and walk right up to the closest barrel until it’s pushing against my forehead.

“Do it, motherfucker. I fucking promise you, my trigger finger will be quicker and your sorry excuse for a cock will be gone.” That’s when the bald guy looks down and realizes my gun is on his junk, finger on the trigger, armed and ready to blow his balls off.

“What’s your message?” Prez tilts his head to the side and narrows his eyes.

“We ain’t dumb. We can hear those bikes of yours a mile away. Next time we see

you at the Beaufort property, we're shooting first and not even bothering with questions." Prez is about to rip into this Tiny motherfucker when a sing-song voice on crack gets the entirety of our attention.

"Tell your boss to bend over and get fucked with a rusty fork." All heads turn to Flower, who is now standing on the hood, fists on her hips like a fucking superhero. The only thing missing is a cape.

"You heard the lady." Prez is grinning like Flower's attitude is the best thing since the introduction of electronic fuel injection.

Taking inventory of their side then ours, the Irish begin their retreat. But Tiny stops, shakes his head, and inhales a whistle.

"By the way..." By his stance, I know—I fucking know—he's about to drop a bomb. "How's that...whatta ya call 'em, Jimmy?" Tiny turns to Skeever, who grins around a toothpick as he answers, his stare focused entirely on me.

"The race chief."

"Oh yeah, that's right. The race chief. How's he doin', do you know?" We don't have time to answer, or even ask him what the fuck he's talking about, before those fucking douchebags get the fuck out of here, peeling their way out of the parking lot.

"What was that about?" Shade breaks the silence by asking the question we're all dying to know.

"No fucking idea." Prez is still watching their dust settle when he speaks. "But I have a feeling we're gonna find out and not like the answer."

Two fucking hours.

That's how long I had to pretend I wanted to be at the birthday party instead of inside my woman. Basically one hundred and nineteen minutes too long.

"You look like you want to rip my head off. Fuck's your problem?" Sledge tips the beer bottle up, watching me as he does, with Ninja sitting on his shoulder cleaning his paws but stopping every once in a while when Sledge makes a sudden movement. Reaching out, I click my tongue up against my teeth to call him over and grin at my brother's pout when Ninja barely gives him a second thought. Good boy.

"No problem, I just hit my limit of peopleing." I shrug like I want this conversation to end before they start ribbing me. It won't take them long to figure out I'm jonesing for my girl.

"Peopleing? The fuck is that? Quit talking funny, man." Without giving him the ammo for a comeback, I just smirk and walk away with Ninja on my shoulder.

"The fuck is that, Brother?" Behind me, I can hear him complain to, who I'm guessing is Shade, about me leaving him hanging.

"Get over it, Brother." Nice. Shade gets it.

"Hey, handsome, are you enjoying your birthday bash?" When Violet comes up to me, my eyes scan the room until they slam into Cherry's on the other side of the couch where she's talking to Grinder as he gesticulates like a fucking toddler.

"Violet, listen to me." I'm speaking to her but not looking at her because my soon-to-be wife is way too fucking beautiful. "See that woman over there?" I point to my Cherry Pie and make sure my intentions are clear as spring water. "She's going to be my wife one day soon." Looking down at Violet, I stay respectful because she's only doing what the Khaos Khunts do...have fun and flirt with the Sons. Less than a year ago, I was tapping it on the regular, but that's nowhere near my radar and I don't

want my girl to feel uncomfortable around the other women. Never that. “Tell the others I demand they respect Mackenzie by not coming on to me.” I don’t need to look in the mirror to know I’m scowling, I can feel it in the pull of my upper lip as I finish talking.

“Yeah, Psycho, of course. That’s really cool of you to do that for her. Yeah, I’ll tell them.” Giving her a sharp nod, I face my Cherry once more and stop short at the sight in front of me. One of the Reapers, big guy with a crew cut who looks like he could throw me like a fucking baseball, talking and laughing and...did he just fist bump Mackenzie?

Did he just lean in and whisper like they have some kind of private joke going on?

Oh hell to the fuck no. Private jokes? Yeah, I don’t think so, buddy. I tolerate Spencer because he was there before me and has absolutely no intention of coming between her and me, but this? This dude? I don’t fucking know him .

Before I even know what the fuck I’m doing, I’m stalking my way through the room, shoulder checking every one of my brothers who have the misfortune of being between me and my target. Somewhere in the distance of my foggy mind, I hear Bear telling me to calm the fuck down. Sledge is laughing and taking bets while Prez is yelling at Shade and Hoops to hold me down.

By the time anyone gets a finger on me, I reach Cherry, pick her up, and throw her over my shoulder like a fucking caveman ready for dinner, barely aware that Ninja has abandoned ship by escaping down my back and jumping on Boner’s lap where it’s safe. For now, I’m guessing.

“Mine.” Okay, so apparently I’m also talking like a Neanderthal, but in my defense, when it comes to getting a point across, less is more.

“Aleko! Put me down, what the actual fuck?” I’d be worried that I’m being too possessive if it weren’t for the way she’s laughing every time her face hits my ass as I practically run back to my suite. Correction: Our suite.

As I pass the Reaper, I expect him to be pissed off, like he thinks I cock blocked him or some shit. Instead, dude is grinning like a proud papa. But I don’t have time to analyze his reaction because Cherry is pinching my ass cheeks and swinging her legs, yelling at me to let her down.

I don’t, of course. Why would I? This way, we get to our suite a lot fucking faster, which means my dick will be inside her sweet, sweet pussy in a matter of minutes.

I don’t put her down when we enter, I just hike her up and slam her against the closed door. We’re both out of breath, panting like we’ve run a marathon; only it’s not from exertion. Not yet. The flush across her cheeks and chest, her tits heaving with each inhale as her wild eyes scan my face like she’s searching for the meaning of life, are all signs of lust.

“My sweet Cherry Pie...” The flimsy material of her dress rips easily when I pull it with more force than it deserves. “I’m about to destroy your cunt. You okay with that?” As if I’d wait for her to formulate words, I palm her pussy, thinking about how I need to rip her panties when my hand lands on hot, wet skin that pulses against my fingers. “Oh, you are in so much fucking trouble, Cherry.”

I’ve got a million questions about how long she’s been walking around in a dress without fucking underwear and without me being there. Problem is, if I start to ask them, my mind will wonder how many of my brothers possibly noticed. Then I’d have to kill them. All of them. One by fucking one.

Okay, fine. I wouldn’t do that. I would, however, rip their fucking eyes out so they’d wish they were dead.

With my mind reeling, I pin her to the door, my fingers—nice and wet from her unapologetic need for me—wrapped around her neck, pressing harder and harder until she moans from the pressure.

“I was going to fuck you hard and fast so we could both take the edge off, but now I just want to punish you.” The little tease simply licks her lips then smiles like I’m not cutting off the oxygen to her lungs. “Fuck, baby, you’re so perfect for me.”

My mouth lands on hers, our tongues searching and fighting and stroking like a well choreographed dance that I can’t wait to perfect.

Pushing my knee between her legs, I rub it along her wet pussy as I devour her mouth, making sure to leave bite marks on her lips so I can taste the sweetness of her blood. With my free hand, I unbutton my jeans then slide my zipper down before pushing everything down, letting them fall to my ankles. “Ready, baby?”

“God yes. Just fuck me already, will you?”

“Naw, Cherry. Not yet.” My dick hurts from how hard it is. It’s straining and leaking from the tip like it’s about to explode from the sheer heat of her pussy. Thank fuck I have enough self control to let it last at a little while longer.

Pressing the head of my cock to her clit, I slide it along her slit. Up and down. Over and over again until she’s begging beneath my palm, where every one of her swallows makes my blood buzz with the anticipation of coming inside her. Every one of her moans makes me want to worship at the altar of her perfection.

“Please, Aleko. Please.” I can barely hear her since my fingers squeeze harder and harder each time she speaks. My hips are thrusting faster and faster as my dick slides over the lips of her cunt, over and over until I’m losing my fucking mind. At this point, I’m punishing myself more than her and fuck that...I’ve been a really good

boy.

So with my last retreat, I change the angle and thrust deep inside her until we're both fighting to catch our breaths, lips to lips, mouth to mouth, dick to cunt. We're like two puzzle pieces, cut specifically to lock together and never let go.

"Wrap your legs around my waist, baby, and let me fuck you until you pass out." She doesn't hesitate. With her arms circling my neck, she uses her core to hug me with her long legs as I push her harder against the door.

We pause, our mouths fusing and gliding with a kiss so hot it sets my organs on fire. Then I pull out almost all the way before pushing right back inside and not stopping until we're screaming each other's names. I don't care who hears us. I don't care who can guess what we're doing. Shit, my caveman show earlier was proof enough that I was hell bent on making my girl come.

"Come all over my cock, Cherry. Give me the gift of you." I don't need to ask twice. Honestly, I probably don't need to ask at all but I like giving her the order, it satisfies some deep rooted desire to master her. When in fact, if anything, she owns me heart and soul.

As my cock slides in and out of her slick cunt, I revel in the heat and the soft tissue that rubs against the sensitive skin of my dick. Every sense is heightened; the smell, the taste, the touch. Everything. But my sight? Seeing her so free and happy, it does something to me. It fucking makes me crazy with love and lust and possession.

She's mine because I'm so deeply hers, I'm certain I can no longer exist without her. With our foreheads pressed hard against one another, we both let go. Long strings of my cum release inside her, over and over again. So much so, I'm hoping this feeling never ends. Her orgasm slides down my dick with every pulse of her cunt every time she tries to take a breath. Fuck, I love that I do this to her. I love that only she can

bring me to my knees.

That's when an idea comes to me, and once it does, I can't not act on it.

Bringing both of my hands to her ass cheeks, I pick her up and swing her around until her back hits the wood of the cluttered dresser. With my elbow, I swipe every item on top to the floor and lay out my Cherry Pie like a feast for my starving eyes and mouth and soul.

As soon as she's laid out and open for me, I slap my palms on the backs of her thighs and widen her position until my shoulders can fit between her legs and my mouth can latch onto her soaked pussy.

The thought of my cum and hers mixing together like an elixir that could and will create life from our love, makes me a ravenous beast. Licking and sucking, I push my tongue deep enough inside her that I can scoop up a dollop of orgasm and let it rest on the tip of my tongue.

As I move away from her pussy, I finger fuck her with two digits before sliding up her body and fusing my mouth to hers.

I don't kiss her. I fucking destroy her mouth, making sure she swallows our cum. Tastes our love. Understands that she and I aren't a temporary thing—we never were. I have no idea how long we'll live, but I do know that my life is forever linked to hers. And hers to mine.

“We taste so good, Aleko.”

“You and me, baby, we're divine.”

With my fingers fucking her, she comes again, and fuck me if it's not the sweetest,

most delectable sound ever created.

And I made it happen.

When she almost passes out from the intensity of her orgasm, I pick her up and take her to our bed where I kiss every inch of her before taking off the rest of her clothes as well as mine.

“I love you, Cherry Pie.” With her back to my front, I place one leg between her thighs and soak up the heat of our bodies pressed together.

“Mmm, I love that thing you did with your tongue. You know, when you shared our cum with me?” Chuckling at her bratty answer, I pinch her nipple hard enough to make her squeal, pulling her impossibly closer so I can bury my nose into her neck and inhale her unique cherry scent deep into my lungs.

“Cherry, don’t make me repeat myself.”

“Fine. I love you too, you big brute.” That’s much better. My beautiful girl likes to play with my emotions.

“Tonight was perfect. You’re perfect. Thank you for the birthday party...and the gift of your pussy wrapped around my cock.” I grin at my crude words, knowing it’ll only make her horny again.

Pressing my thigh to her core, I smirk behind her hair when I feel her wet heat coat my skin.

“If you thought that was great, I can’t wait for you to see your actual birthday present.”

“Yeah, no way anything tops what we just did.” She can’t convince me differently, either. Nothing is better than fucking her.

“Bet.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter Twelve

Mackenzie

“Last squat. Hold it for a second...and done.” Spencer claps his hands together with a grin as Grinder and I stand. “Well done, guys. Keep up with the list of exercises I’ve written down for y’all and you’ll be back on those two-wheeled machines in no time.”

“It’s not the machine I’m worried about. My dick hasn’t pounded into anything for fucking months.”

“Well, you were in a coma for a while, Grinder. Kinda hard to get your dick wet when you’re unconscious.” Boner swigs from his can, chuckling and shaking his head from where he’s sitting at the bar watching our unofficial physiotherapy session.

“Pfft. Unconscious or not, someone could have emptied my sack once in a while. Y’all did me dirty by leaving me blue for so long.” Grinder makes his way over to join Boner and I roll my eyes at their banter.

Violet places a shot of something clear in front of them both and leans over the bar, pushing her huge tits together so they both get an eyeful. Leaving them to it, I slide the chair I used for some of the exercises beneath the nearby table before sitting next to my best friend.

“Thanks for that. I know it’s not something you’ve trained for, but I appreciate the help. I’m sure Grinder does too, but he’s too much of a douche to say anything.” I tilt

my head to the side, watching the guys at the bar throwing peanuts at Violet's cleavage and finding it hilarious, laughing when Spence and I make eye contact again.

"Kristoff from the physiotherapy department gave me the sheets and a quick rundown of what was needed for your kind of injury. Grinder's too. It was no biggy." Spence shrugs and picks up his cell, checking it for the billionth time since he's been here.

"Everything okay?" I'm aware our conversations have centered around me and my problems a lot lately, but I hate the thought of something going on with him that he's keeping to himself.

Nodding for what feels like too long, Spence finally stops, looks up, and sighs heavily. "No, not really." Now that I'm looking at him properly, I can see the dark circles beneath his eyes and I notice he's not as cleanly shaven as usual. "It's Steve."

"Is he hurting you? Being an asshole? What can I do?" Maybe I'm overcompensating for my lack of action in our friendship recently, but it pains me to see him looking so down.

"Nothing like that." Spence huffs and allows a half smile to tip his lips. "He's just been a little off over the last few weeks, and I found some pills in his jacket pocket last week. I threw them away, but I'm worried. With all the deaths in town, the missing bodies, I think it's all connected and, somehow, I don't know why, I think Steve's involved."

"Oh, God. Were they the smiley face ones?" I tried hard to get as many of them off the streets as possible when I was the Toxic Rebels' drug mule, but now, I'm surprised they haven't closed the town off to the outside world. It's like a pandemic with the number of deaths caused by this thing.

“No, these ones had an indented X across the top. Before last night’s shift, Anthea—you remember Anthea, from the fire station radio—she gave me and my new partner some information on the new drug we had on board...” He pauses, likely for dramatic effect because that’s what he does. Serious conversation or not. “One only to be used in emergencies when we get called out on drug overdoses. I mean, weird, right?”

A twinge of something rumbles in my gut and I recognize it as a sense of longing. It’s the same feeling I get when I think about how long it’s been since I’ve ridden a motorcycle. I miss having a job, a purpose, but I’m not going to wallow on that because this isn’t about me.

“Yeah, totally weird. Have you asked him about it?” Look at me being all mature, suggesting an actual conversation happens rather than coming up with assumptions and fucking things up.

“I tried, but he avoided my question and made excuses about needing to get to work. I haven’t seen him in a couple of days.” Spence sighs and shakes his head. “I don’t know. Maybe there’s been an influx of dead bodies for his department to deal with at the hospital and he can’t get to his phone.”

He and I both know that what he’s saying is bullshit, because there’s no way the hospital would keep Steve there for two days without a break of any kind.

“You wanna stay here with us for a while?” I don’t know what else to suggest other than stalking him and forcing the truth out of him.

“Nah. I should get going. Got to feed the cat or she’ll scratch me to death next time she sees me.”

“You have a cat?” That’s surprising. I was sure Spencer is allergic to cats or is

grossed out by their hair or something.

“No, Steve has a cat. Old and ratty with an attitude that could kill, but she’s growing on me.” He stands and shoves his cell into the back pocket of his jeans. “Make sure you both keep up with your physio, okay? The top sheet is for you, the other one for Grinder, because you have different exercises.” Back to business then.

“No problem, boss.” I mock-salute him, giggling when he rolls his eyes.

“Go eat something. I’ll text you later.”

“Okay. Keep me updated with the Steve thing, though. And don’t hesitate to call me if you need anything. Got that? Anything !” I raise both my brows at him and push my fists into my hips, giving him my best stern face.

“Got it. Love ya.” Spence air kisses my cheek, then quickly looks over to Grinder and Boner at the bar before leaving through the double doors at the end of the room.

Physiotherapy is a lot better than I thought it would be, and I’m just as excited as Grinder to get my ass on a motorcycle again so I’m for sure going to do all I can to make that happen.

My cell pings and my eyes widen as I read the message.

“Yes!” I can’t help my vocal outburst. Finally, Aleko’s birthday present is ready, albeit a few days late.

“What’s the yessing all about, Mac?” Grinder spins around on his stool at the bar and tilts his head in curiosity.

“Can one of y’all take me into town, please?” I’m practically giddy with excitement.

Not only is Aleko going to love it, but so is Ninja. They're both at Rocks Off today, finishing off some final cleaning or whatever so they can open again by the end of the week, and even though I miss Aleko when he's not with me, this timing couldn't be more perfect.

"Oh no. Nope. Not happening." Boner is first to respond and I deflate a little, because I get it. I'm the reason Grinder nearly died on my last little outing into town.

"Don't listen to him. What kind of adventure are we going on today, Miss Thing?" Grinder's grin is catching, and I can't help but smile back at his mischievous face.

"I am happy to not be in control of driving if it helps? Here..." I show them both the message I just received.

"Fuck yeah!" Grinder slides off his stool and knocks back his drink. "Any of the prospects around? We've both been drinking and I don't trust you driving for shit. Adventures or not." He winks at me as Bash seems to appear from nowhere, a mop and bucket in hand. "Bash, drop the tools. Run to the garage and grab the keys for one of the trucks. Let's bounce."

"Where are we going?" Bash, rightfully, looks a little concerned about our little outing.

"We'll tell you on the way. Go on. Mush, Prospect, mush." Grinder mimes a whipping motion, grinning like a madman the whole time, before looking directly at me. "Text your man, tell him we're going out because I'm not being held responsible if he comes back and finds you gone...again." There's a hint of humor in his tone, but also a seriousness that I totally understand.

I nod, unwilling to do anything to jeopardize my future any more than I already have.

Me: Bash is taking me into town with Grinder and Boner. I have to pick something up from the shop. Promise we'll go there and come straight back.

Aleko: Don't leave their side. They're troublemakers ;)

"Are y'all going somewhere?" Mom and Sabrina are in the main foyer as we get to the front doors of the huge building that houses the bar and the living quarters.

Nodding, I show Mom the message I received and Sabrina leans over to have a peek also.

Sabrina taps Mom on the shoulder before signing something—making me wish I'd paid attention when Mom tried to teach me some things as a kid.

"Can we come with you? Sabrina wants to get a few things from the supermarket, so if y'all drop us off in town and we meet up when you're finished..." I swear, Mom is flourishing by being here. The quiet days are now few and far between and she's integrating herself into the daily lives of the people here more and more. She still doesn't participate in the larger gatherings for very long, but baby steps.

"Sure. Bash is just getting a truck. Oh shit, I don't know if there will be enough room for all of us."

Before I can debate any longer, Boner pipes in, "I'll ride behind y'all."

Well, okay then. That solves that problem, though I will admit to being a little jealous.

"You fucker. The minute I get back on my Bella, me and you, Boner, we're racing for funsies." Grinder bumps him on the shoulder as we all exit the building to find Bash waiting patiently for us to join him.

“Whatever, dude. You couldn’t beat me on your best day.”

Boner and Grinder continue to rib each other as we walk toward the truck, then Boner veers off, presumably to grab his motorcycle from the side of the building.

Crow and Hoops are in the garages as we drive past, one with his head beneath the hood of a beat-up sedan, and the other tweaking something on what looks like the exhaust of a badass Ducati. I know which job I’d prefer.

The drive into town is short, and as soon as we pull up outside the building, excitement begins bubbling in my stomach. Bash is a gentleman, opening the door for us to get out and watching as Mom and Sabrina head in the opposite direction for the supermarket down the road.

Me? I look up at the sign on the building and grin.

Time to pick up my Bandit.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter Thirteen

Aleko

The day started out so fucking great. Cherry's taste is still on my lips when we roll into the hospital parking lot and cut off our bike engines. I add to her delicious taste with a sucker, pushing it to the side of my cheek as we head inside.

Rocks Off is getting the final polish, which means we can open up and start earning back our lost money tonight. As soon as we finished up there, Prez told me we were going to check on the race chief to make sure the Irish threats were just that...empty threats. It's only the two of us, leaving our prospect, Jonesy, with Bear, Sledge, and Shade to finish up.

Cherry: Bash is taking me into town with Grinder and Boner. I have to pick something up from the shop. Promise we'll go there and come straight back.

The ping from my phone brings a goofy ass smile to my face when I see who it is. Except, as soon as I read her message, my entire body goes rock hard rigid. My first reaction is fear and worry with a high dose of controlling until I remember what happens when I try to bottle my Cherry up and keep her safe. She obliterates my plans to the point of putting herself in the thick of trouble. By her own admission, she's learned her lesson, but...one can never be sure, right?

So, instead of being overprotective, I opt for a higher dose of humor and pray it all works out.

Me: Don't leave their side. They're troublemakers ;)

There's no further response to my text but I can picture her jumping on her tiptoes and clapping her hands in victory. Fuck, her leaving the compound makes me sick with post traumatic stress.

Me : If anything happens to my girl, I will tear your balls off...slowly.

Boner : Ouch man. Fuck, what I ever do to you?

Me : Nothing. Keep it that way.

Boner : You're fucking psychotic.

Me : Thanks.

Boner : Not a compliment.

"Everything alright?" Prez's question is hesitant, like he really doesn't want to know if there's another problem.

"All good, Prez. Just having fun with Boner."

"Between you and Grinder, that kid is going to regret joining the Sons one day." He ain't wrong.

Chuckling, I put my phone in my back pocket just as we reach the nurse. I have a feeling I'm going to need all my charm for this task.

Movement at my side has me scanning the room. That's when I see a familiar man and his face brings me back to the worst memory of my life. He looks different, his

eyes are sunken in with purple circles like warning bells on his skin. Something's off about him, and that's saying something since the last time I saw him the love of my life was lying on his morgue table and I was about to slice his throat open for daring to take a scalpel to her body.

"Can I help..." The nurse, interrupting my trip down memory lane, raises her head and stutters when she sees us on the other side of her desk. "You?" It's not every day two big bikers who've been cleaning all day and probably look like hard core criminals stand here with big, hopefully harmless, grins on their faces. I pull the sucker from my mouth, savoring the flavor and rest my arms against the desk.

"Yes, we're looking for the chief? Johnston?" It occurs to me that I don't know his first name. We always either called him Chief or Johnston.

"Kenny." Prez looks at me and shrugs, and I get it...it's probably an age thing. "Kenny Johnston." With his eyes fixed on the nurse while she checks the computer, he whispers, "We went to high school together." Right, it's an age thing.

"Not judging, Prez." I can't help the snicker that escapes.

"Shut the fuck up."

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Johnston is no longer with us." The nurse looks ill at ease and it makes every fucking hair rise on my arms.

"That's great. When did he go home?" Clearly, Prez and I did not get the same vibe.

"No, sir. He's gone as in, he passed two nights ago." Fuck. I hate being right for shit like this. Crunching the sucker between my teeth, I sigh heavily.

Prez doesn't say anything, just stares at her like he can will a different outcome from

her.

“Thank you.” I’m pushing Prez away before she calls security, thanking her a couple of times more for good measure.

“I can say this.” We both swivel our head back to her and freeze. “He was doing fine, healing even. The doctor was about to let him go home but then his heart just...gave out, I guess.” She guesses?

“You guess?” Yeah, that!

“We didn’t find anything wrong with his heart, but I guess the strain of the bullet and the surgery was greater than we ever imagined.” When she’s finished, she shrugs then goes back to her job just as the phone rings.

Dismissed.

“Prez.”

“Yeah, I agree. It’s as fishy as a fucking oyster cult.” Frowning, I swing my head around to look at him.

“Huh?”

“Like the band?” Yeah, I know Blue Oyster Cult but why would it...you know what? Forget it.

“The Irish, then?”

“No doubt.” His answer is not exactly surprising, given that our conversation two days ago is the very reason we’re here today. These fuckers need to get the fuck out

of here. Or maybe their deaths would be good for the rest of the American population.

My ass vibrates with an incoming text. Normally, I'd ignore that shit during a conversation with Prez, but Cherry is out there in the real world and if something happens and I'm not looking at messages, I would fucking lose my shit.

Except it's not about Cherry. Not this time, at least.

Kincaid : Beaufort's dad.

Following her text, there's a picture of a distinguished man in a dark suit. It's not a frontal picture, but it's not profile either. More like three quarters. If I had to be objective, I'd say the guy's good looking enough, clean cut for damn sure; the epitome of a suit.

Kincaid : Fuck, we've been spotted.

By "we," she means her and Flower, who went on a stake out with her to try and get a visual on the pharma guy. Thankfully, their tech genius, Glitch, is here with us, so he can deep dive into Beaufort's life. Something ain't adding up in this town and he's the root of it all.

Me : We're good, get the fuck outta there.

Kincaid : Flower just shot the guy. We're leaving now.

Well, fuck. That escalated quickly.

"Uh, Prez?"

“I do not like that tone, Psycho. That tone says you’re about to give me bad news, and since we’ve just lost a cushy amount of earnings, I’m not happy about more shit going down.” We’re walking back to our bikes when Prez stops me and I show him the texts.

“Fuck.” With his hands on his hips and his head down, he looks tired. Like the weight of this life is beating him down. I get it. With Cherry by my side, I can understand that this way of living has some hardcore negative sides to it. “Let’s go. We’ll deal with the repercussions when they come to us.”

Cherry : Home safe and sound.

Thank fuck for small favors.

Back at the compound, I’m greeted with fifty shades of trouble.

Boner is so concentrated on his phone that I think he might get swallowed up by it. Meanwhile, Grinder looks like he’s going to explode with his eyes bulging and his lips pressing tightly together.

“Where’s Cherry?” I don’t mean to growl but...here we are.

“She’ll be right back.” The only person with big enough balls to answer me, ironically, is Violet.

“The fuck is wrong with you two?” My gaze darts from one to the other, and my suspicion that shit’s about to hit the fan just keeps on growing.

“Hey, baby.” At the sound of Cherry’s sing-song voice—also suspicious—I swing around, forgetting everything when I see her.

Fuck, she's perfect. Her jeans show off every sexy part of her while her midnight-blue sweater hangs off one shoulder, exposing silky skin I want to see tatted one day.

"As much as I love seeing you like this, Cherry Pie, my trouble radar is going off like a motherfucker." If I thought I was wary about whatever this is before, her acting coy with her hands behind her back just sends me over the edge. "What the fuck is going on?"

Cherry rolls her eyes. Like, overly so, just in case I'd miss it. "Can't a girl try to surprise her man?"

It occurs to me that using the "girl" and "man" when talking about us now annoys me.

"Soon to be husband." And just like that...I've announced our engagement to the whole fucking club. Okay, so it's only Grinder and Boner, but same shit. Those two are worse than ninety-year-old grandmas sitting on a bench at the retirement home.

Cherry brings one hand from behind her back, Ninja crawling up her arm and sitting on her shoulder. There's nothing wrong with that, for sure. Except, Ninja always comes to see me when I get home from club business. Right now, though, he's looking over Cherry's shoulder and not at me.

With his little butt in the air, he's bent over and looking behind her back.

Yeah, something's up, no doubt.

"Surprise!" I'd be annoyed at the high pitch screaming from the four of them but I'm too shocked by the thing in Cherry's hand.

It's all white and tiny. Like, smaller than the inside of her palm. Blinking once, twice,

I come to the conclusion that I'm not, in fact, hallucinating.

"Meet Bandit." Cherry's excitement is intoxicating and contagious and she's so fucking cute, I can't stand it.

"You got me a baby rat?" Bending over her hand, I don't disrupt the tiny creature, which is looking at me like I'm the monster from under the bed.

"It's called a pup." Right. I remember that now. It's been a few years since Ninja was a pup and now he's practically an adult. As if he can hear my thoughts, my excited boy runs down Cherry's arm, sniffs at the pup without jostling him too much, then jumps onto my shoulder and nuzzles into my neck.

"Bandit, huh?"

"Yes, he's all white with that black circle around his eye. It just fits." Raising a brow at Cherry, I grin, knowing I'm about to rile her up.

"Except bandits would have both their eyes covered with a mask." And I'm not disappointed with her reaction.

"Don't piss me off, Aleko, or else he'll just be mine and you can suck it." There's no venom in her words and she doesn't miss my reaction when she talks about sucking...she knows I'll suck her anytime, anywhere, she only needs to say the word.

"Psycho!" Prez's holler gets everyone's attention.

"Be right back." Leaning in, I kiss her hard and fast and make sure I leave her wanting for later.

With Ninja still on my shoulder, I jog to the next room where Prez is on the phone.

“Yeah, hold on, I’ll put you on speaker.” I’m the last one here. Shade and Hoops are leaning against the back wall while Flower and the big guy from last night are sprawled out on the couch. Bear is sitting on the desk, his head down, but I don’t miss how his gaze keeps going back to Flower.

Interesting .

I nod my hellos to everyone before giving my undivided attention to the phone call.

“S’up, guys? Name’s Glitch, or Tech Dude for Flower.” Bear snorts but doesn’t say anything as Glitch continues his report. “I just did a deep dive into Harrison Beaufort here and in New York. At first, I was just looking for activity, sketchy employees, his rapey son—sorry, there are like a dozen lawsuits that have been snuffed out by his father—and his business.” In the background, the unmistakable sound of fingers tapping against a keyboard fills in the silence while he does whatever he’s doing. “Now, in New York, they had a rise in drug busts, specifically a new form of LSD ravaging the upper crust of the Financial District. Oddly enough, just about the same time as the smiley faces started killing young kids over here, Beaufort was making himself nice and cozy within the high society of Rockford Beach. Coincidence? Yeah, I don’t believe in those. I believe in stats and graphs and fucking math.”

“Hey, Techy, do we know the difference between the drugs here and the ones in Manhattan?” Flower is sitting cross legged, her hands resting on either knee.

“Wasn’t he here last night? Why are we talking to him on the phone?” I’m so fucking confused, like people are keeping shit from me.

“He’s got his set-up in the room that has the best service for his tech shit.” Frowning at Bear’s explanation, I still don’t get it. The compound is not that big, he could give us a report face to face.

“Glitch doesn’t do people. Besides, he needs his equipment to bring up information and graphs and be able to answer any of our questions.” Flower smiles like she’s proud to give us all the information we need. “Hey, so...are you more grizzly or teddy?”

Bear and I both frown at her question because...what the actual fuck does that even mean?

“He’s definitely teddy in the body of a grizzly.” Everyone, and I mean every-fucking-one in this room, turns to Shade when he answers Flower.

“Right on.” Flower’s answer is like a fist bump and Shade’s slight blush is just...shocking.

“Brother, I think you’ve got competition.” Yes, I love fucking with my best friend.

“Shut your fucking mouth.” Bear is not amused, and if I’m understanding the ribbing, the teddy bear side has lost big time to the grizzly side of him.

“Hellooo, I’m still here. So, to answer Flower, the shit in New York was straight up laced LSD, but the pills here are some kind of mixture that’s supposed to be a sort of hyped up Ritalin. Ha! That’s funny.” It’s not. Not even a little bit. Our youth are fucking dying.

Python lost his life to this shit, it’s not making me laugh in the least.

“Sorry, I forget that other people aren’t as awkward as me.”

“All right, thanks, Glitch. We’ll let you know if we need anything else.”

Prez hangs up and we all sit in silence for a bit until I take my phone out and pull up

the picture Kincaid sent.

Something niggles at the corners of my mind and I can't seem to shake it.

"Does he look familiar to you at all?"

Bear stares at the picture of Beaufort for a minute before shaking his head.

"Nah, he looks like any other rich, white, douchebag."

Fair point. But...

I'm still staring at the picture when I walk back into the rec room, trying to put the pieces together when I sit on the couch and pull Cherry to my side with Ninja sleeping in my hoodie.

"Oh, I think Bandit should sleep with Ninja. I want them to be besties." Cherry gets to her knees, and with care and love, places Bandit inside my hoodie. I don't miss her sigh of contentment and it makes me so fucking happy that she's okay.

She'll be okay. We'll be okay. More than that...we'll be fucking perfect.

Then she gasps, her fingers curling around the shoulder of my hoodie, her entire body tense enough that I can feel it.

"Why the fuck do you have a picture of Jake on your phone?"

Chapter Fourteen

Mackenzie

“ W hy did I not know that rats are supposed to eat their own shit?” Shade laughs, setting down one of the many leaflets the pet shop gave me a few days ago.

“Something about absorbing the nutrients from their food.” Prez’s quick response surprises me and Aleko chuckles at my back.

I’m sitting in his lap, with Ninja and Bandit napping on the table in the makeshift portable bed I bought. Aleko’s arms are wrapped around my waist, his chin nestled into my shoulder, and we’re watching some of the brothers making a Guy Fawkes to burn on the bonfire this evening.

Sledge insisted we need one because apparently “Remember remember, the 5th of November” is a whole thing in the UK. Something to do with a plot to kill the king gone wrong in the 1600’s. I wasn’t really listening because Bandit was trying apple slices for the first time and it was so damn cute watching Ninja share one of his favorite snacks.

The basis of the whole 5th of November thing is apparently to burn this Guy and set fireworks off. Seems a little fucked up to me, but if the rest of the UK is anything like Sledge, then I’m not surprised. Either way, it should be a good night.

“Your mum makes a bangin’ chili, Mac. Just had a taste test and it’s fuckin’ perfect.” Sledge barges through the double doors of the rec room, a huge grin on his face and

rubbing at his stomach. “And those jacket potatoes, man, she proper nailed it. The prospects are piling up the wood and shit for the bonfire, and I’m heading out to set up the fireworks.” Almost giddy with excitement, and not giving a fuck that no one is responding, Sledge grabs one of the large boxes full of pretty explosives and practically skips back out of the room.

“What in the actual fuck is a jacket potato?” Crow lifts his head from stuffing paper into an old sweater, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“Dunno, man. I’m legit picturing Mr. Potato Head with a jacket on though.” Grinder cackles loudly and continues wadding up balls of paper for the others to stuff into the clothes that will make up our Guy.

“Pretty sure he means baked potato, but the Brits have weird ass names for shit that make zero sense.” Hoops, ever the sensible one. Yet he still has a small grin tipping the corners of his lips upward.

“Sledge is always like a kid at Christmas with this shit. Every fuckin’ year. I think this is the first time he’s been so excited about the food though.” Aleko squeezes me a little as he speaks, like he’s just as happy as I am that Mom and I are here.

“Mom was always good at that. Where do you think I learned to bake cookies so well?”

“Your mom taught you how to bake poison cookies?” His low laugh tickles the skin behind my ear.

“If she did, you should be more worried about the food she’s been feeding y’all, don’tcha think?” I chuckle, snuggling back into him before sighing. “I should ask Mom about that photo, shouldn’t I?” I’ve been putting it off since I saw it a couple of days ago, afraid of the can of worms I could open, seeing as she didn’t readily offer

any information when we talked about Jake having a different dad.

“Whenever you’re ready, Cherry. Want me to come with?” I don’t deserve this man. No. I mentally chastise myself because that line of thinking only seems to come with shitty consequences.

“No. I’ll see if she and Sabrina need any help cooking. Maybe I can make some non-poison cookies for later.”

The rumble from his laugh goes through me again and I smile. He’s like the rats, purring when he’s pleased, and I’ve never been happier than in this moment. Okay, that’s a lie, but the sentiment is still there.

I leave Bandit and Ninja with Aleko and the brothers in the rec room, heading toward the kitchen. Mom and Sabrina are signing to each other when I walk in, smiling at something before they notice me and wave me over.

“Hey, darlin’. We’re almost finished up here so you can help wrap the baked potatoes Sledge insisted on if you like?” Mom shakes a roll of aluminum foil in the air. “Keeps them warm.”

“Sure. I was going to bake some cookies for dessert.” Taking the foil, I rip a length off and wrap a potato, smiling at what Sledge called them earlier. I could make actual little jackets out of the foil, but that would take far too long and I doubt the brothers would appreciate the humor, favoring ripping the wrapping off to eat them.

“Oh, what a good idea.” Mom signs something to Sabrina, who responds in kind. “Sabrina said you’re spoiling the brothers, but she’ll finish wrapping those while you bake. It’s been a long time since the smell of cookies filled these halls.” She begins pulling some ingredients from the cupboards, placing them on the work surface in a neat line, ready for me. “I think this is all you need, if you’re using the recipe I taught

you.” Mom’s smile is catching, and I’m afraid I’m going to make it disappear, but I’m not avoiding shit anymore.

“Yup. The one and only.” They really are the best cookies in the world—without the poison, of course.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m rolling balls of dough and placing them on the baking tray. Sabrina signs something to Mom before grabbing a container full of foiled potatoes and leaving the kitchen.

“She’s taking them down to the buffet table and rounding up some prospects to help with the rest.” Mom translates for Sabrina, and I nod in acknowledgement.

Now’s my moment.

“Mom?”

“Yeah, darlin’?” She continues to stir the pot of what I’m assuming is chili because the spices make my nose tickle.

Finishing off the last of the dough balls, I slide the tray into the warm oven and check the time so they don’t burn. I’m stalling, I know. With a deep, fortifying breath, I pull my cell from the pocket of my maxi dress. Because, yes, this thing has freaking pockets. It’s magical.

“Do you recognize this man?” Without giving a hint of my own suspicions, I show Mom the picture Kincaid sent Aleko. The picture that made me think Jake had somehow come back from the dead.

The color drains from Mom’s face, leaving a pale, scared woman in front of me, and I now feel like shit for causing it. I quickly switch it off, worried that Mom may be

about to have another episode and the only defense against it that I can offer her is a hug. The memory of her words from our last conversation chooses this moment to come back to me, and I realize I could have approached this with a little more care. She had a restraining order against this man. Ran away from him.

“I’m sorry, M—”

“That’s Jake’s father. How did you...is he...What—”

Like me, she has a thousand questions and doesn’t seem to know where to begin. So I give her the information I have, which isn’t a lot.

“He lives in Stonebrook Falls, the next town over. With his wife and son. Some big-wig business man that owns a pharmaceutical company.”

Mom takes a few deep breaths, slowly in and out, like I’ve seen her do several times with Sabrina, then she nods to herself and pulls out some cleaning supplies. Closing her eyes for a second, she inhales again, opening them on an exhale as she begins wiping down the counters.

“Harrison Beaufort...” The words are like acid on her tongue and she pauses a moment before continuing. “Knowing your brother is gone made me believe I’d never have to hear that name again. Never have to see his face again. He’s a dangerous man, darlin’.” She begins washing the mixing bowl I used to make the cookies, scrubbing it clean to within an inch of its life. “I met a woman, years ago, Mrs. Howell was her name. She ran a home for women like me just outside of town. I had your father by then, but I attended regular meetings and one day, she told me about a new woman she had taken in. She only knew her abuser as Harrison but I knew it was him. The way she described how he controlled her, the leash...how could it be anyone else? A few weeks after she showed up, there was a fire. Just like the one he set before I managed to get the restraining order. It was so terrifying...” Mom’s

body begins to tremble, but she continues on anyway. “I never met Mrs. Howell’s son, but he was the only survivor. Women. Children...” Tears begin falling down Mom’s cheeks and her voice hitches.

“Mom, please. You don’t have to.” Now I’m wondering why I even brought the whole thing up. Well, no, that’s not technically true because I had this need to know who this man is. The similarity to Jake is overwhelming and I needed to confirm he hasn’t come back from the dead.

Gripping Mom’s arm lightly, I turn her to face me, take the sponge and bowl from her hands to put them down, then hug her. It takes a few moments before she hugs me back, but when she does, she squeezes hard and sobs into my neck.

“I love you, Mom.”

The bonfire has been going for a solid few hours, the Guy easily burned away quickly with whoops and hollers from the brothers. Bear grumbled like a motherfucker about spending more time making the damn thing than it took to burn, but he’s been enjoying the food on offer.

Sabrina and Mom are in one of the suites; after our talk earlier and with the fireworks going off soon, they wanted to be in a safe space. I get it. The hits just keep on coming for Mom, her mind easily wanders back to the shit she experienced with Harrison and with the Toxic Rebels that used to visit her at the psychiatric facility. It’s something I can relate to after my own experiences, but I have Aleko to help center me. The love of Mom’s life is no longer here.

Shaking my thoughts aside, I concentrate on the conversations happening around me. Aleko is with Sledge and Grinder getting the fireworks in place, which I’m not sure is the best idea, but when I see Bear heading in their direction, I’m relieved. He’ll make sure they’re not about to blow up the compound. Hopefully.

“How’re you doin’, Mac?” Vanessa sits beside me, passing me a fresh can.

“I’m good, thanks. You?” Small talk is my enemy. I’m not a fan, but I’ll do pretty much anything for Vanessa at this point. She’s becoming one of my closest friends.

She squeals as Prez comes over, lifts her up, sits in her seat, and places her back on his lap, his arms wrapped securely around her.

“You big brute.” Vanessa giggles, and I can’t help the smile that stretches across my face. These two are made for each other.

“Your big brute.” He kisses the side of her neck, making her giggle again, and I want to be just like them when I grow up...

“Where are Bandit and Ninja tonight?” Vanessa loves them almost as much as we do.

“They’re up in the soundproofed suite with Mom and Sabrina because we don’t want the fireworks to scare them.” Aleko told me it’s where Ninja usually spends the 5th of November with one of the Khaos Khunts.

“Are they getting along okay?”

“Yeah, best of friends already. They’re constantly snuggled together in Aleko’s hoodie or in their bed. I think Ninja’s happy to have a buddy.”

“So cute. I’ve made a few bags of snacks for them and left them in the main fridge for you. Make sure you tell them Aunt Vanessa prepared them.” She chuckles and places her palm over Prez’s against her stomach. Their private pain hits me a little, the small action nothing to the outside world, but they know. I know. Vanessa and I have both lost babies, but at least I still have the chance to get pregnant again. Vanessa doesn’t have that.

“I heard through the grapevine that you and Psycho are getting married. Does that mean we get to plan a big elaborate club wedding or are you eloping to the courthouse?” Vanessa has no filter and I love it. I guess the news spread from Grinder and Boner as quickly as Aleko guessed it would.

“I’m not sure. I think if Aleko had his way, we’d already be married, so it could go either way at this point.”

“Whichever way it does go, make sure Griffin and I get a front row seat with your mom, okay? We’ve been rooting for you from the start and the way you make our Psycho happy, well, it feels like how we started out, doesn’t it, baby?” Vanessa looks over her shoulder at Prez, a goofy look in her eyes, as though he is her whole world.

“Yeah. You women sure do know how to cause trouble for the Sons, don’tcha?” The laughter from them both holds secrets I don’t think I’ll ever know, but it’s freaking beautiful.

“So, Mac. What’s next for you?” Prez’s question catches me off-guard. Mainly because I don’t have a fucking clue, but also because it’s not what I’d expect from him, especially not in this moment.

“Honestly? I don’t really know. I loved being an EMT, but the hours were shit.” We all laugh because it’s true. Working a twenty-four hour shift every three days meant it was difficult to maintain any sort of structure. I mean, practically being a slave to my brother and his club didn’t help either, but that’s neither here nor there.

“I’ve got a friend who’s looking for some help, if you’re interested?” That doesn’t sound ominous at all...

“What kind of help?” I’m curious, but I know the prez wouldn’t put me in a terrible situation like the Rebels did. So I know for sure it’s not the kind of help that would

get me in trouble.

“Her name’s Maribel, and she’s setting up a new hostel in town. Said she could do with an extra pair of hands to help with some of the day to day things. I don’t know exactly what, but I have her number if you want to find out more.” Prez hands over a small card, the number on the back, that he just so happened to have in the pocket of his jeans.

“Thanks. I’ll think about it. I appreciate it.” And I really do. The thought of being useful again, having a purpose other than just existing, it’s exactly what I need.

Speaking of things I need, Aleko chooses this moment to saunter over to us, a half smirk on his lips and that damn single brow raised, a look in his eyes that says he wants to devour me whole.

“Sorry, Prez, but I’m stealing my woman back.” Aleko doesn’t even look at Prez or Vanessa. Instead, he scoops me up, taking the can from my hand and placing it on the brick wall I was sitting on. “You looked fucking delicious sitting there, Cherry. Too delicious not to taste.” Carrying me bridal style, he takes me around the side of the building. It’s darker here without the lights and laughter coming from the crowd around the bonfire.

“Aleko, someone could see!”

“That didn’t bother you the first time I slid inside your little wet pussy.” His smirk grows, taking over his whole face as he places me down with my back against the wall.

He’s not wrong. That first time was exhilarating. The sounds of engines revving, people hollering all around us, it was a thrill. I didn’t race that day, but Aleko did, and he was magnificent.

I squeal when he kneels, pushing up the skirt of my long maxi dress, and presses his warm mouth to my pussy. Holy fuck, he's good at that. The ball of his barbell just adds an extra sensation I can't explain. There's no holding back when two fingers find their way inside me, his tongue lapping at my clit, and my knees buckle as an orgasm flows through me like lightning, as if it came from nowhere. Only, it didn't come from nowhere. Aleko is fucking masterful with his tongue.

Taking his time to lick my slit, he looks up at me as he slowly pulls his fingers from my pussy before pushing them into his mouth and sucking on them as he stands.

“Turn around, Cherry. I need to see that ass.”

Obliging, I turn and place my hands against the wall, then I arch my back just a little when he lifts my skirt up and over my ass, baring me to him completely. Because, of course, I'm not wearing panties again. It drives Aleko crazy every time, and I fucking love it.

“Oh, you're a naughty girl. If it didn't make me so fucking hard I'd demand you wear panties around the brothers, but knowing it's all for me, and they don't have a fucking clue, yeah...you're hot as fuck, Cherry. So wet for me.” He drags his fingers over my slit, all the way up and over my asshole before putting a little pressure there with his thumb.

He slides his other hand up my back and into my hair before gripping it, holding me in place just as his cock pistons into me.

“Oh, God! Yes!” I scream out at the sensation, the pain from how he's pulling my hair, the pleasure from how his cock pushes in and out of me...it's everything.

Bringing the hand that was holding my ass in place around to my front, Aleko leans over me, impossibly closer than before, and pinches my nipple, kneading my breast at

the same time.

Another orgasm begins building, straight from the tips of my toes, and I swear Aleko is holding me up, because I could easily fall to the ground with the amount of pleasure tingling its way through my body.

“That’s it, don’t come yet, baby.” He pinches my nipple again, harder this time, and it’s fucking incredible. He continues to pound into me, a tight grip on my hair, a firm hold on my breast, his breath at my ear...I love this man.

The squeal of fireworks adds to the moment, bangs going off and the flash of colorful lights all around us as my orgasm becomes so intense I could pass out. It’s flowing throughout my whole body, tingling, making me almost spasm just as Aleko says, “Come all over my cock, Cherry.”

I yell out as he shudders inside me, filling me with his cum as his hold on my breast and hair get gentler. More soothing.

Closing my eyes, I try to get my breath back, with Aleko stroking a palm over my ass and no doubt looking at where we’re joined.

He pulls out of me, scooping up our cum with his fingers and pushing it back inside me. I shake my head and chuckle because I know what he’s doing.

I stand and turn to face my man, tenderly kissing him on the lips as I wrap my arms around him.

Fireworks going off in the sky above provide the perfect backdrop to this perfect moment. The kaleidoscope of colors flash and bang, lighting up the darkness, which is exactly what Aleko does for me.

Even with the tragedies we've both had to overcome, this moment couldn't be more fairytale-like.

Until the blood curdling scream that will forever change our lives hits us like an atomic shock wave.

“Noooooooo!”

Chapter Fifteen

Aleko

“What the fuck was that?” Mackenzie and I both freeze and ask the same question at the same time. It feels like that moment lasts a thousand lifetimes, and to be honest, I wish it would. All too quickly, we scramble to cover our naked bodies before I clasp my hand over hers and pull her toward the sound.

The whole way there, my mind is reeling at the possibilities. Maybe it was a snake. Although we don't really see many after September, it's not completely out of the question. Some of the venomous ones have been known to surface around this time of year.

Just as the thought pops in, it's immediately discarded. Bear would have taken care of that problem without hesitation.

Maybe the fire got out of hand? No, that's not possible. There's no significant wind and—

“Somebody do something! Oh, God. No. No!” Fuck, that voice...it's ripping my insides right out.

“Hurry, Aleko! We need to go help!” My steps slow at Mackenzie's words, whereas hers pick up in speed, separating our joined hands. As I watch her speed run around the building, I realize I've stopped moving. I'm frozen in place and I think it's because my body knows this is bad faster than my brain does.

Because my feet know that once I turn that corner, nothing will be the same again, and honestly, I don't know if I can take another devastating turn in our lives.

Our lives. Those two words get my legs moving because no fucking way am I letting my Cherry Pie go through another traumatizing event all alone. Fuck that and fuck the universe for apparently hating the fuck out of us.

“Do something, Mac. Do something, please. Oh, God, please, please, please do something.” Vanessa's wails are like a spear through the middle of my heart. It hurts. It fucking hurts so goddamn bad because I know—I fucking know how she feels right now. There's no worse feeling than this.

“There's...” Mackenzie's voice hitches once, then again, before she can finish her sentence. “There's nothing for me to do.” With her admission, she falls to her knees and wraps her arms around Vanessa so tightly that I can see the color draining from her fingers. Or maybe I'm imagining it.

My steps are slow, and from this angle, I can't exactly see what's going on. Not with Mac and Vanessa blocking my view.

One more step and I see legs, then jean-clad thighs. Followed by the bottom of a cut.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. God, please, no.

Upon taking my last step, I can see over the heads of the two most important women in my life, and what lies beyond them causes my knees to buckle and my breath to lock in my throat.

There's a flurry of commotion all around us, people screaming, bikes revving, brothers running, and women crying silently. More than a couple not so silently at all.

Through it all, I can't move. I can only stare, willing the sight before me to be a bad joke, a prank gone wrong, a stupid, drunken bet.

Except I've seen bullet holes before and there's no mistaking the truth of the scene at my feet.

A real bullet in the middle of our president's skull. Right between his eyes. There's no coming back from this. There's no hoping for the ambulance to get here soon enough. There's no hope...at all.

The only true father figure in my life is lying dead on the cold November ground and there isn't a fucking thing I can do about it.

"Psycho! Come on, mate, let's go!" My head snaps to the side where Sledge is screaming at me, and from the expression on his face, I'm guessing he's been at it for a while. Blinking, I turn my head back to Prez and suddenly it's like a dam has broken inside me. Only, instead of water pouring out, it is pure, unfiltered rage and hatred that has me stepping back. One step, two steps, until I'm running toward Sledge and shouting orders at Bash, Jonesy, and Kincaid.

"Bash, Jonesy, you cover him. Did someone call nine-one-one?" My brain is back at work but my heart is hiding inside a titanium safe until we find who did this.

"Yeah, police and ambulance are less than two minutes away." The thought that it doesn't matter if they're two minutes or two hours away crosses my mind but I shove that shit away.

"Kincaid, you take the women inside and put the whole fucking place on lockdown until further notice, got it?" I'm not even looking at her as I throw out directives but she knows what needs to be done. I know for a fact I can count on her.

“Let’s go. It was a sniper shot from straight ahead, over there.” Shade and Hoops are on either side of me, explaining what happened. I’m completely dissociated, like we aren’t talking about the beloved president of this fucking club being executed on our own fucking land. “It had to have come from over there.” Shade points to the barren field beyond our property and I don’t miss the slight trembling of his hand and the barely contained rage in the tone of his voice.

“No way he was on our side of the line, we’ve got booby traps and triggers all over the fucking place. This was a professional job done by a fucking sniper. Probably ex-military because that son of a bitch did not miss and only fired once.” I’m soaking up all the information Hoops is giving me and we don’t need to say the words out loud to know exactly who the fuck did this.

The fucking Irish.

Well, they’ve been begging for war. I guess they’ve got it now.

The sound of my name being called has me snapping around and searching her out. Gone is the woman I knew less than twenty minutes ago. Gone are the bright smiles and positive eyes. In their place is the shell of who Vanessa used to be. The woman I see now, standing at the top of the stairs with Mackenzie holding her by the waist as she struggles to stay upright, is already just half alive. And I know all too well where her other half has gone.

“Griffin loves...” Knowing she can no longer use the present, she pauses, takes a fortifying breath that hitches into a small sob, then tries again. “Griffin loved you like his own son. You find the son of a bitch who did this and you put a bullet through his head. Do you understand me?” I nod, not sure my voice could work well enough to be heard all the way across the road.

But I whisper it and make sure she can see my mouth move.

“I promise.”

The Sons and the Reapers all spread out in a straight, horizontal line as we walk from our compound to the edge of the property. As we anticipated, we didn't find anything on our side, it's just not possible for anyone to come to this side without setting off our alarms.

“The fence is easy enough to climb over, let's go see what's there.” Bear is already jogging to the neighbor's property, avoiding a trigger line probably set up by Python back in the day.

We're about five hundred yards from where our bonfire was roaring and the tree line to the neighbor's property is another three hundred yards. Hoops is right, no fucking way this was amateur. Those motherfuckers brought in a professional.

“Hey, Boss, we've got a problem.” A few yards beside me, Flower is on the phone and I'm guessing she's calling Marco Mancini to let him know a close ally has just been murdered by a common enemy. “Yeah, I know. Nah, we're good, but Marco should know we may have casualties.” As she says this, her gaze darts over to me so quickly I almost miss it. Except I'm staring at her and not even pretending I'm not listening in on her conversation. “Got it. Yeah, Glitch's van is full. Sure will, Boss. Tell Shoo we miss his little face!”

She doesn't even wait for an answer and just hangs up the phone like she's scared of the repercussions.

“Who was that?” Polite walked out the door when my Prez was executed.

“The Shadow.” Ah, yes. I've heard of the Shadow. The only female capo in existence and leader of the Reapers up in New York.

“Badass.” Every person I’ve ever met has said this. She’s about to answer when I spot something glistening in the moonlight right at the end of the clearing that leads to the small forest. “Don’t move.”

“Yeah, we’re not gonna do that, okay?” I turn to her, annoyed, because I want my attention solely on whatever it is that’s caught my sight.

“Do what, exactly?” When I face her once more, there’s no doubt I’m scowling. Sometimes I think I have Resting Dickhead Face.

“The whole”—she waves her fingers around my face then body and back to my face like she’s encompassing my whole body—“me man, you woman. Let me protect you bullshit.”

I grin, which she definitely does not like.

“Hey, suit yourself, FloFlo, but you were about to step on a boobie trap.” At my words, Flower freezes, looking around her feet, trying to find the culprit. Then she takes her phone out and turns the flashlight on.

“I can’t see it.”

Shaking my head, I keep walking and throw my answer over my shoulder. “That’s ‘cause I just saved your ass.”

Behind me, Flower grunts. I’m about to give her shit when I hear Bear call out, “Found something!”

Careful not to blow ourselves up, we gather around Bear and look down at the small patch of grass at our feet.

Lying there, like a fucking staged theatre set, is a piece of paper with a rifle casing lying dramatically on top.

“It’s a point three o’ eight. American made.” Hoops, our military know it all, looks up at me and frowns. “I was right. This was ex-military.”

Something catches my eye so I crouch down and pick up the paper.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Chapter Sixteen

Mackenzie

“Please don’t leave me, baby!” Vanessa has her arms gripped around Prez’s torso as she lies beside him, almost as if they’re just having a lazy morning in bed and she’s snuggled against him.

It’s fucking heartbreaking.

Her screams, her cries, her pleas for him to come back to her...

If this is anything close to what Aleko went through when I “died,” then I have a hell of a lot more making up to do with that man. It just hammers home that the decisions I made were selfish as fuck. I need to do better.

The ambulance arrived twenty minutes ago, and they’ve been waiting patiently to take him away after confirming he’s dead. It’s a shame Spence isn’t working tonight, with Aleko and a whole lotta Sons out searching for the shooter, I could do with the comfort. Mom and Sabrina are still up in the sound-proofed room with Ninja and Bandit, and everyone still out here is seething with barely controlled rage.

However, now is not the time to have my own pity party because this isn’t about me. This time, Vanessa is at the heart of this tragedy. The love of her life is gone. Just like that. No warning. No time for goodbye. Just gone.

I slowly approach Vanessa from behind and wrap my arms around her, trying to

gently pry her away from Prez so the EMTs can do their job. The longer he lies there, motionless, the more images of this sickening moment she'll have planted in her brain.

Bash must catch on to what I'm trying to do because he sets down the bottle he had a white-knuckle grip on and comes over.

"Let me." He twitches his head to signal for me to stand aside. I can barely hear him because Vanessa's screams are so loud, but I get the gist of what he's saying and I move. She's freakishly strong, but that's not surprising in this situation. Her need to never let go of her man is deep-rooted, and doing so means accepting he's gone.

With ease, Bash lifts Vanessa from Prez and nods for the EMTs to do their thing. She screams for her husband as he grips her tightly from behind and lifts her, kicking and scratching at him to get away. Her whole body goes limp once the EMTs lift Prez, placing him on the stretcher after the police have cordoned off the area surrounding him and taken their photos, and they cover his face with a white sheet. The wails that come from her remind me of the moment Mom was told that Dad hadn't made it, that he was gone.

Like then, I'm utterly useless. There's nothing I can do or say to make this better for her. Nothing in the world other than him miraculously opening his eyes can heal her heart. While this is sad for me, it's just that. Sad. It's fucking gut wrenching, shred your soul pain for Vanessa.

The deputy sheriff, Celia Shipman, is ordering around the other cops as they talk to the Khunts and brothers left behind. It's a flurry of activity and yet none at all. Surreal is an understatement.

Bash calls me over as the EMTs roll the stretcher toward the ambulance, just as Vanessa collapses to the floor like a broken ragdoll, landing on her hands and knees

and curling over herself. She sobs into her hands, which are covered in Prez's blood, just like the rest of her beautiful cream outfit.

Kneeling beside her, I wrap my arms around her to let her know she's not alone. She still has people here who love her. It won't help for shit right now because the world is never going to be the same for her, but one day, when she's ready, she'll be grateful for the support.

I'm not sure how long we kneel on the solid ground, the bonfire still roaring behind us, but the brothers who left to search out the killer finally return. The Reapers are with them, and if circumstances were different, I'd chuckle at the cute, tiny woman walking among all those huge leather-clad men with an expression that promises death. She could easily lead an army.

Aleko searches me out as soon as he rounds the corner of the building. His eyes, when they land on mine, are filled with so much pain and anger, I'm not sure which one is riding him most. They flick across to Vanessa, then back to me, and he stalks toward me, giving no fucks who needs to step aside for him to take the quickest route.

"Hey, Mac. I've got her." Shade's deep timber tone is beside me just as Aleko crouches down to our level. "Come on, V." He somehow manages to hook his arm beneath her knees and lift her. She immediately curls into him and continues sobbing. Holding her close, Shade nods to Aleko before heading toward the building.

The time I've spent with the Sons has taught me how close they all are to each other. But I've also seen all the individual friendships that have blossomed between them, and from that, I know Shade is going to be hit by this in a different way to the others. Prez and Shade went to school together, joined the club as prospects at the same time, and they have been best friends for most of their lives.

Arms wrap around my waist as I watch them disappear inside, and the smell that is

uniquely Aleko invades my senses. His body presses against my back and he nestles his chin into the dip between my neck and my shoulder.

“I fucking love you, Cherry Pie.” The words are husky, as though he’s been shouting for hours on end and his throat is desperate to get these final words out. He’s trembling, but I can’t determine whether it’s from the pain or from the anger. It’s probably a combination of both.

“I love you too, Aleko.”

All around us, seething bikers are downing shot after shot, the empty glasses exploding in the bonfire, and as I move to turn and face my man, the room hushes.

“I know we all want vengeance on those Irish bastards for what they’ve done tonight. But we need to be smart and not fuck ourselves over in the name of revenge.” Hoops is standing tall beside the makeshift outside bar. He pauses a moment, emotion threatening to take over, but he pulls himself together and continues. “Prez would tell us to plan this shit, not go in raging. We need to do this right, get our fucking ducks in a row and keep our club safe or it’s all been for fucking nothing. Tonight, we drink for our Prez. Griffin Michaels. Friend, brother, husband. And tomorrow, we prepare. Those fuckers will regret fucking breathing.” Hoops raises his shot in the air. “For Prez!”

The whole club follows suit, raising whatever glasses, bottles, or cans they have. Bash quickly hands a shot to Aleko, who then does the same before they all yell, “For Prez!” Then they drink and a kind of calm before the storm settles over them.

Aleko throws his empty glass onto the bonfire and it lands with a crack as he grips onto me again.

“Come on.” Taking his hand in mine, I step out of his arms and head for the double

doors into the back of the building. This is hitting Aleko in ways I don't think he even knew were possible, and I can't imagine not being able to spill blood or blow shit up is easy for him, so I lead him to our suite.

Going through the motions, Aleko undresses in silence, his mind clearly elsewhere. We both use the bathroom and I get into bed first, pulling the dark sheets back for him to climb in beside me. With a heavy sigh, Aleko nestles into me, his head against my stomach, and I finally feel his body relax a little. The way his muscles loosen slightly is visible and we just lie there for I don't know how long, this time, with me comforting him, stroking my hands through his hair and across his back.

A few wet drops slide across my stomach, but before I can say anything, Aleko moves and kisses them away. More gentle than I've ever felt them, his lips work their way over my stomach, my thighs, and when they reach the slit of my pussy I can't hold back the moan. I continue to thread my fingers through his hair as Aleko climbs on top of me, carefully spreading my legs to give him better access.

The moment his tongue touches me, my back automatically arches and I have zero control over my body as he sucks on my clit, pushing two fingers into my pussy and quickly drawing out my first orgasm. It's so quick, I barely have time to breathe before he's hovering over me, the head of his cock sliding against my entrance.

Aleko's eyes are full of so much pain as he stares down at me, the cool-blue depths red-rimmed with emotion, but I know he needs this just as much as I do. To remember we're still here. We're not gone. The unshed tears and dark shadows are fighting for dominance, but it's as though being in this moment pushes that aside, ever so briefly.

Leaning down, he takes my lips with his, gently parting them with his tongue, and I can taste myself on him. His tongue begins to battle with mine as his cock drives into me, over and over, but it's not desperate or quick, it's slow and steady, his pelvis

rubbing against my clit with every push inside me. It's so deep, so gentle, and my next orgasm builds into something so powerful I could explode. He doesn't mean to draw it out, he's just taking the pleasure from me that he needs, and I'm more than happy to give it, but the pace is excruciating.

All my nerves are on edge, waiting for that moment I finally give in to the sensations flowing through my body, but I refuse until Aleko's ready. Our mouths are fused together as his thrusts become more urgent, one of his hands squeezing my hip, the other behind my head, gripping at my hair and holding me close.

His movements get jerky and he lets out a satisfied growl as he comes inside me, and it's the key to unlocking my own orgasm. The feel of his cock pulsing against the walls of my pussy sends jolts of electricity through me and we both moan into each other's mouths. With his cock still inside me, Aleko pulls back with watery eyes and places a featherlight kiss on the tip of my nose. Then he buries his head into the crook of my neck and breaks my heart all over again.

His silent cry is something I never want to experience again after tonight, and I can fully understand how helpless he's felt when I've done the same thing.

The world will burn before I allow Aleko to get hurt like this again, because as much as he wants to protect me, I will happily risk every ounce of his rage in order to do the same for him.

Chapter Seventeen

Aleko

It's been three weeks since the glue that has always held our club together was ripped away from us. Between the administrative shit of declaring the death, getting the certificates—both short and long—and picking the casket since Vanessa can barely get out of bed from the weight of her grief, it's been a whirlwind of emotions around here. Our only saving grace is that Prez had an entire folder with all of his wishes written out. Then there's the investigation of our club. We don't like strangers all up in our business on a good day, so it was no surprise that the brothers got a little heated when the cops started acting like the place belonged to them, banning us from areas on our own property. Boner had to physically restrain Grinder before he scooped out some poor rookie's eyeballs with a spoon.

Unfortunately, that's not a euphemism. The spoon in his hand almost became a murder weapon.

Today, though, we finally put Prez to rest.

With Mackenzie by my side, one arm wrapped around my waist, her other hand on my bicep, I try my best to listen to the actual words Hoops is saying. The ocean breeze whips around us but every word is distinct and just as painful. My eyes are downcast, though, because I can't use all of my senses at once without losing my shit.

“The first time I met Prez, he narrowed his eyes and asked me: ‘Why you wanna join my club, boy?’” Hoops pauses, the hitch in his voice more telling than his actual

story. Prez is intimidating on a good day... was . Prez was . Fuck . But his love for the club, his brothers, was above all except Vanessa. No one and nothing outranked her.

“I didn’t know at the time how important this life would become to me.” Hoops pauses again, and as I look up, I see his eyes scan the cemetery. Half the town seems to be present. The pier is filled with bodies dressed in black and overflowing onto the beach around it. Knowing they feel a profound need to say goodbye, that they saw him as a prominent figure, a friend and a confidant, should bring us comfort, and I suppose it does but...it also hurts to share him right now. By the way Hoops fidgets, it’s clear he’s uncomfortable. “So, I just told him what I thought he wanted to hear. I said: ‘Cause I wanna ride.’” We all chuckle but there’s no humor in it, it’s just empty sounds swallowed up by this pit of dread and loss. “He got up and walked over to me, arms crossed and looking like he wanted to bite my head off. And what he said next has resonated with me for the last fifteen years. He said: ‘You’re here, kid, ‘cause you need a family.’ It wasn’t a question, you know? He just...that’s what he did, he took a bunch of misfits, lost kids, traumatized adults and he...he healed us.”

Beside me, Vanessa’s sob is muted only by her hand slapping across her mouth. Of everyone in attendance, she’s the only one sitting, because standing wasn’t an option. I don’t think her legs can hold her up. Shade is immediately beside her, squeezing her shoulders as the silent presence that she needs. That she’ll probably need for months, or years, maybe forever.

“No one could ever fill his shoes, they are too big for mere mortals, but we will follow his philosophy when it comes to the club. Rest in peace, Prez. Ride, die, and bleed for speed.”

“Ride, die, and bleed for speed.” Like we’re one single voice, we repeat our motto. Where our chant is usually filled with joy and pride, today, it chips away at a small piece of our souls. Today, it hurts in a sharp, ripping of our identities kind of way.

Prez was us and we were all part of him, his chosen sons, his ride or die. His brothers in arms and in life.

Losing him won't kill us but it will change us. Profoundly.

One by one, we step away and let Hoops pass by with the urn so everyone can say goodbye before we release his ashes to the four winds as a sign of freedom. Prez wished to fly over the ocean so he could travel the world and then come back to us. He didn't write it down but Vanessa told us as best she could.

It's what she wants too, one day, so she can travel the world with him.

As we ride away from the pier, Cherry sitting behind me with her arms wrapped tightly around my waist, the images, like an old silent movie, keep running through my mind.

One second, the rage boiling just beneath the surface begs me to set it free, then the next moment the ball in my stomach is so tight that I have to force myself not to throw up.

Right now, however, all I feel is a deep-rooted sense of pride as we navigate the streets of Rockford Beach, Hoops keeping his position as VP and leaving the empty space for our Prez. In the middle of our procession is a black town car, in the back of which Shade sits with Vanessa, trying his best to hold her together, and I can't help but wonder who's going to help him survive this loss. The sides of the road are lined with our townsfolk, solemn and respectful, with their hands raised and their fingers in a V , saluting us and the spirit of our president as we pass them by on our way back to the compound.

To be honest, we shouldn't be surprised by this show of love from the townies. Prez and Vanessa did so much here. Hell, we all try to give back as much as possible, but

Prez loved it here, chose this place to raise his family, and although he and Vanessa were never able to have children, the club was his family. Their family. Now, we'll forever be the reason Vanessa lost the love of her life.

For me, it's like losing a father, and my biggest fear is that I may also lose a mother.

The last thought running through my mind as we finally reach the compound is that I'm glad we've had a twenty-four hour watch on Vanessa these last few weeks, because I know all too well the deep, dark abyss into which your mind dives when losing your other half. It's not pretty and it's definitely not healthy.

Parking at the garage, I note the changes to our security system. The brothers from the other chapters helped us set up temporary fences with wood paneling all around our property. Every ten feet or so we've got cameras surveilling all the angles to make sure no other motherfuckers try to take us out like sitting ducks. I never thought I'd say this, but I'm beyond happy to have Glitch here working his magic. Python would have busted a nut learning a thing or ten from this guy.

The thought of our lost prospect only makes this pain settle in more deeply. Who knows? Maybe they're both somewhere having a drink and catching up. The thought soothes me, just a little, until Cherry and I walk into the rec room and see the utter chaos. On a normal day, this room has maybe five to seven brothers in it; either drinking, getting sucked off, or busting a nut in a not so discreet position over the couch.

Tonight, though, it's filled to the rim and I'm suddenly overtaken with a sense of claustrophobia. It's too much.

The people, the emotions, the drinking, and the women. People evacuate their emotions in completely different ways, and right now, none of those outlets make me comfortable. I'm aware of my hypocrisy since I buried my dick so far inside my

Cherry last night that I thought we'd never separate again. In fact, every night since the Prez's execution, I've been taking my woman back to our suite and fucking all of my emotions into her, but I'm not escaping, I'm not compensating, and I'm definitely not using her.

I'm expressing my love in the only way I know. I'm giving myself to her and only her. Mackenzie Wilson will soon be my wife. She is the only person allowed to see all the broken sides of me because she's the only person capable of putting those pieces back together. So I give her my hurt, my pain, my anger and my confusion. But mostly, I give her my love—unfiltered and as real as can be.

“All right, listen up.” Like a cold shower on a hot summer day, there's a collective exhale from the room at Hoops's call to attention because we all know this is it. This is our final goodbye to the man we all loved and respected. Correction: We all love...present tense. Forever tense. “Violet here is passing out shots as I speak, raise your hands when you get one.”

A few of the Khunts are helping Violet out and soon, every person in the room is armed with a shot of Prez's favorite drink: top shelf whiskey.

“Brothers.” Immediately, the room goes quiet enough to hear the creaking pipes of this old building as Hoops takes a second to swallow his grief. “Raise your glasses to the man who led us, who guided us, and who took us in like we were his true sons.”

“Hear hear!” The response is quiet but firm.

“He was fierce and loyal and he fucking loved this club, this found family.” Hoops pauses as the room erupts in hoots and hollers, agreeing to the imagery he's painted for us. Then he turns to the corner of the room where Vanessa is sitting, eyes glassy and lips in a tight, straight line. It's impossible to miss the effort it takes her to stay strong and not run away or break down on the floor. “But you, Vanessa, he loved you

above all else.” She nods, one quick jerk of her head, as Shade places his big hands on her shoulders, like he’s transferring his strength into her. “And as his Sons, we will come together, around you, to support as best we can because that’s exactly what he’d expect of us.” With those words, Vanessa’s battle against her tears crumbles as her cheeks are soaked with her watery grief, her pain, her desolation.

Cherry snakes an arm around my waist and leans her head on my shoulder, jostling Ninja and Bandit as they sleep inside my hoodie. When I look down at her, I can see her guilt in the way her mouth tips downward and her gaze darts from one of my eyes to the other. She’s asking me something and I don’t have the energy to lie to her, even if it’s to make her feel better.

“Hey, it’s over, okay? I understand why you did the things you did. The running and the hiding and...I get it. I forgive you.” Now it’s my girl’s turn to lose her fight against her tears.

“To Prez!” Hoops’s voice booms out across the room.

“To Prez!” Every single brother answers back, and it’s a beautiful fucking thing.

“Now, we’ve got club business to take care of, so Rockford boys, let’s get to church while the rest of you enjoy Prez’s favorite whiskey.” Hoops downs his shot then lifts the empty glass to the ceiling and mouths an, “I’ll miss you, Brother,” before slamming it on the bar and beelining his way to Church.

“I’ll see you later, babe. Stay with your mom and Vanessa. I’m sure Sabrina will be right back, she’s probably cooking up a fucking feast in there.” Kissing Cherry on the top of her head, I sigh into her hair as her scent soothes my aching heart. “Be good.”

Ignoring her snort, I pinch her ass and walk away.

For the past three weeks, we've been planning, just like Hoops asked us to do the night Prez died. Glitch has been a fucking life saver as he navigates the deep, dark web. It's been a real eye-opener seeing just how easily he can go in and out of people's lives, their private homes, their fucking phones, without breaking a sweat.

Tonight, however, we need to vote. All of our core members are back from whatever jobs they'd been on. Notably, Axle has returned from New Bern where he's been overseeing the distribution of our less-than-legal parts acquisitions. Until now, Hoops has been acting as interim president, leaving the VP spot open for another brother.

Names were thrown around these past weeks, not just to replace Hoops's spot, but also to envision replacing whatever other position would be open. Bear was asked to step in as VP but he refused. He's comfortable as treasurer and clearly the most capable of running our numbers. Without him, we'd probably be in a shit ton of hurt. Grinder's name was also mentioned, but he just laughed and said maybe one day, when he grows up.

Most of us already knew back then and still know now, that Sledge is the best suited for the job. As secretary, he already runs most of the club's business, makes sure we're up to speed with all the shit that needs to be done, and keeps us in line with our duties. So that's who's up for vote right now.

"All right, let's do this." Hoops bangs the gavel for the last time as interim and silence falls in the room.

"Let's make this short 'n' sweet. All those in favor of Hoops as the new Sons of Khaos, Rockford Beach charter president, say yay or nay." Sledge says, his notebook out where he takes minutes and generally uses it to boss us around. Each of our names are there, and as he goes around the room, it's clear this is going to be a unanimous vote.

“Psycho?”

“Fucking yay.” I’m the last one called out and where an event like this would usually warrant an explosion of cheers, this time, it’s solemn and engrossed in sadness when it comes to our choice for a new leader.

“Now, the VP slot is open and I’ve generously accepted your begging demands for me to take over. Show me your yays.” Sledge goes through the motions all over again, and when he gets to Grinder, he’s about to write yay when a collective gasp rings out.

“Nay.” My head snaps toward Grinder, shocked that he could vote against Sledge. Then I see the corner of his mouth tick up and I roll my eyes. Ninja chooses this time to sleepily stretch out of my hoodie and trot his way down my sleeve and over to the baggie in the middle of the table where a few sticks of celery are just waiting for him to snack on them. Bandit quickly follows behind. Well, quickly is relative when it comes to our little pup.

“Oh, sorry! I meant to say yay but my tongue slipped.” An echo of insults rings out and Sledge promises bodily harm while Grinder is asleep, except that turns into some kind of sexual innuendo and then everything goes to shit.

“Boys, let’s focus, shall we? We’ve got important business to talk about so this shit needs to wait for fuck off o’clock.” All eyes are on Hoops, who has always been the quiet force of our club.

“Well, damn, Brother. I think I speak for us all when I say...we chose well.” Bear grins, and just like that, there’s a feeling of rightness among our tightly wound biker family.

After that, Crow takes Sledge’s place as secretary and Axle, who decided things were

running as smoothly as could be up in New Bern, was voted in as road captain interim until Grinder was healthy enough to ride without pain.

“Now, Hoops and I were in cahoots and thought maybe it was time to give Bash his day in the sun. I move to make our little Bashy Bash Bash a full-blown member of the Sons.” Grinder stands and does a hip jerk movement like he’s fucking the desk, all the while fist pumping up and down. “Mate, you havin’ a stroke or something?” The ruckus just gets louder as Grinder grins and winks.

“Nah, just celebrating my boy’s graduation. I’ve got skills to teach him, if you know what I mean.” Yeah, we all know what he means, and it has something to do with ripping out teeth and finding new ways of making people blind.

“Anyway, all the yays?” All hands go up until the room goes completely silent.

“Boner, go get the prospect,” Hoops grins like an evil cat ready to rule the world and we all put frowns on our faces.

This is my favorite part of making a prospect a forever brother.

Two minutes later, Boner comes in with Bash at his heels looking green enough to puke. He’s fucking scared shitless. I have no guilt. We all went through this fucking charade and it just makes it more impressive and shows us just how much we want to be patched in.

“Prospect,” Hoops extends his arm and holds out his palm. “Give me your cut.”

Bash stutters, trying to figure out what to say, his gaze bouncing from one brother to the other.

“Don’t fucking look at us and do what you’re told.” Sledge’s tone is unusually harsh,

but because I'm watching him, I notice the crack in his veneer. Our new VP is about to lose his shit.

With movements slow and measured, he shrugs off his cut and hands it to Hoops. I watch the kid as his brows shift from furrowed and confused to high and resigned. Poor guy is about to fall into a puddle of disarray thinking he's been ousted.

Hoops rips it out of his hands and throws it on the wooden table, his pocket knife at the ready.

"Prospect, you are hereby stripped of your status." Without even looking at him, Hoops hacks the patch off his cut and tosses it aside before he lifts his head and scowls at Bash.

"But...did I? What exactly—" Bash's questions are interrupted by me, this time.

"Shut the fuck up, Bash." I'm growling loud enough to make Ninja look up at me, his nose twitching like he's not buying it. "You don't speak unless we give you permission to do so." To be fair, I'm being nice compared to the shit they made me do way back when.

"Y-yes, sir."

"Do you know why we're stripping you of your patch?" Hoops asks, his fingers curled around the lapels of his own cut.

"Uh, no. I mean...was it because I let Mackenzie leave that one time?" His gaze flicks to mine and this time my growl is not fake. The memory of coming home and finding her gone makes me want to murder people.

"Well, that didn't help, but no. We're stripping you because..." Dramatic pause, it's a

must. Sledge pops out a new patch with the single word “Member” on it and Hoops grins like a fucking maniac, all teeth and bright eyes. “Because you’re our newest patched-in member.”

There’s a moment where Bash has no fucking clue what’s going on as his eyes dart from Sledge to Hoops and back to Sledge before they land on the new patch.

Then the room erupts into complete chaos with woots and backslaps and forehead to forehead bumps. I think the kid’s gonna need a moment to himself where he may need to take a shit to get over this traumatizing moment.

“Congratulations, Bash!” Grinder stands and slow claps. “You’re fucking legal!” And then we all groan because ew, dude, come on.

It takes a minute, but soon enough, we all calm down and it’s right back to business.

“Second order of business is my conversation with Deputy Shipman, or Celia to some of you. I was asked, firmly, to make sure we don’t hinder the investigation into Prez’s killing.” His glare shoots to Diablo, who only smirks, which makes me wonder what that story is about because holy fuck, if Diablo is fucking the deputy sheriff it could go south real fucking quick. Then I remember that Celia likes the same bits as we do and now I’m wholly confused.

“Anyway, she wants us to cooperate and most importantly...and I quote: ‘Don’t get in my fucking way, Leo Clark.’” Hoops smirks and we all chuckle.

“Damn, she used your real name. Sounds like she means business.” Boner is chewing on a piece of carrot while Ninja tries to steal it out of his mouth. My little buddy is tenacious. My money’s on him.

“Anything else we need to address before I let the other chapter presidents in on our

church business?” We all shake our heads until Grinder speaks up and another cold shower reminds us of our reality.

“All good, Prez.” Oof.

“How about we give ourselves some time before we start calling me that, okay?” We all nod because he’s right. It’s got to sink in and it won’t until we’ve avenged our late president.

Ten minutes later, the conference room where we hold church is so full, we’ve got to keep the doors open so everyone can attend.

“I won’t take up a lot of your time, so listen up. Our plans are in place. Thanks to the Reapers, represented by Flower, here—” Hoops is interrupted by the applause and catcalls before Bear puts an end to that shit.

“Sweetheart, do not cat-call me unless you’re serious about getting some of this.” Flower adjusts her cups like she’s weighing her tits and I don’t miss the heavy growl beside me. I know my best friend and this seems like a great time to fuck with him.

“Boner’s been chomping at the bit to get a piece of her,” I say, so matter of factly that I know Bear thinks I’m serious.

“Well, she’s not here for that. She’s here on business so he better keep his fucking paws off her.” He clears his throat when he realizes he’s said too much. Not that his words said all that much, but his tone said everything I needed to hear. “For the club’s sake, that is. You know, to make sure the relationship with Mancini isn’t ruined.”

I don’t answer but I’m sure my face says it all. “Sure, dude. Sure.”

“Cut it out and let’s make sure we’re all on the same page.” Hoops again demonstrates his gift for leading as he runs through the plan with us once more. Church ends on hoorahs and grunts, the adrenaline pumping and the need to fuck at the top of the Sons’ agenda because, soon enough, all Hell will not just break loose. It will go up in flames like a fucking volcano of vengeance.

“Go fuck, go drink,” Sledge speaks for the first time as VP, a smirk firm on his face. “And get ready for the reckoning.”

Chapter Eighteen

Mackenzie

In aid of finding my purpose in life again, I take a leap and call the number on the card Prez gave me just over three weeks ago. It rings a few times and I don't know why, but I'm nervous.

"Hello, Maribel speaking." The voice sounds like an older lady, though I could be completely wrong.

"Hey. I'm M—Scarlett Green. Griffin gave me your number a few weeks ago because you're looking for some help with a new women's home?" It feels weird as hell calling Prez by his actual name, but I've learned none of the people in town used his club title.

"Oh yes! I'm sorry to hear about what happened. Please, send my prayers to the family."

"Thank you, Maribel. I'm sure they will appreciate it."

"Do you have any time to come and see me today? I'm overseeing some construction in the building I want to use. You could meet me here."

If I'm honest with myself, as much as it's for a great cause, the thought of working in a women's home does not fill me with joy, but I'm trying to be a better version of myself and maybe this is how I do it.

“Sure, I’d love to.”

Maribel goes on to give me the address and we arrange to meet in a couple of hours, so now all I need to do is find my man and let him know I have a job interview. Pretty much.

The outside garages are where I find him, polishing Philia while Bandit and Ninja sleep in his hoodie on the ground beside a toolbox. I see Bear through the window, surrounded by paperwork, and I just know he’s likely the reason our tiny pets are asleep right now. I have no doubt he’s spent most of the morning feeding them and making little obstacle courses in his office.

“Hey, handsome.” I slide my palms across the logo on the back of Aleko’s cut, then around to his chest, pressing myself against him. The tattoos he has all over his neck are accentuated by the white T-shirt he’s wearing, and his skin glistens from hard work...I’m a very lucky girl.

“Mmm, you smell fucking divine.” Dropping the cloth in his hand, he turns, grips my chin, and kisses me so hard my toes curl.

“Yes, girl! Get it!” Flower’s enthusiasm makes my cheeks flush, but I keep on kissing Aleko because no amount of embarrassment would ever stop me.

Eventually, he pulls away and rests his forehead against mine for a second. “To what do I owe the pleasure? Not that you need a reason, but I thought you were hanging with your mom this morning.”

“I called that Maribel lady about the women’s home work and she wants me to go see her today.”

“You decided to go for it?” He grins, but it still doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Yeah, I’ll see what it’s about, at least. You wanna come with me?” I know something’s going down in the early hours of the morning, but as far as I’m aware, he has a free afternoon.

He hesitates, then quickly picks up his cloth and holds it in the air. “Gotta finish up here, then Bear needs me for some boring paperwork.” Taking a deep breath, he closes his eyes for a second and kneads my sides. “I’ll get Kincaid and—”

“Ooh, ooh! We’ll go! Tab and I are bored as fuck hanging around this place. You can show us where to get the best coffee.”

Shaking his head, Aleko huffs a laugh. “Sure. Why the fuck not? You good with that, Cherry?” He holds my chin in place so our eyes align.

“Yup.” I know how difficult it is for him when I’m not surrounded by his brothers here at the compound, and the threat against them is still out there, but he’s trying his hardest not to smother me and I’m compromising by letting him know every detail.

After spending too long deciding what to wear, I end up with a pair of dark denim jeans and a teal-green off-the-shoulder sweater. I slide on the Doc Martens Aleko bought for me months ago and head out to the waiting truck. Kincaid, Flower, and the big guy who I think is called Tab are already in the vehicle and the back door is open for me.

“So, where we heading?” Kincaid is at the wheel, likely because she knows the town better than the Reapers do.

“There’s a diner near Rocks Off, just down the road from Mirabel’s place. I don’t have to meet her for another hour so we could have coffee there first.”

“We should totally go to Rocks Off when it’s open. We got to see that place when we

arrived. For a few months, I dated a dancer and loved watching her on stage. My friend, River, has a club in New York that has male dancers too. Seriously, it's a feast for the eyes. Like getting the best of both worlds, you know?" Flower practically vibrates in her seat with excitement.

I don't get it, really, but she speaks with such enthusiasm that I nod and smile to her beside me.

I'm going through the motions with this whole thing, but it feels so cliché to be the biker's old lady that goes to help those in need. I feel like that's me being ungrateful for the opportunity I've been given though, and I'm not about being that kind of person.

It doesn't take long before Kincaid parks the truck in front of the diner and we all climb out. Well, Flower jumps out. I think I've only been here once, when I was on my way home from a race night and wanted a decent cup of coffee before serving the Rebels until they passed out.

We find a booth and order a round of coffee. Flower and Tab also order a shit ton of food between the two of them, declaring they'll share so they get to try more things on the menu.

"Holy shit, it is you!"

Fuck, I didn't put my wig on today, I completely forgot all about the damn thing.

Two familiar faces look over from the booth beside us before they scramble from their seats and aim for our table. Flower, Tab, and Kincaid all move quicker than I can blink, standing in a V and blocking the table from the new guys.

New guys to them, anyway. To me, they're Cameron and Booker. Two of the Toxic

Rebels who were actually nice to me. Don't get me wrong, they never actually stood up for me, but they were also never ones to dole out my punishments. They even helped me clean up the trailer park after a heavy night occasionally.

I'm positive they're more frightened of Flower, who is snarling like a wild animal at the front of the protective formation, and they both hold up their hands in surrender.

"Woah, we're not here to cause trouble."

Flower snaps her teeth at them, and I can't hold back my chuckle when Cameron and Booker jump backward with wild, scared eyes.

"It's fine. They're fine. They're actually not totally bad guys." I feel the need to stand up because we're starting to cause a scene. We really could do without that because being recognized once is already too much.

With a heavy sigh, Kincaid is first to sit down beside me. "Take a seat." Her voice is calm, like the kind that comes just before the storm. Tab sits down opposite me, and Flower dramatically gestures for Cameron and Booker to sit beside him. They slide along the seat with stiff smiles and Flower pops herself neatly on the end.

"It's a Reapers sandwich." Flower laughs far too hard, but it's contagious because me and Tab are chuckling too. Kincaid, not so much. She's staring Cameron and Booker down as though she controls their every move with the power of her eyes.

God knows what the waitress must think as she delivers the food ordered, but she politely smiles despite the silence of our table.

"How are you still alive? Is Jake still alive too?" Cameron is first to speak when the waitress is finished, keeping his voice low.

Flower growls again, smirking as she pokes something into Cameron's side before taking a huge bite from her burger.

"Let's just say things happened. But no. Jake's not alive." I shrug, hoping to hell these guys are still the good guys to whatever degree and won't rat me out.

"Your guys fucked pretty much everyone else up. The charter's disbanded. Well, with only us and Chewy left, we kinda had to. Chewy went over to Detroit, got a cousin up there, but we haven't decided yet." Giving no fucks that Cameron has something sticking into his side, maybe, I can't exactly see, but Flower's fist is still there, unmoving, Booker basically gives me the run down of what they've been up to the last few months.

It's almost December and they're figuring they ride as nomads until the race season starts up again in February. Then they'll pick a charter, I suppose.

"It's a damn shame we won't be racing here again, we were so close to that top spot for once with you riding as Cain."

I smile at the memory, because that was a damn good feeling. One of the best. Racing has always given me a thrill that only Aleko can satiate these days.

"Wait, you were Cain? Totally thought you were a dude." Tab laughs, but he's nodding his head and smirking with approval.

"Anyway, we gotta run." Cameron looks nervously across at Flower beside him. "Promise we won't say anything." He holds his hands up again, trying to show he's sincere.

"I'll cut your balls off and make you eat each other's if we suspect anything. 'Kay?" Flower tilts her head to the side and grins with more menace than I ever thought was

possible. Then she casually sucks her fingers clean from all the food.

“Yeah. We got it.” Cameron answers for both of them, nodding more ferociously than Booker as Flower jumps up to sit on the table, allowing them to slide past her. She watches each one with that same grin on her face, completely the opposite to Kincaid, who is scowling, her eyes narrowed with a death warning.

“Nice friends, Kenzie.” Booker’s brave, but he still hightails it out of the diner with Cameron after his comment.

“So, you still racing?” Flower sits back on the bench seat as if nothing happened, sipping at her coffee.

“Nah. Got shot in the thigh, the race chief died, and it’s off season right now.” I neglect to tell them about being pregnant and the miscarriage that followed, because that’s nobody’s business but mine and Aleko’s.

“Fuck, dude. It’s all against you. You should do your own race club, then you can race all year round.” Flower wags her brows. “I’d join, there’s nowhere to do that shit in New York. Although, riding along the Hudson at night is like a fucking dream when the roads are clear.”

I laugh, because what else am I supposed to do? That’s a really great idea, but I have no clue how I’d even approach that kind of thing. It’s like some strange pipe dream that just appears out of nowhere, though. I should talk this out with Aleko at some point, see what he thinks...

The chattering between Flower and Tab stops, and the whole freaking diner goes silent, and for a brief moment I think maybe I’ve been mumbling or thinking out loud, but nope. Speak of the devil and he shall appear.

Aleko. My dark knight in a hoodie and a leather cut.

He stands proud, in the center of Bear, Sledge, Crow, and Diablo.

They sure are a sight to see, hands clasped in front of them and smirks on their faces.

“Time to go! This is so fucking exciting. Shit like this hasn’t happened for like, a year back home.” Flower claps her hands together and slides from the booth, Tab close behind her. Kincaid actually winks at me before she gets up and follows them outside.

Aleko holds his hand out for me and I blindly take it.

“What the fuck is going on?” I may have blindly taken his hand, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have questions. Still, I can’t help the smile tugging at my lips.

“Follow me.” He leads me outside, and once we’re all standing by their bikes parked further down the road—which explains why I didn’t hear them—he grips my hips and faces me. “I can’t spend another minute without you as my wife. Life’s too fucking short to wait for that shit. So we’re getting married, Cherry baby.”

That grin of his, combined with that single raised brow and the fact he’s so eager to marry me all make my heart swell so much I could swoon like a 1920s movie star. My whole body hurts with how much I fucking love this man. But there’s a problem. And I hate that I made it a problem.

“I can’t ever really be your wife as Scarlett Green. She only exists on paper, her name would be—”

“Fuck that shit. Prez did something for you a few days before...well, he was gonna surprise us but never got round to it.” His respect for his old president is something

that will never die, it's clear every time he speaks about him.

"What are you talking about?"

"Come with me." With a smile sure to make the Cheshire Cat envious, Aleko slides the spare helmet on his motorcycle seat over my head before pulling on his own. He straddles his bike and tilts his head for me to join him. It's not painful anymore and I'm sure I'll be able to ride on my own again soon.

We pull up at the sheriff's office, the brothers in tow, but the truck with Kincaid, Tab, and Flower is long gone. The vibrations from the engine beneath me stops, and the ones surrounding us go quiet too, but Aleko is the only one to get off, holding out his hand for me.

"What are w—" Aleko shushes me, putting a finger over my lips, and I widen my eyes in mock-horror.

This is exactly where I shouldn't be, but I suppose it's not the worst idea. If I want to live a normal life, a good life, I should own up to my shit. My heart's beating for an entirely different reason now, because I know there are going to be consequences. I still have no idea why Aleko is the one to bring me here, what his plan is with this, and it seems he's intent on not telling me until we're inside.

Oh, God. What if I've got it all wrong up to now and Aleko really does want to punish me for what I've done? My stomach sinks and I'm trying to stay calm, but there's a slight tremble in my knees.

"Deputy Shipman, have you got something to tell us?" Without a care in the world, Aleko walks us into the building and straight into the deputy sheriff's office.

"You could've made an appointment, Mr. Kastellanos."

“Ooh, you last-named me. Celia, I thought we were friends?” Aleko holds a hand to his heart and winces in fake outrage.

Shaking her head, she opens one of her desk drawers, rifling through it before pulling some papers out. She’s yet to comment on the fact that I’m alive, because I know she knows me, but she hasn’t batted an eyelash.

“Here it is. Mackenzie Wilson, any and all paperwork connected to your death is right here, in my hands. I knew something wasn’t right when you and your brother went missing from the morgue.” She huffs a laugh. “Y’all can’t do shit in this town without me. I don’t even know why you try. Anyway, I got around to speaking with Griffin about it when I got word of a Scarlett Green in town. He explained the whole situation and said you’d be mighty happy if I made your death disappear. So I am.” When she says Prez’s name, a sadness washes over her eyes, but it’s gone as soon as it appears and she hands the papers in her hands to me.

This all seems a little too easy.

“But why?” It’s the main question I have, so it seems like the logical one to ask first.

“Like I said, he explained the situation, and that the Toxic Rebels won’t ever be coming back to this state. I may uphold the law, Miss Wilson, but I won’t tolerate rapists either.” The way she speaks, with a slight crack of anger in the word rapist, is as if it’s something she has personal experience with, which makes this whole thing a lot more believable. Though still surreal as fuck.

“So I’m not legally dead?” I just need to be sure that I’m taking this all in correctly.

“That’s right, Miss Wilson. You are very much still alive.”

Chapter Nineteen

Aleko

“Sir, you have the rings, right?” My head snaps around to Bear, and although there’s no one I trust more in this world beside my Cherry Pie, the stress of wanting this moment to be perfect for her is apparently turning me into groomzilla.

“Ah, yes, little man,” Bear pats the bald clerk on the head, grinning like he’s got a secret and he just can’t hide it. “I’m a responsible person with a brain that functions perfectly well.”

“Why are you talking like that?” Whisper-yelling at Bear while staring at the courtroom entrance is a whole vibe and I’m not digging it. The only thing I can think of to calm me down is hidden in the inside pocket of my cut. Pulling out a cherry sucker, I unwrap it and stick it in my mouth.

Bliss.

“Sledge and I are trading accents for the day.” Only in my world would that phrase make any sense. No, scratch that. Not even here is it understandable.

“Hate to tell ya, but you suck at it.” My smirk is like a reflex action and my clasped hands are beginning to feel like fire ants marching to the beat of Five Finger Death Punch on speed.

“Well, you’re Greek so you don’t get a vote.” Dipping two fingers into the inside

pocket of his cut, he pulls out the wedding bands I had custom made for today.

Her ring is made from the titanium I took from Philia's frame, while mine comes from the exhaust of Cherry's new racing bike. The one I'm building in my apartment off compound. The one she doesn't know is her wedding gift. Obviously, the jeweler knew what the fuck he was doing and cleaned and finished the bands to perfection, adding tiny diamonds all around so when the light hits, they shine almost as bright as she does. For mine, I opted for a lighter shade of metal on the inside circle to have a semblance of matching rings.

"I still have ears, Brother. And you sound like..." I pause, look at him, and frown. "I have no fucking clue what you sound like but it ain't British."

Just as I say this, Sledge, Crow, and Diablo barrel in like they've found their new favorite bar.

"Y'all ready to get hitched?" Oh, fuck my life.

"You two need to get a fucking life. Sledge, we ain't in Texas, lose the accent." Also, where the fuck is my Cherry?

"Well, to be fair, I can't tell the difference between North Carolina and Texas. Or Alabama and possibly Georgia." Frowning, he puts a finger up and tsks. "Wait, no. Alabama is definitely different. Like molasses." Drawing out the word, he grins wide, showing all of his perfectly white teeth. I swear the guy won some kind of genetic lottery.

Just then, the doors open again and my girl is front and center, wearing a cute little lavender dress that puts every single one of her curves on display. It's simple and refined all at once, so much like my Cherry Pie. I even leveled up my clothes by replacing my leathers with black jeans and my t-shirt with a white button down. The

cut stays. She's marrying a biker, the cut always stays.

Fuck me, I'm instantly hard and ready for this to be over so I can fuck my wife.

Guiding her inside is Spencer, who came to the rescue when I needed him to grab Cherry's mom and a dress she'd be happy to wear on a day like this. I would have chosen it myself but I wanted the surprise element. Kinda like the traditional not sleeping together the night before the wedding except the complete fucking opposite of that. There is no scenario in my life where I'm not sleeping next to my woman ever again.

With enough witnesses to make this official, the ID and social security numbers for the license all handed over, and the sixty dollar fee for administrative shit, I'm fucking finally making my Cherry Pie mine.

Not to mention with what we've got planned in the early morning, I may not be here in twenty four hours. If that's the case, I want Mackenzie to be set with access to everything I own so she won't ever have to worry about money again.

My teeth crack down on the rest of my sucker and I grin like a fucking loon about to get his pussy and eat it too.

As I look deep into her eyes, I shake off the hint of fear for what's to come and embrace this perfect moment where she becomes mine and I become hers.

"Are we ready?" Damn, I forgot this dude was here.

"Yes." We speak in unison, facing each other and both smiling like teenagers running away from home to start a new life together. It feels naive and new and perfect.

"Yeah, baby, let's do this." Sledge howls, with his hands cupped around his mouth no

less, like he's a fucking wolf at the top of a hill, and I'd punch him in the face for interrupting if I weren't too busy chuckling.

"Um, okay. That's enough of that." The way the officiant just whispered his command tells me he thinks we're crazy and he can't wait for us to get the fuck out.

Same, man. Same.

Clearing his throat, he begins to roll out his prepared speech, and instead of being annoyed at how fucking long it is, I'm actually taking the entire moment in. No doubt Cherry's wide grin and bright eyes filled with unshed tears of, I hope, joy are making it all perfect.

"We're here today to witness the union of..." I refuse to look as I hear the officiant take the paper in his hand and again, clear his throat. "Aleko Ka-Kastellanos?" It comes out more like a question, and for a second I debate ripping his balls off. Instead, I keep grinning at my Cherry and ignore the mistake. "And Mackenzie Wilson in marriage. Today, you begin a new life together, founded in love, laughter, honesty, respect, and friendship. The promises you make to each other today should not be taken lightly. A marriage is more than a ceremony, it is a lasting and lifelong commitment."

I take it back, this is way too fucking long.

"If you have rings, please take them out now." Prompted by the officiant, Bear opens his big hand and right there in the middle of his palm sit the two rings I carefully designed.

"Oh my God, Aleko..." A tear skips down Mackenzie's cheek and pride fills my chest like a helium balloon.

“Do you, Aleko, take Mackenzie to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in good times and woe, for richer or poorer, keeping yourself unto her for as long as you both shall live? If so, answer 'I do'."

Now we're talking. "I fucking do with cherries on top."

"Um, yes, a simple 'I do' will suffice." I'm pretty sure we've traumatized this poor guy but I can't find it in me to care.

"Do you, Mackenzie, take Aleko to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, in good times and woe, for richer or poorer keeping yourself unto him for as long as you both shall live? If so, answer 'I do'."

"I fucking do with...me on top." The entire courtroom erupts in cheers and I didn't know it was possible but, in this moment, I fall even deeper in love with my...is she my wife yet?

"Please, a little decorum." Bet he's taking an early retirement, for sure. "By the virtue of the authority vested in me by the state of North Carolina, I now pronounce you married."

My hand, heavier than it has ever felt with my eternal vow wrapped around my left ring finger, I clutch onto the back of Cherry's head and pull her roughly to me, kissing her deeply and making sure she can feel every ounce of love I feel for her.

"You may now kiss." No, I did not wait for permission to kiss my wife.

The sounds of hoots and hollers fade to the background as I continue devouring Cherry's mouth, sucking on her tongue and crushing her close enough against my chest that I can feel her heartbeat in sync with mine.

“No going back now, baby. You’re all fucking mine.”

The biggest mistake every one made was leaving us behind. By everyone, I do mean the officiant who couldn’t haul ass out of here fast enough.

“What are you doing?” Cherry follows me as I walk to the double doors and lock them.

“I’m fucking my wife.”

“I think you’re supposed to say ‘making love’.” She thinks she’s funny.

“Hmm, maybe.” Turning, I eye her up and down, picturing her sprawled out on the nearest flat surface.

“Can you at least wait until we get home?” I smirk as she starts walking backwards, matching me step for step as I stalk her, commanding which way she goes.

“Not a fucking chance, Cherry.” When the back of her knees hit the edge of a wooden table, I place my hands on her thighs and invade her space. “Spread.”

Without a second’s hesitation, my Cherry not only widens her thighs, opening herself for me, but she takes the hem of her dress and shows me her pretty pink cunt.

“This no underwear thing is becoming a habit.” Sliding my hands up to her hips, I pull her right up to the edge so she’s perfectly aligned to where my mouth is about to be. “I approve, baby. Anything you do to give me quick access to your pussy is a yes from me.” I reach out and grab the back of the chair to my left, pulling it behind me so I can sit down and admire what’s mine.

“Hmm, this isn’t American Idol , Aleko. I don’t need a ‘yes’ from you.” Her sass

makes me chuckle but her moan when I bite her clit makes me even happier.

“The faster you come, the harder I’ll fuck you.” My Cherry understands the assignment when she leans back and presses her hand against the back of my head, taking control of how hard and how fast I eat her pussy.

The ball on my barbell plays along her slit before rolling around her clit, and when I lap her up like my favorite cream on top of a chocolate dessert, I revel in the way her body starts to quake, her legs start to tremble, and her nails dig deeper and deeper into my scalp.

One hand unbuttons my jeans, knowing this isn’t going to last long and as soon as she comes, she’ll need to be riding my dick.

As her cum starts to trickle onto my tongue, my face pressed so hard against her cunt, I wonder if this is the way I die in this lifetime. If so, I’m okay with that.

Except it’s not, because as soon as the post-orgasmic tremors set in, I pick her up by the waist and, with nimble fingers, open my jeans and impale her on my raging hard cock.

We both moan, long and sensual, as I fuck my Cherry Pie in the very room where I made her my partner for life. Our first time as husband and wife. We’ll probably go to Hell for this level of disrespect, but I’ve done much worse in my life to gain access to the devil’s house. I’m not worried about it.

Holding her down by the shoulders as my Cherry rides me up and down, I can feel every pulse and every squeeze of her pussy around my cock. She’s always been nice and tight, a perfect fit for every fuck, and I don’t know if it’s our new status or something else, but today feels different. Today is different.

Today, I'm making my Cherry come not as Mackenzie Wilson but as Mackenzie Kastellanos, and that makes all the fucking difference in the world.

“Come for me, baby. Come nice and hard.” Fuck me, does she ever.

With her head thrown back like the goddess that she is, I hold her by the shoulders and piston in and out of her slick, tight little cunt like a man on a fucking mission. We grunt and scream as sweat gathers around my neck and at my temples.

“Right there, Aleko. Right fucking there.”

On my last hard thrust, I growl with how powerfully my orgasm hits me. I spurt every fucking drop of my cum inside her pussy as it squeezes and pulses with each contraction of her walls.

We're both breathing heavy, panting like we've just run a triathlon without a single second of rest when a sound gets my attention.

It's not me, and it's not Cherry, which means only one thing.

“Hey! What the hell are you two doing here?”

Busted.

“Is it bad if I tell you not to go?” My Cherry Pie is gorgeous at any point of the day, but that moment she first wakes up—blonde hair fanned out, eyes half mast, voice croaking and thick with sleep—she's at her best.

“No, my sweet, sweet wife.” Fuck, I love the sound of that. The weight of my ring on my left finger brings me peace, a sense of belonging outside of my club. “I think I'd be offended if you just rolled over and went back to sleep.”

“Honestly, it’s fuck off o’clock, I’m tempted to do just that but...” Wrapping all four limbs around me, she clings on like a sloth and buries her face in the crook of my neck. “I also never want to let you go.”

To be fair, I’m tempted to do the same thing, but I have to get up. Outside our suite, the commotion of brothers getting up and pumped about what’s about to go down is only a reminder of how important it is for me to go out there.

“I need you to promise me you won’t leave the compound until we get back and the danger is over.” No doubt, I’m still gun shy when it comes to this subject. Every time I asked—okay, fine, told her—to stay home, she’d end up somewhere else and that usually ended up being dangerous or deadly.

“I promise I won’t leave the compound until you get back and the danger is over.” I swear, that fucking sass will get her in trouble one day. And by trouble, I do mean an ass so red I’ll be calling her Cherry for a whole other reason.

“Keep that smart mouth up, sweet wife, and I’ll have to find a suitable punishment for it.”

“Promise?” Her words are muffled and I’m pretty sure she’s falling back asleep, which can’t happen.

“I promise you the world, baby.” I kiss the top of her head and take a deep breath, her scent giving me the strength I need to get through this morning. “But first, it’s time to get up.”

Having to unwrap her from my body isn’t easy, neither physically nor emotionally, but I don’t have a choice. As the enforcer, I’m expected to be front and center, protecting this club from outside threats.

The banging on the door with each passing member is a reminder of that. Ninja and Bandit both startle at the sound, jumping from their little beds and running straight to Cherry for comfort and love. Swallowing a jealous growl at the sight of my pet rats getting comfortable on my wife's perfect skin, I remember...I'm a fucking adult and can control my emotions. Sometimes.

"Gotta bolt, baby."

"I hate this." Goddamn, hearing her admission is like a dagger to the heart.

"When I get back, I'll fuck your worries away."

"Then I'll walk around without panties again as motivation to be safe and be quick." When I pull my wife away, I realize her husky voice may not be from sleep but more because she's crying. Silent tears, I'm finding out, are more gut wrenching than outright sobbing...and that's saying something considering we can sometimes hear Vanessa's cries all the way down the hall.

"You know me so fucking well, Cherry baby. Your pussy will get me back here in no time." Before I change my mind, I bring my palm to her throat, mouth at the perfect angle so I can rip a goodbye kiss from her, and walk into battle with her taste on my lips. "Gotta go."

This time, I jump out of bed so I'm not tempted to say fuck it all and hide under the sheets with my new wife.

I piss, I brush my teeth, I get dressed.

When I realize her taste is already gone, I go back to my Cherry Pie, squeeze her cheeks together with one hand and devour her fucking mouth like it's the only thing that'll keep me alive.

Then I pop a cherry sucker in my mouth and wink.

“Be good.” She knows what my words mean, nodding once with conviction.

“Come back to me.” This time, I take her left hand, bring her titanium ring to my mouth, and place a gentle kiss on the symbol of our forever union.

“Always.”

By the time we all get packed up and ready to go, we’re completely jacked up on adrenaline. Except for Grinder and Boner. I’m pretty sure they’ve got a couple of white lines up their noses.

Outside, we’ve got our bikes ready to go and two black vans full of people and equipment following us on site, courtesy of Marco Mancini and the Reapers.

“Before we go, I want to say a few words.” Hoops waits for the brothers and Reapers, along with a few of the Mancini soldiers, to settle down. “We’re not military and we’re not trained for fucking combat, but the sheer number of us can go in, blow shit up, and get the fuck right out of that hell hole.” Pointing to the crowd standing around him, he adds. “Our Prez? He’s with you. He’s right here, always fucking here.” We all follow his lead by beating our fists against our chests right where our hearts are beating overtime. “No one dies tonight. We get our latest intel from Glitch over there and if we follow his lead, we all come home. That’s the goal. We. All. Come. Home.”

Cheers and hollers ring out and I can’t ignore the tingling at the back of my neck telling me to look up to the front door. And there she is. My beacon, my reason for coming home in one piece.

I nod to her and she nods right back, bringing her ring to her mouth and kissing it. I follow suit, and in that private moment, we reinforce our promises.

“I’m not going to bore you with details but this is what you need to know.” Glitch stands on the hood of the van and gives us the downlow on the basics of the situation. “We’ll be arriving from three different points. My van will be the closest, parked just a couple of yards away from the property so I can go in through the back door of their wifi and general electricity. I’ve rerouted their access so if they call for assistance, they’ll be calling our van where Flower, here, will have the best customer service in the history of customer service.” Flower finger waves to the crowd and smiles like she’s performing for the Miss America pageant.

“Why three arrival points?” One of the soldiers asks the question a few of us were wondering.

“Too many of us. If we arrive as one, from one street, it’ll set off alarm bells in the neighborhood and we don’t want that. The element of surprise is the only thing that’ll guarantee success.”

Taking out a piece of paper, he reads off a few names. “Ryder, Tabs, Diablo and...Kincaid.” Looking up, he sees the hands of the names he called in the air. Ryder is a soldier and Tabs a Reaper. “You guys are quietly going to the four houses around the Beaufort property telling those people to stay inside and hide somewhere safe. Make sure you wear your balaclavas. Plausible deniability.”

They nod, having heard these instructions already during the week.

“Jonesy and Bash, you’ll be running point in the van with me and making sure everyone is coordinated. Now, this is important. The Beauforts’ security system has an extra to it, which means that once I’ve deactivated it, you’ll have three minutes to get inside before anyone is alerted. The soldiers will be covering for the Sons outside so they can get inside the house. Team A members are equipped with ear buds so Bash and Jonesy can give vital information. The rest? Well, let’s just hope you’re all brushed up on your Special Ops VR.” We chuckle, knowing there’s a world of

fucking difference between video games and reality, but we'll take everything we can get to make sure we get home safe.

We ride out, fighting the urge to make a fuckton of noise with the sheer amount of adrenaline pumping through our systems, and the whole way there I run the plan through my head. My sucker is gone and I wish I could take another out to help with the nervous energy, but I need both hands free and it's easier to shout at a motherfucker without sucking on a stick.

Whoever gets Beaufort will let the others know so we can get the fuck out of there. At this point, the goal isn't to kill him. That's too kind.

Also, we want the Irish dead. All of them. The Reapers and soldiers are chomping at the bit to put those fuckers in the ground.

After that, everything happens so quickly that we won't have time to think or have any type of regrets. When Glitch mentioned Team A, he meant Hoops, Shade, Sledge, Bear, and myself. Crow, Grinder, and Boner will be coming in from the back door to intercept anyone trying to run.

On paper, our plan is foolproof. On paper.

We park our bikes far enough away that we don't alert anyone in Beaufort's entourage, especially the Irish guards we're expecting to find at the front of the property. After Mackenzie's little visit to the property, and all the recon the Reapers have done for us, we know the front lawn is closed off with a gate that rivals any Hollywood star types.

But it's fine, we planned for that.

"Don't take too much, you want to stay light and use a weapon you're comfortable

with.” Crow uses his ex-military experience to guide us one last time. “Psycho, take a couple of knives. I know you’re a fan.” I grin, knowing damn well I look demonic in the beam of my flashlight.

Everyone is in place, waiting for Glitch to give the go ahead, and during that time, silence is key. There are about twenty of us in various places, having left enough of us back at the compound to make sure our girls are safe and protected should any of these fuckers get crazy ideas.

“Ten seconds, get ready.” Bash’s voice is clear in my ear and my eyes meet my brothers’ gazes. In that quick moment, we tell each other everything we need to say.

Love. Brotherhood. Loyalty. Prez.

“Soldiers are going in. Team A, stand by.” It’s fucking hard. Waiting is the fucking worst, but moving in before it’s time is a sure way of fucking this up to all Hell.

The pop pop pop of guns and the grunts of men falling to the ground rings in my ears and I can’t help the evil grin that rises at the corners of my lips knowing those assholes were taken by surprise.

We warned you, too, you cowardly motherfuckers.

“Team A: go, go, go.” Rounding the corner of the property wall, we run inside the open gate and bust through the front door, where chaos erupts. I’ve got a hand on Bear’s shoulder as I check his six and make sure no one is flanking us.

In the living room, I see a bald guy running toward us and I don’t even stop and think. I react. I throw a knife, watching it twirl through the air before it sinks to the hilt in his forehead.

“Let’s go.” Without yelling, but making sure my brothers can hear me, I pull the knife out of the now-dead body and wipe it clean before running upstairs.

“I’ve got the son!” Sledge yells out from somewhere on the property.

Nice. That piece of shit wanted to hurt my Cherry. He’ll regret that move.

“Motherfucker! There’s a helicopter on the roof. How the fuck did we miss that?” It’s then I hear the tell-tale sound of blades whipping around.

Bear and I both take off running like we’ve got flames licking up our asses, taking the steps two by two and looking for an entrance to the roof. This house is fucking huge and we don’t have time to look before the alarm resets and the cops are here.

“Get out, now! Get out!” Bash is shouting in our ears, and at first I refuse because letting that fucker leave is not the fucking plan.

Kicking out one of the windows, I scream out over the helicopter engine.

“We’ve got your son. I will fucking kill him if you don’t come back.” Just then, the helicopter rises into the sky, Beaufort in the pilot seat, staring at me. He knows exactly where I am.

He heard me. He ignored me.

I shoot at the metal bird, knowing those fuckers are fragile, but I didn’t choose long range and it’s too far for me to get a good shot. I miss all three attempts, and my knives are useless in this situation.

I am many things, but a liar I am not. My promises are gold.

From below, soldiers are aiming at the helicopter, but I turn and stalk back to where Sledge is holding Beaufort junior by the back of his hair with a gun to his head.

I don't hesitate. I aim. "Your father doesn't give a shit about you." I shoot and don't fucking miss.

"Shit, Psycho! I was just standing there, mate. You could've shot off my balls."

"Good thing I'm a good shot."

"Right on."

After that, we get the fuck out of there before the cops arrive, all taking different exits so we're not in easily identifiable clumps.

Once we're back at the compound, we debrief at church with disappointment in our hearts and souls because none of us will rest until Harrison Beaufort is as dead as his rapist son.

Chapter Twenty

Mackenzie

“Call it a late wedding gift.” Aleko nestles his chin into the dip between my neck and my shoulder, something that’s becoming a habit but I’ll never complain.

With his arms around my waist, his palms resting against my stomach, there’s no place I’d rather be than with my husband. Our surprise—to me—wedding wasn’t how I ever pictured the day, but honestly, it was perfection.

No stress of planning for months on end, no spending a small fortune on an uncomfortable dress to wear for half a day and needing help to use the bathroom, and no family dramas.

Everyone we love was there, my dress was better than I could have imagined, and while it may have seemed odd to the outside world that there was a wedding the day after a funeral, to us it was needed. Although I missed Vanessa, she did tell me how happy she was for us when I spent some time with her the next day. We’ve all been taking shifts, making sure someone is close to her at all times, and I’m honored to be in the rotation because it’s an acceptance I never thought I’d get.

“It’s...fuck. It’s beautiful, Aleko.” The thing that has me gawking and almost speechless is the cherry-red custom-built motorcycle in front of me. I recognize the exhaust first, making me realize this is the bike that disappeared from Aleko’s living room a few weeks ago. The one he’s been building from scratch for fuck knows how long.

Now that the Irish are pretty much eliminated, and with Mr. Beaufort nowhere to be found, we have spent more nights alone in Aleko's house than at the compound. Kinda like a honeymoon, which I said we really don't need, but he insisted. In his words, he wanted to fuck me endlessly in every room and on every surface of his home, and only then would it be fully ours. We achieved that by the end of the third night here.

Turning in his arms, I wrap myself around him, pushing my fingers into the back of his head. "Thank you." He squeezes my ass as I rise to my toes and press my lips against his so hard it could bruise. That's not enough for him, and his tongue finds its way into my mouth.

I'll never deny my husband any part of me. Not anymore.

However, it's mid-December, and this may be my last chance to take a ride for a while, especially if we get snow this winter. Despite this being an unusually warm day for this time of year, I don't trust those rain clouds to stay away. I reluctantly end our kiss with the goofiest grin on my face, realizing why he was so eager for us to get our riding leathers on this afternoon.

"You gonna name her?" Aleko spins me back to facing the shiny new motorcycle, his words tickling the skin just behind my ear.

"Scarlett." Yup, that feels right. Seeing as I no longer need to go by the fake name, I may as well use it somewhere.

He chuckles and the grip he has on my hips tightens. "If you stay here poking that thing into my crotch for much longer you won't be riding Scarlett any time soon because I'm gonna pull your pants down right here on the lawn and you'll be here riding me for the foreseeable future."

With a final wiggle, the hard cock I can feel between my cheeks is evidence enough of his words. I laugh, plant a quick kiss on those plush lips of his, and pull out a cherry sucker from the pocket of his hoodie. The supply he has is endless, I swear he has them hidden away everywhere. Ripping it from the packet, I suck on the cherry candy, wrapping my lips around it and letting it pop on the way out before pushing into his waiting mouth. He shakes his head and slaps my ass as I saunter over to my shiny new motorcycle, making sure to sway my hips for him.

I know it works, because he growls low, “Behave.” I swear the single word is the on switch to my clit because I have to take a moment as I reach my new motorcycle.

It’s bittersweet, standing here. Everything is so different and yet the same as the last time I did this by myself.

The physiotherapy sessions have worked wonders for my thigh and I straddle the bike easily. I won’t be doing any wheelies or tricks anytime soon, but I can ride, for now.

Bandit and Ninja are with Aleko, in a new pouch made to fit them both more easily, but I’m hoping to take them on a ride of my own someday. The way Bandit took it in his stride the first time cemented the fact that he was meant for our little family. After the ride through town the day before yesterday for Prez’s funeral, he even took some coaxing to wake up and climb out of the pouch.

Starting up the engine brings another smile to my face as the motorcycle vibrates between my thighs and I look beside me. Aleko is on Philia, wearing the helmet I fucking love with the face of a devil on it, his eyes peeking over his neck tube. Seeing him like this does things to my insides. He’s a glorious man and I’m lucky to be married to him. With a tiny shiver of excitement, I slide my gloves and helmet on, pushing down the visor and making my baby purr.

What I’d really love to do is ride for miles on end, through the afternoon, the night,

and right up until tomorrow morning when the sun begins to rise, but I'm not fucking stupid.

The handlebars and foot pegs are perfectly set from my seat position, making it even clearer that this was made for me. With one foot firmly on the ground, I squeeze the clutch, using my other foot to kick down into first gear before twisting the accelerator.

Aleko is quick to follow me, then rides beside me and in front of me, weaving down the roads from his—our—house toward the beach. I'm assuming the bag Mom gave him when we were at the compound earlier was full of the same picnic food I saw him pack into Philia when he thought he was being sneaky. I'm happy there will be food, and that he hasn't planned a long ride.

Twenty minutes later, we both park beside a rickety looking wooden pathway to the beach. The weather isn't particularly on our side because, while it isn't freezing cold, the dark clouds aren't showing any signs of disappearing. What it does mean though, is we're alone out here. All the sensible people aren't visiting the beach today.

I pull off my helmet and gloves, unzipping the top of my riding suit and kicking down the stand of my motorcycle.

“Hey, little dudes. You wanna play?” Lifting my leg up and off the seat, I smile at Bandit and Ninja poking their little noses out of their pouch. They patter onto Aleko's waiting palms before jumping off onto the sand.

“Get your fine ass over here, Cherry.” Leaning against Philia, one foot lifted and resting behind him and his helmet still on, he opens his arms out and beckons me to him.

This is what wet dreams are made of.

“You mean, this ass?” I tilt my hips and palm my butt cheek, staying in exactly the same spot.

Even with his helmet still on, I can practically see the smirk and eyebrow lift from just his stance alone.

“How’s your balance?” Still not going to him, I slowly strip out of my riding suit, sure that we’re in an area we won’t be easily found or seen.

Pulling at each finger of his gloves individually, Aleko takes his time before ripping them off, followed by his helmet. The eye contact is insane and every fiber of my being is vibrating with anticipation.

“Get. Your fine ass. Over here.” Each word comes straight from the back of his throat after he’s pulled down his neck tube from his face.

I’m trying to embrace the light chill in the air, still thankful it hasn’t gotten colder with the evening drawing near as I stand here in a black tank top and crotchless panties. I ordered them from a great new website I found online for moments like this. Being semi-covered in public feels better than going commando, especially seeing as I’m wearing so little anyway. Not even a dress to cover myself up if someone decides to pass by.

However, Aleko’s pale blues are glazed over, full of lust as they graze over my body. He makes me feel powerful in every way, and even when I’m on my knees for him he treats me like a queen.

The man is simply irresistible, but I hold off for just a little longer, wanting to try something we haven’t done yet before it becomes impossible.

“Sit on Philia and take out your cock.” I’m feeling bold, adventurous, and the thrill

that someone could actually see us just makes this more exciting.

“Oh? So it’s like that, is it?” He smirks, but he does what I asked, unzipping his riding suit and adjusting it enough to pull out his thick cock.

If it was warmer, I’d take my time tasting him, but that can wait for later tonight, when we’re in the comfort of our home.

I walk with what I’m hoping is a seductive sway toward him, unable to resist sucking his dick into my mouth for a few seconds before straddling him on the motorcycle.

“That’s more like it.” He grins before leaning forward, catching my bottom lip between his teeth. Gripping the back of my head, he scrunches my hair into a fist, maneuvering me so he can nip and kiss my neck and jaw. “I like the new panties.”

I grin and reach down, wrapping my palm around his shaft between us and begin slowly pumping. There’s some pre-cum, and I use my thumb to bring it down over the rest of his cock.

Controlling my head, Aleko moves me again so he can kiss me, or devour me—same thing. Either way, the kissing, combined with the way I’m rubbing my clit over the tip of his cock, is going to have me coming all over him in no time.

“Ride me hard, baby,” he growls into my mouth, grabbing my ass with the hand not tangled in my hair and pulling me onto him.

The pleasure-pain sensation is electric as my pussy stretches around his cock.

“Fuck, yes!” I scream around his tongue, sucking on it before exploring once more, our mouths fused together.

Aleko's thigh muscles are tense where he's keeping us and the motorcycle stable as I ride him as hard as he asked for. Up and down, with a little rotation to rub my clit against his pelvis. He controls all my movements, the hand squeezing my ass and the one gripping my hair keeping me close to him. Not that I want to get away.

Tingles build from my curling toes, shooting up my legs and down my spine, meeting in the middle and causing an explosion of pleasure to ripple through me. Aleko grunts once, twice, exhaling on a deep growl as my body is still in aftershock from the eruption of my senses.

"You're fucking perfect, Cherry." He places one, final, sensuous kiss to my lips before he rests his forehead against mine, his palms holding me securely in place at the waist.

We're both breathing heavily and I can't contain my giggle. It's involuntary, but it feels so good with him still inside me. This is the perfect moment.

"You're gonna be a daddy, Aleko." I grip his wrists and bring his palms around to my stomach. I did like, five tests this morning to confirm it, and while it may seem soon, it feels like a miracle to me.

We're being given a second chance.

"I guess you could call it a late wedding gift?" I laugh, repeating what he said to me earlier.

"I'm gonna be a...? Fuck, Cherry Pie. You just made me the happiest fucker in North Carolina." Grinning, he grips my cheeks, kissing me hard and fast, then he notices I'm shivering a little. "Get dressed. We're going for a coffee—hot chocolate for you—and I'm calling Jonesy to bring a truck."

“Why?” His reaction makes me chuckle. He’s trying to be authoritative as he lifts me from him, whipping off his neck tube and sliding it between my thighs to catch any fallout.

“Because you just took your last ride on Scarlett, Philia, or any bike until that baby is born, Cherry Pie. And I know we’ve been doing this whole growing-as-people thing, but right now, I need to control how this goes down for both our sanities.” He’s completely serious, but I can also sense the nerves in his tone.

I get it, I’m scared as fuck too, and this time, I’m happy to follow every rule he has for me.

“Okay.” I can’t keep the smile from my face as I pull my riding suit back on.

“Just okay?” The way he raises that sexy ass motherfucking brow says he doesn’t believe me fully, but he’s willing to try. Just like I am.

“Yup.” I shrug.

“Let’s go grab a hot drink before Jonesy arrives. There’s a place about a ten minute walk away from here.” Aleko holds out his hand for me and we link fingers, squeezing each other affectionately. “Ninja!” Both rats come at the call, scurrying out from where they were huddled in my helmet. I kneel to let them both crawl up my arm, and they make quick work of jumping across to Aleko, climbing into his hoodie.

We walk in a comfortable silence, stopping every few steps for a quick kiss or a grope like we’re teenagers who can’t keep their hands off each other until we get to the door of a small coffee shop.

It opens just as we approach and I swallow hard at what I see.

Aleko's grip on my hand tightens and my eyes widen in surprise.

"It's been a while, Kenz. Glad you didn't die."

Chapter Twenty-One

Aleko

T his motherfucker again?

There are two things wrong with that comment, the least of which is the nickname Ryan the Fireman has for my wife.

“Uh, yeah.” Mackenzie is squeezing my hand like she can feel my control dwindling by the second. “Me, too.”

“Y’all are still a thing, huh?” It’s official, this guy wants to die. Not that it’s the first time he’s asked for a beating. Way back when I had my sights set on my Cherry, he made his crush on her and disdain for me known loud and clear. He even went so far as to call the cops on me, thinking I beat her to a pulp. The only reason he didn’t get punched in the face back then was because I was still trying to impress my girl.

“Well, yes, obviously.” She lets out a nervous laugh and I know for a fact she’s trying to downplay this whole situation because she knows I’m about two degrees north of Smacktown and he’s the pin on my GPS.

“Hey, asshole.” Okay so maybe I’m a little closer than I thought, but I’m past that, now. Anyone who thinks they can disrespect my wife with their underhanded comments hasn’t properly met me. So, allow me to introduce myself. Raising our joint hands, I make sure he can see Cherry’s platinum wedding band and smirk. “It’s definitely a thing.”

“Jesus Christ, Kenz.”

Okay, I have reached my destination.

“Hold my rats, baby.” I reach back and take our precious pets out of my hoodie and place them on her shoulders knowing damn well, this won’t end pretty.

Blocking Mackenzie with my body, I step up to Ryan, leaving just enough distance for my fist to rear back, only to spring forward and land on his cheekbone, rewarding me with a satisfying crunching sound.

Contrary to Spencer all those months ago on the beach when I thought he was making a move on Cherry, this asshole doesn’t choose to take the high road. He swings right back at me and the grin I feel spreading across my face is bound to make normal, law abiding citizens fear for their children.

Not missing his mark, my head snaps to the side as he hits my jaw, but I’m not drugged up on my own adrenaline as I grab him by the lapels of his aviator jacket and slam him against the outside of the diner.

“Aleko, let him go!” I almost chuckle at my sweet Cherry Pie’s resigned tone. It’s like she’s just saying that because it’s the appropriate thing to say but deep inside, she knows it’s useless.

Slamming his head back against the brick wall, I press my forearm to his throat and, seething, I give him a choice. “You either apologize for your disrespect or you lose a couple of teeth. Your choice, man.”

Using his shoulders to dislodge me and the wall behind him for leverage, he pushes me straight into a parked car, the alarm sounding almost immediately.

“Option two, then.” I crack my neck left then right before stalking him as he brings his fists to his face like we’re about to have a clear boxing fight. Yeah, I don’t think so.

Crouching down, I ram my shoulder into his gut and lift him up and over until he lands on the hood of the same car that’s still wailing like a fucking air raid.

As Ryan snaps around, his anger reaching the levels that make you do stupid shit, the police sirens ring out, but unlike him—civil worker and all that—I don’t fucking care. So, when he stands to his full height, thinking I’d stop as well to avoid getting arrested, I punch him one last time and I fucking know he’s lost a tooth.

“Motherfucker!” As he spits blood, I look down and see his tooth. Score.

Twenty minutes later, we’re both in county and I’ve left instructions with Cherry to call our lawyer, Veronica Luna.

Fucking worth it.

“Fancy meeting you here.” A smile creeps onto my lips as I lie on the old, wooden bench set on the far back wall of the county jail.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite deputy.” Rising to my full height, I walk over to the steel bars and greet Celia Shipman, who, for all intents and purposes, has been good to the club.

“I wanted to present my condolences for Griffin. He was a good man, albeit a criminal.” We both chuckle but there’s no real joy to it. Prez was a good man who chose to live a life on the fringe of what society deems proper behavior. Hell, we all do. “How is Vanessa holding up?”

I shrug because there's no simple answer to that question.

"Shade said something about waves. She's okay one minute then something will set her off and bring her back down." I don't remember feeling like this when I thought Mackenzie was dead because the only thing I felt was the need for vengeance, knowing that once all that was over, I'd join her.

"Yeah, I get it. Emotions are a tricky thing and never the same for two people." We nod, allowing the brief silence to act as a segway to whatever it is she really wants to talk to me about. I don't know much, but I know Celia isn't the chit chat type of person.

"So, I was wondering." Here we go. "You wouldn't know anything about a shoot out down at the Beaufort House, would you?"

I frown like I'm really thinking hard about that.

"Beaufort, Beaufort, Beaufort...doesn't ring a bell. What happened?" And the Oscar goes to...

"Hmhmhm. Well, I can't really talk about it since we're still investigating, but there were several dead bodies we had to deal with, which is never fun." The deputy watches me closely, looking for any hints or chinks in my armor. She can look all damn day.

"Yeah, sounds like a hassle I wouldn't want." Cocking my head to the side, I figure I could ask some questions too while she's here. "How is your investigation going with the smiley pills? I hear the body count is dropping..."

"Again, ongoing investigation that may or may not have something to do with the Beaufort shooting. That being said, since his wife took over Risus Pharmaceuticals,

we're seeing death numbers going down. It could also be about the antidote that's hit the market." It's obvious she suspects us in some way but we went in clean, no way she'll find evidence against us. But the last part of what she says gets my hackles up even though I'm not really sure why. Something about this doesn't sit well with me. Then again, what the fuck do I know?

"Um, hello! Shouldn't you be processing him for assault and charging him or something? He broke my tooth." Celia shakes her head at me and whispers.

"Why you gotta make my life hell?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." My grin is sincere because this woman is pretty fucking cool, but it's also cocky because that's who I am.

"Ma'am, Aleko Kas...Kastel...um..." I growl at the rookie deputy destroying my name. It ain't that fucking difficult.

"Kastellanos." My tone is harsh so I add on a toothy grin to ease the blow.

"Right. Sorry. Um, his bail has been paid." Celia thanks him then turns to me.

"Listen to me," she speaks in hushed tones so Ryan the Fireman with one less tooth can't hear us. "Let us do our jobs and tell the club to stop being mercenaries." We stare at each other for just a second before I smirk and shake my head from side to side.

"No idea what you mean, Deputy. We're just going about our days repairing vehicles and mourning the death of our beloved club president. By the way, any leads on that?" Raising a brow at her to let her know she should be doing her job a little better, I back away from the steel door as she opens it and gives me space to step out.

“We’re working very hard on our leads but it’s hard to get the job done with all the interference happening at the same time, if you know what I mean.” Yeah, we both know what she means. We need to stay out of her way, except there’s no fucking world where we don’t avenge Prez’s assassination.

“Sounds like you’ve got your work cut out for ya.”

Celia grunts at my understatement.

“Get out of here before your brothers cause another scene.”

“Good luck on your tooth, Ryan.” That last jab couldn’t be helped. Fuck that guy.

“Goddammit!” I ruffle Grinder’s overgrown mop as I pass him by on my way back from the lane where I just hit a strike.

“Don’t be jealous, Brother. You gotta eat your soup so you can get big and strong then maybe one day, you too, can get a strike.” I fucking love bowling.

“I hope your nutsack gets caught in the toilet seat when you’ve got the shits.” The entire fucking corner we’ve designated as ours erupts in laughter and I’m tempted to knock my bowling ball over his skull. Pretty sure that would make my Cherry angry though.

“That’s rough, mate. Now every time I hit the loo I’ll have that fucking image in my head.”

I grin when everyone groans.

“Good. You knuckleheads are fucking nuts, man.” And yeah, I get the irony of my words but my fucks flew out the window years ago.

Bash gets a seven-ten split and we all groan. Instead of at least aiming for one pin, he ends up in the gutter. Tough luck for team Grinder.

“Boner, you’re up! Come on, let’s goooo!” My Cherry is way too excited about this game, but watching her ass bounce up and down every time she claps and cheers us on is my only goal in life. For that, I’d play all the fucking games in the world.

“Sit down, Mac. You’re making me seasick with your bouncing.” Grinder grins, flinching when I throw a sucker at him then get another one out to suck on.

“Your head’s gonna bounce down that lane, motherfucker, if you speak to her like that again.”

Cherry growls at my over-the-top attitude. Meanwhile, Grinder sucks on his middle finger then kisses the pad in my direction, giving me a wink for good measure. Fucking asswipe.

“I can take care of myself, babe.” Leaning down, she wraps her lips around my sucker, and in this position, I’ve got the perfect view of her full tits, just right there.

“Maybe, but it’s always better when I take care of you.” I grab her by the ass cheeks and sink my teeth into the swell of her cleavage, reveling in that tiny gasp she gifts me. “Mine.”

“Yours, baby.”

“C’mon, man. Some of us are trying to fucking bowl, not play tittie waterboarding.” It’s my turn to give him the finger. “Your turn, Mrs. Psycho.” Grinder’s kidding, but holy shit, I kinda like it.

“Mr. and Mrs. Psycho, sittin’ in a tree...” Boner pipes in and I lose my shit because

these guys are so far from mature it's disturbing.

With a sweet kiss on my lips, Cherry tries three orange bowling balls before finding the one she's been using. It was her idea to come here tonight so we could celebrate my being bailed out of jail for assault. Originally, the guys wanted to go to Rocks Off and watch half naked women dance on poles but she put a stop to that real quick. Oddly enough, her veto had nothing to do with the dancers' state of dress and everything to do with it being too stuffy.

When she mentioned this place, the guys only paused for a half a second. We're all too fucking competitive to refuse a healthy game of...anything, really. What we forgot was that Mackenzie is as competitive as the bunch of us put together. Hence her leading score with a nearly perfect performance.

"Bloody hell, Mac! Leave some of them strikes for us, will ya?" Sledge is at the end of his rope, walking up to Cherry with his fingers pointing to his eyes then to hers in the universal gesture for "I'm watching you".

"What you do with your balls is all on you, Sledgy-Poo." The boom of laughter gets us some side eyes from the family two lanes down and for the first time in my life, I wonder if we should tone it down. Be a better example for those kids playing with their parents.

Then I remember that there are plenty of reasons to judge someone in this world, but laughing too loudly should never be one of them.

"Sledgy-Poo...that shit is sticking forever and fucking ever." Case in point...Grinder's over use of the word "fuck." To be fair, it's a very versatile word.

"I'm not calling him Sledgy-Poo. He's too crazy for that." Bear is on their team and wishing he was on ours. The only reason we're not crushing them is because he's

playing a good game. “Come on, man. Can’t you at least try?”

Sledge walks backward, watching the ball hit one, lone pin. Spinning around, he spreads his arms wide to the side and moans. “Something’s wrong with that lane. It ain’t me, it’s the slope in the floor.”

“Don’t be a sore loser. Your turn, baby!”

Smacking a noisy kiss on Mackenzie’s mouth—I love it when she calls me baby—I suck on her bottom lip before slapping her ass for good measure.

“Watch and learn, Sledgy Boy.” I pat my brother on the cheek and make a pouty face his way.

“That’s what your mummy said.” Fucking hell, I don’t need to look over to the family to know they’re glaring daggers at us. Okay, fine, they can judge for that, I guess.

I’m the only one with a red, sparkly ball. My fingers are nice and long and it’s the only one I could find that fit. Normally, I’d walk with a swagger to get my wife all hot and bothered, but it’s impossible in these fucking shoes so I don’t even try.

Raising my ball to my chest, I take three steps and throw, watching as it goes straight down the lane between the middle pin and the second line. The crash is so fucking satisfying until I realize I’ve got one pin still standing.

Asshole.

When I turn to wink at my Cherry, I see her talking to another woman with Bear. The way he stands it’s like he’s protecting her, but with his shoulder in the way, I can’t see her face.

“Where the fuck are you going?” The game forgotten, I ignore Grinder’s protests and make my way to Mackenzie. When Bear acts more grizzly than teddy, it means I need to have his back.

My molars begin to grind together when her face comes into view, catching the tail end of her statement.

“...my condolences. Also, I wanted to thank you for saving my life.” Harrison Beaufort’s wife is standing there all nice and gentle, but I’m not buying it.

“We have no idea what you’re talking about,” Bear answers before I can tell her to fuck herself and her husband right off.

“Oh. I thought it was you the other day at my house. I saw your bikes outside and wanted to come in and personally extend my gratitude.” No fucking way we’re copping to killing. I don’t give a fuck if she was a victim of that guy, we’re not admitting anything. Also, she can heli-fuck right off, just like her sociopath of a husband.

“Do we know you?” Grinder, sensing there’s a fucking problem, stands between Bear and me with Mackenzie at his front.

“I’m Emily Beaufort, the new CEO for Risus Pharmaceuticals, thanks to you...or at least, I thought.” Frowning, she looks down then back up again like she’s trying to figure out a complicated math formula.

“Why would we know anything about Risus Pharmaceuticals?” Grinder is very skilled at playing dumb, it’s a fucking art.

“Who’s this?” Sledge is up next and I don’t even try to tone down my venom.

“Meet Emily Beaufort, Harrison Beaufort’s wife.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mackenzie

Despite Aleko's grumbles, I invited Emily to come shopping with me today. Well...me, Sledge, Grinder, Bear, and Flower—who decided to stick around to see how these bikers do Christmas after Tab, Glitch, and the other Mancini soldiers went back to New York. The woman seems like she's been through some shit. She has no friends or family here, her step-son was killed, her husband is a walking dead man on the run, and it's Christmas Eve.

There's no way I want a stranger with us on Christmas day, especially not one connected to Jake in such a strange way. She was technically his step-mom as well as Preston's. But Christmas Eve? I can do this.

To be honest, the invite was accidental as she overheard us talking about it at the bowling alley. She just seemed so forlorn about how strange the holidays were for her this year, and I figured this was the first step in me helping people.

Leaving my gift shopping until the last minute is a mixture of on purpose and running out of time...mostly running out of time, but I figured I'd make a day of it. One thing in particular, though, I had the forethought to plan and I can't wait to pick it up.

Obviously, Aleko can't come with us because I want to surprise him tomorrow morning, and Grinder was explicit about his housemate, Boner, not coming for the same reason. Bear is coming because Aleko doesn't trust Emily, as well as extra muscle with Sledge in case Harrison Beaufort decides to make an appearance. I'm

positive he won't. He's been untraceable for almost a month. It'd be fucking stupid of him to come out of hiding now. Too many people want him dead. Surprisingly, the Irish left in New Jersey are among them, blaming him for the massacre here. That doesn't mean Aleko is taking any chances, and I'm totally on the same page.

"She scrubs up well. Swit fuckin' swoo." Sledge wolf whistles when Emily climbs out of her Uber and waves in our direction.

"You're such a fucking dog." Flower elbows him in the ribs, grinning from ear to ear.

"Woof woof." They both laugh and I can't help chuckling along with them. This afternoon is gonna be fun.

"I fucked a furry once—"

"Not the time for sex stories, Grinder." I side-eye him as Emily gets closer.

"She looks like she's ready for a night on the town instead of an afternoon of shopping," Bear grumbles, almost under his breath.

The wine-red coat she's wearing flares out around her knees, is nipped in to give her a tiny waist, and looks like something Mrs. Claus would wear. Paired with shiny red stilettos, presumably a skirt or a dress beneath the coat, and her hair in an up-do any bride would be proud of, I get more of a prim and proper vibe than a girl on the town.

"Hi, Emily." I wave awkwardly, not sure if we should hug or whatever because it's not like we're regular friends or anything. The sleeve of Aleko's hoodie slides up my arm and I pull it back down to cover my wrist because it's fucking cold. I'm not showing yet, but the thick maxi dress I'm wearing is one of the only warm things I own that fits me. The bag of clothes Vanessa gave me last time is full of summer dresses, which won't come in useful for a while.

“Hey. Thanks for inviting me. Shall we go in? It’s cold out here.” Emily kind of grimaces in the direction of the Sons, and I’m hoping she’s just nervous because they do look intimidating to the average person, I guess.

Flower is dressed exactly the same as the guys, in jeans and a T-shirt, the only difference is she’s wearing a neon pink leather jacket and the Sons are wearing their black cuts over their jackets.

“I say we make a stop at Starbucks first. Fuel up for all the browsing and shopping. Plus, I have a little extra treat to add.” Flower shakes a hip flask in the air before sliding it back into her black over-the-shoulder bag.

“Nice. Bear’s driving and Mac’s preggo, so Uncle Grindey and I will have to take one for the team.”

Hearing things like that will never get old. It still hurts in a strange way I could never describe, but it also doesn’t.

Inside the two-story mall, we turn left and head straight for Starbucks. I may not be getting coffee, but my fingers need warming up. A hot chocolate and a cookie seem like the perfect start.

The stares from other shoppers are beginning to annoy me. Some of them are friendly, but the majority are very judgy and I don’t like it.

“Hey, ignore them. The people that matter don’t mind, and the people that mind don’t matter.”

I raise both my brows in Emily’s direction. Her words came completely out of the blue, but I like them.

“Sorry, it’s just something my mom used to say when we were couch surfing for a while. Carrying around all your worldly possessions in plastic bags can draw some interesting looks.” She shrugs and grins, as though sharing parts of herself with a stranger is nothing.

Apart from Spencer and Aleko, I’ve never felt comfortable enough to share anything real about myself with anyone. Okay, so the rest of the Sons come as part of the Aleko package, but still, considering I’m twenty-two in a few months, that’s still not a lot of people.

“Silver lining: you had your mom to do it with.” Flower winks, swigging from her spiked coffee as we make our way into a store full of sports equipment. Grinder chose our first destination and we’re just going to browse from here.

“I suppose you could say that.” Emily grimaces again, and I’m beginning to think it’s her thing when she’s uncomfortable.

We shop for hours, all of us—except me—with hands full of bags. Bear insisted that he and the others would carry my bags or Psycho would rip them all new ones...his words. While I’m aware that I’m pregnant, not incapable, I know Aleko is only thinking of our safety; me and our tiny bean that I have vowed to keep safe with everything I have.

“I would like to get some of those self-care-style gift boxes for that new women’s home that opened a few weeks ago. The owner’s taken in a couple of new ladies and I want to donate something.” Emily points to an aisle with a variety of beauty products and I follow her because I see some things Mom, Sabrina, and Vanessa would like. There’s also a cool neon eyeshadow kit that I think Flower will appreciate.

“Do you know Mirabel well?” I’ve spoken to her on the phone after eventually meeting her, and the job she had in mind isn’t something I’m comfortable doing now

that I'm pregnant. I could be in potentially dangerous situations if an angry husband or partner found their other half in Mirabel's home. It's a little far-fetched, but I'm not taking any chances.

"A little. I heard about what she was doing, taking women in who have suffered domestic violence and offering them a safe space, and well...once I took over my husband's businesses—albeit temporarily until he is found either alive or dead—I offered to sponsor the home so she could get it up and running sooner. It's her second location, but every little bit helps." The way Emily talks about her husband is so macabre, like she's totally unaffected.

I guess this chick's a lot tougher than I thought. Good for her.

"Doing some good with the hand you were dealt." I nod, because that's something I've been thinking about lately. My dad gave me a specific set of skills, and I've never truly put them to good use.

"Yeah, you could say that." Emily smiles. "So how far along are you?" She points to my stomach with her eyes.

"About eight weeks. The doc said we're due at the beginning of August." My hand automatically rests against my lower belly.

"Congratulations." She sighs. "I can't have babies of my own. Something bad happened to me and someone I knew years ago. We..." She pauses and shudders, shaking herself from whatever dark path she was about to travel. "Sorry. Too much. Er...where did the others go?"

Turning to see what she's talking about, I notice that Bear is my only chaperone. Sledge, Grinder, and Flower have all disappeared somewhere, but it's not the first time this afternoon.

The conversation dead, I shrug and pick up a few things, then we head to the cashier to pay. Emily is nothing at all like I imagined. She has her shit together, but she's damaged. Not for the reasons I thought she would be though. Full of surprises. Still, we exchanged numbers earlier, and I get the impression she's the oversharing type so I have no doubt I'll hear from her.

"Where the fuck have you three been?" Bear's rumble is deep, authoritative, and I swear Emily's grinning. Maybe she likes a bit of Bear?

"Got a blowy from the shop assistant in the changing rooms." Sledge is pulling up his zipper, a huge smile on his face.

"And I caught this little minx watching over the next cubicle." Grinder laughs, pointing his thumb at Flower, who shrugs.

"And what were you doing in the cubicle, Grinder?" Flower puts a hand on her waist and tilts her head.

"Finding a good place to watch." They both laugh, rubbing their hands across their own chests and making fake orgasm noises as they thrust their hips.

"Fuck off." Sledge isn't really angry with them, but he rolls his eyes and starts to head out of the store. "Pricks."

The delicious stretch in my pussy makes me groan and roll my hips as I open my eyes. Aleko's hand is cupping my breast, his thigh is between mine, and he's slowly sliding in and out of me from behind.

"Merry Christmas, Cherry." He chuckles into my ear and begins kneading my breast, pinching my nipple between his thumb and finger.

“Mmm.” This should be the way we wake up every morning. “You too, handsome.”

Sucking my earlobe, he hums, and it vibrates through my body, tickling at the hairs on the back of my neck.

“You feel so fucking good. Made for me.” Aleko begins nipping at my skin and his thrusts get harder, more urgent.

I push back against him, meeting him stroke for stroke, the sensations from where he has my nipple and breast in his grasp adding to the building orgasm. It hits like a tsunami, strong and fast, causing every nerve ending to spasm out of control as Aleko slows, with one final thrust, pushing all of our cum back inside me.

His palm slides down from my breast and he pulls his cock out of me. Using a towel he clearly prepared earlier, he pushes it between my legs and presses his lips against mine chastely before getting up.

“Fucking perfect.”

A couple of minutes later, he returns from the bathroom with a smile and a washcloth. One that he uses to carefully clean my pussy, soothing the delicious ache he causes every time he fucks me.

I lie back against the soft pillows, watching him take care of me with a reverence I’m in awe of. Once he finishes, Aleko plants a gentle kiss on my stomach, glancing up through his lashes to make eye contact with me. The way the tattoo above his eyebrow crinkles when he looks at me like this is just everything. He’s everything.

Fuck, I’m a lucky woman.

“Good morning, Cherry. Good morning, Baby Psycho.” He kisses my stomach a few

more times and his large hands spread across my skin.

“No. We’re not doing the Mr. and Mrs. Psycho thing. Baby Kastellanos.” I push my hands through his hair and massage, grinning at my cheeky-as-fuck husband as he continues to place gentle kisses all over my belly.

“Sorry, Cherry, but it’s totally a thing now. Nothing you can do to stop it. Train left the station weeks ago.” He shrugs and chuckles.

“Well bring the train back because Baby Psycho’s not happening.” I purse my lips and raise my brows, feigning outrage, but the fucker is a cheat and he tickles my sides. We both burst into laughter, rolling around the bed, and a rustling from the dresser gets our attention right before Ninja pokes his head up to see what’s going on.

“Come on, then. Vanessa made you both a special treat.” Holding Aleko’s hands still at my sides, I sit up and kiss the top of his head. Vanessa loves these little guys, and while she was having a good day yesterday she made up some of the treat bags they love so much. I take a couple from the small fridge in the corner of the room and open them up. We decided to stay at the compound for Christmas Eve, because unlike the Toxic Rebels, the Sons of Khaos are a family who love to be around each other. Plus, Mom insisted that she wanted to make dinner for everyone with Sabrina and Hoops. Apparently, Hoops is a great cook. Who knew?

By the time I get back to the bed, Ninja and Bandit have made themselves at home between our pillows, enjoying all the fussing Aleko is showering them with.

“Morning, boys.” I scratch beneath each of their chins and pass them both an open bag. Clever little fuckers like to pretend they’re human and choose their own treat, reaching into the bags and pulling out vegetable sticks.

“I got you something too.” It’s impossible to contain my grin as I practically jump

with excitement and pull out the little box I have for Aleko from the drawer in my bedside table. He takes it with that sexy-as-fuck grin of his and opens the black lid, revealing a chunky silver ring shaped with two skulls side by side and a cherry stem connecting them.

“This is fucking stunning, Cherry.” He immediately puts it onto the middle finger of his right hand. “Thank you.” Palming my cheeks, he pulls me closer to him and kisses me. It’s soft and gentle and full of promises, and he moves away too soon.

I grab some panties from the drawer and slide them on, watching as Aleko roots around his giant black sports bag. The pure nakedness of him is a sight to behold. Tattoos snaking across his entire body, weaving in and out of the natural dips of his muscles...

“Are you staring at my ass? I’m not a piece of meat.” Shaking his head, he turns and walks toward me with a rectangular box. “Stare at my cock, that’s the meat you can have.” He winks and I laugh, sitting back down on the bed where Ninja and Bandit move to snuggle into my thigh.

Sitting beside me, Aleko grips the box and wraps an arm around my shoulder.

“The brothers and I have been talking.” I try not to scoff and bite back with something sarcastic, nodding for him to continue. “Crow actually came up with the idea after you spent some time in the garage with him last week. I know it’ll take some time to get running, but you’ve got around nine months to prepare for...” He pauses and passes me the box like it’s the key to the world.

Gobsmacked. I’m completely gobsmacked by what I’m seeing.

Hundreds of small, red business cards, with “Cherry Racing Team” scrolled across them.

“Wha—?” I’m speechless, and elated, and I can’t believe the Sons knew what I wanted before I did.

“We all fucking love you, baby. Crow thought this would make your clit tingle, and after I knocked the fucker out for suggesting it, I agreed.”

“Oh my God, is that where the black eye came from?” The thought makes me chuckle.

“Yup.” Aleko’s like a proud dad, totally happy with his efforts.

“You know this means I’ll still be your rival during race season?”

“Makes life interesting, and if you beat me I’ll just have to think of a punishment.” He wags his brows.

“Or I could think of a punishment for you when you lose.”

“Oh, it’s on, Cherry!” Aleko pounces on me, making Ninja and Bandit jump down from the bed, snacks in their paws.

A few hours later, I declare that this Christmas day is one for the history books. The food is a banquet fit for royalty, and I’m debating forcing Hoops to move in with us because the pumpkin pie he baked is my new obsession.

“Where did the pie go?”

Whoops, they’ve noticed. I give zero fucks, ignoring Boner’s question.

“The pregnant lady has it. You’ve got no chance, mate.” Sledge laughs opposite me, eyeing the whole pie in my hands.

The rumble of conversation and laughter from the mass of tables we slid together comes to an abrupt halt when the doors to the rec room fling open.

There stands a soaking wet Spencer, red-rimmed eyes, a few butterfly stitches over a gash on his temple, and breathing heavily. I'm the first to stand, running to him as he falls to his knees and collapses on the ground.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Aleko

S o...Steve's dead. Has been for almost three weeks now.

Because Spencer walked in on his boyfriend being murdered, he got smacked upside the head with the butt end of a gun. That's how he ended up on our doorstep at Christmas, looking like death itself.

With their apartment still yellow taped off from the pending criminal investigation, he's been staying with us. Or should I say...they?

That's right, Spencer inherited a cat. We all love Pepper—and by “we” I do not include Ninja, who has decided to be a diva—with his big eyes and slow, “don't fucking rush me” pace of life. To be fair, he's old as fuck.

I like Spencer, and I'm enjoying the lazy-as-fuck cat, but Steve? Nah. Don't really care. Don't get me wrong, I get it. Spencer is torn up, he was his boyfriend after all, but let's not forget my first meeting with the guy where he had a fucking scalpel to my supposedly dead girlfriend. In those kinds of moments, the logical part of the brain is completely checked out. I know he didn't and wasn't going to hurt her, but Steve will forever be associated with that first second I saw her pale, cold, body on a slab of stainless steel.

Fucking fiction is what it is. At least he only got the butt of a pistol to the temple and passed out for a few minutes, but it was long enough for the guy to bolt. Definitely

traumatic.

“Look, all I’m saying is that something’s not adding up.” We’re playing pool in the rec room, two on two, with Bear and me against Bash and Crow. Spencer is sitting at the bar with Pepper sleeping on his lap, explaining his theories about what happened. “I’m not denying that Steve was using, I found a couple of smiley bags in his coat pockets, but he wasn’t a criminal.”

Looking over my shoulder I raise my brow and stare at my wife’s best friend.

“Okay, technically, he was but you know what I mean.” If Spence could roll his eyes any further, he’d be taking off into flight.

“You mean...like us?” Bear’s question is so matter of fact that Spencer answers on reflex.

“Yes.” Four pairs of eyes are now on him. “No. I mean...you’re different.” He’s not wrong but we still like to give him shit.

“‘Cause we’re hot as fuck, right?” Crow pipes up, egging him on.

“Well, there is that.” I don’t miss his gaze as it darts over to Grinder feeding carrot sticks to Ninja the pouter.

“What’s up, bitches!” Sledge trots in, jumps over the bar, and grabs a beer from the cooler.

“I take offense to that.” We all side-eye Spence but I go one step further and throw the blue chalk, hitting him square in the chest.

“Nope, we don’t do that here, mate. This is an offense-free zone, you either suck it up

or walk right out.” Pepper wakes up, stands on Spencer’s thighs, then jumps on the bar, probably in search of a quiet place to sleep his life away.

“Fine. I’m not offended but I probably should be.”

“So what’s the theory on Steve?” Sledge takes a long sip from his beer and watches as Bear cues up and calls the twelve in the middle pocket.

“Look, he worked at the morgue, right? Bodies were going missing all the time. Then he starts using drugs? Like...why?”

“Why does anyone start using drugs? It’s an addiction.” Bash shrugs then walks up to where Spencer is sitting at the bar and picks up the chalk I threw.

“Yeah, but he was fine until he wasn’t.”

“So, let’s say someone set him up. Your goal is to what?” My question is met with nods around the pool table as they give their attention to Spence for an answer, but his shoulders fall and his sigh is heavy.

“I don’t know. That’s the problem. I just want the police to do their job and find this guy. I mean, I get it, they’re overworked and have a backlog of cases, but look, I’ve been here three weeks and my apartment is still off limits.” He’s not wrong, it feels like an exceptionally long time to keep the yellow tape up. “Not that I want to go back there with everything that happened.”

“Goddammit!” Bash sinks the cue ball and Bear rubs his hands together as he circles the table to choose his next ball.

“Hey, Aleko, would you mind going around and maybe asking questions?” I almost choke on my beer.

“Who am I interrogating in this scenario?” Bear sinks the nine and grins at Bash while I try to understand how, exactly, I could help Spencer.

“I don’t know. Drug dealers, maybe? Someone, somewhere, knows something. You see it on television all the time.” I’d be tempted to say this is real life but he may have a point. We know for a fact that people are more willing to talk to us than the police, so it’s entirely possible for me to get some information out there.

“Bear, whaddaya think? You wanna go for a ride on the wrong side of the tracks?” Bear and Bash both chuckle just as Shade walks into the rec room looking rough.

“We are the wrong side of the tracks...supposedly.” Fist bumping my best friend because truer words are rarely spoken, I nod to Shade as he calls out a, “What’s up,” to the room.

“Hey, Shade, man. Wanna get out of here for a while?” He doesn’t say no right away, which tells me he’s considering the offer. Ever since Prez’s death, he’s been the pillar in Vanessa’s life. I’m pretty sure she hangs on to him and counts on him because he was closest to her husband. It’s one thing to lose the love of your life, it’s a completely different case altogether when he’s executed right in front of you as you sit on his lap. That trauma will never leave her, and according to Shade, and everyone who lives within hearing distance of her suite, the nightmares won’t leave her either.

“Yeah, Vanessa just took a sleeping pill, it should knock her out for a little bit. By the time she’s up, Darlene and Sabrina will be there to keep her company. Riding is exactly what I need to do.” Shade grabs an energy drink and downs it like it’s water.

“That shite’ll kill you, mate.” There’s zero humor in Sledge’s tone.

“Not if lack of sleep kills me first.”

Fuck, I didn't realize it was that bad. Then again, those dark circles around his eyes should have alerted us a while ago.

"You can't take care of Vanessa if you're barely able to take care of yourself." I lower my voice when I speak. I'm not sure how he feels about all of this or if he wants everyone to know he's struggling. Not only is he being an immovable rock for his best friend's wife, but he has to deal with his own grief at losing Prez.

"She's talking about selling their house and building a cottage on the property out back. I think her nightmares will slow down by the time it's built but I get it, his presence is everywhere." Right now, Shade is sleeping on a cot in Prez and Vanessa's suite, probably to make sure she doesn't do anything dangerous. And by dangerous, I mean self-harm.

"No worries, man. We'll all help with that. Except for the plumbing. I don't think any of us knows how to do that shit." Fucking literally.

"I just need to get some air, you know?" Shade blows out a long breath and it looks like he's been holding it for months.

"Well, I guess there's no time like the present. Who's comin' on a ride along?" I don't expect a lot of people to volunteer with the weather being a bit sketchy, so I'm not surprised when only Bear joins Shade and me.

"Fuck it," I hear Bear grumble as he drops the cue sticks on the table and slaps Bash and Crow on the shoulders as he walks past. "I'm tired of winning all the time, anyway."

We're about to head upstairs to change into leathers when Sledge gets our attention.

"Hey, guys? What the actual fuck is happening?"

I follow Sledge's line of sight and the scene before us hits me like a cold shower.

"Oh, fuck!" Bear is the first to react because I just can't. The consequences of what we're seeing are running through my head and the only person I can actually blame for this dangerous situation is my wife.

"Yeah! Get it! That's what I'm talkin' about!" Ignoring Grinder—his comments aren't helpful in the least—I head to the couch, but by the time I get to him, Bandit is already running away while Ninja starts cleaning himself up.

"Well, that's not gonna end well for us," Shade pipes in as he lets Bandit crawl up his leg and into the crook of his neck. "So, does this mean they're gay or we're gonna have a hundred fucking pups in the compound?"

"Ninja was neutered, no chance of babies, thank fuck. But I may need to take a short trip to the vet."

Shade, Bear, and I ride around town for about an hour as we casually seek out drug dealers on the streets. It's not as easy as the news likes to make it seem. Dealers aren't fucking stupid, hanging out on the corners with a sign that says "Buy one dime, get one free."

That being said, we know people. We recognize those who have sold us weed or coke—Grinder likes to dip his nose in the powder once in a while—in the past. The last couple of years, Crow has been growing in the back of our property, going as far as filing for a medical marijuana card because of post traumatic stress disorder.

He's not supposed to have more than six plants but...yeah, like Spencer said, we're criminals.

"Look!" Shade nods to Millie, who waves at us when she hears and sees our bikes.

She's taller and looks stronger, probably from playing softball every year. We first met her years back when she was barely a teen and Prez got her into Maribel's home. There, she could have a safe space instead of hanging out on the streets while her mother worked three jobs for food and all the things Millie and her brother needed for school. Now she's graduating and got early admission with a full scholarship to East Carolina University for nursing. Her mom told us at the funeral when she came to present her condolences. It's the only time we saw a hint of light in Vanessa's eyes.

Parking the bikes in a V formation, back tires against the curb, we rush to Millie so we can all hug her in turn.

"Look at you all grown up and looking more adult than we are." Speaking with clear awe in his voice, Shade gives Millie a tight hug and nods at the clear example she is for teen girls everywhere. He and Prez made sure she was getting her work done while Vanessa gave her math lessons twice a week in middle school.

"Y'all are gettin' old! Is that gray hair, Shade?" She's teasing, of course. No fucking way we've got gray hair any fucking where. Until I look at Shade and, no shit...right there on his sideburns, there's a sprinkling of white. Well, damn.

"It goes hand in hand with becoming wise." Shade smirks, although he's not far from the truth. Of all of us, he and Hoops are the only two sane enough to lead. Sledge may be VP but he's got the impulse gene that, more often than not, could probably get us into trouble.

"Boy, please. Wisdom ain't got nottin' to do with age. It's about experience." Millie rolls her eyes and crosses her arms like we've personally offended her, but then she grins and we all laugh with her. "But, straight up, Shade, I'm sorry about Griffin. I cried for weeks when I heard. Momma, too."

"Thanks, sweetie. We're dealing as we go." Shade's tone drops a little as the sadness

fills his voice.

“How’s Vanessa doin’? I’ve been meanin’ to come by but I don’t wanna bother her, ya know? Momma said she’d make Vanessa’s favorite dish but I told her we should wait.” As Millie speaks, I watch Shade, who takes in a deep breath before letting it out, like he’s trying to push down his feelings so he can answer her without bawling.

“She’s, ah...she’s hanging in there. You know, good days and bad days.” Ain’t that the truth, Brother is the only thought going through my mind at Shade’s answer.

“Yeah, I get it. So, what are y’all doin’ ridin’ around our neighborhood? Kinda far out from the psych house, isn’t it?” Millie looks at the three of us, expecting an answer, but fuck, we don’t want to say we’re looking for drug dealers, and more importantly, drug dealers willing to kill.

“Shade here needed to get some fresh air.” Bear and Shade both look at me like I’m speaking a foreign language as Millie quirks up the corner of her mouth, knowing damn well that’s not the whole story. Smart girl.

“Look, Millie, we’ve got a friend in town who just lost his partner after a...” Bear is trying to find less traumatic words but I’m sorry, Millie has been living with truth her entire life, this isn’t going to shock her.

“Steve was killed in his own home and we’re trying to figure out what the hell’s happening.”

Millie bursts out laughing while I ignore the withering glares from my brothers on either side of me. Jeesh, it’s not like she doesn’t have the Internet.

“Well, I don’t know anything about that, but you know who might?” Millie gives us a dramatic pause and I just know...

Please don't say Fish. Please don't say Fish. Please don't say—

“Fish is running the streets on the few blocks here. If it happened on his watch, he'd probably know something.” I groan, loudly, at Millie's words while Bear and Shade curse under their breaths. “Oh, y'all still not on speaking terms?”

“How the f—how do you know about that?” I'm practicing not saying fuck so often for when Baby Psycho arrives.

“Pfft, you kiddin'? Even my granddaddy knows and he's half blind and completely deaf.” Okay then.

“Aleko here has a gold medal and world record for holding grudges.” Shade is throwing...well, shade and I don't like it.

“He stole my bike.” How are they not supportive of me?

“He borrowed your bike after you let him take it for a ride.” Bear's tone is so calm and logical I want to throat punch him.

“Then he destroyed it on the asphalt. She was unrecognizable!” I remember Philia was all scratched up, it took me—

“He put a scratch on it and we covered that shit up within minutes back at the garage.” If Bear doesn't shut his mouth, I'm going to kick his bike and see how he likes that.

“He never apologized.” Now I've got them, because Fish never fucking said sorry for scratching up my girl. Granted, this was way before I met Mackenzie and my bike was the only true love in my life. “But I can be the better man for a good cause.” After I head butt him. Then we can have a conversation.

“Well, I’ll let you get to it, then. I’ve got homework to do.” Milie starts to leave when I interrupt her retreat.

“Hey, Mills?”

“Yeah?”

“Fuc—freaking proud of you.” Bear and Shade hum in agreement and the grin that graces her face is like a light in a long ass tunnel.

“Thanks, y’all.”

As we round the corner of the block, we spot Fish sitting on an old couch like a king overlooking his castle. Again, we park our bikes, back tires first, and turn off the engine.

“Be nice.” Bear’s tone is fucking annoying but I just want to get information then blow this joint.

“Fine.”

“Well, well, well. Whatta we got here, boys?” Oh, this motherfucker.

““Sup, Fish? How ya doin’?” Bear is the first to speak, clasping hands with Fish as they give each other a half hug with a slap on the back.

At Bear’s question, Fish looks around like he’s proud of his accomplishments. I mean, he did get a promotion so...there’s that.

“I’m good, bruh, just doin’ my thing.” I bet he’s doing his thing. Probably stealing bikes so he can go for a joyride before fucking them up. “Sorry about Prez, man.

That's jacked. But I heard about the Beaufort House gettin' shot up, so I guess Karma was in the neighborhood, right?" We all shrug like we don't know what happened. "Shade, how you doin', man?" Again with the clasped hands and pat pats on the back. When his gaze turns to me, silence falls on the corner of Timber and First.

"You remember, Psycho, right?" Bear is trying to be diplomatic. Fish knows who the fuck I am.

"Do I remem—dude tried to bite my ear off. Of course I remember his psychotic ass." Oh yeah, I forgot about that. I'm glad I didn't, the fuck knows what drugs he's got in his system.

"Look, we just wanted to ask about a murder downtown, see if you heard anything, word of mouth?" Shade gets down to business because it's getting late and the January cold is bitter at night fall.

"The morgue guy?" Fish frowns like he's thinking and going through a list of murders he'd have information about.

"Yeah, that one." Bear's tone is hopeful. The sooner he talks, the sooner we're back at the compound.

Then the light goes on.

"Oh, yeah, yeah. We talked about that shit the other night. But it ain't nobody from here. If y'all want answers, you should be talking to the Rockford Beach Fire Department." We all stare at Fish like he's grown a fucking duck face and he's speaking Croatian.

"Why the fuck would we be talking to the fire department?" Bear's question is tentative, and to be honest, I'm pretty sure none of us wants to hear the fucking

answer.

“Cause your killer is a white boy over there who’s got his fingers in many, many, dangerous pies.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mackenzie

“Do you think many people will join?” Spence looks over one of the flyers Vanessa helped me make—or more like, she sat and watched, offering a suggestion occasionally, but I was just happy to have her there. She reminds me a lot of Mom when Dad died, and my heart still breaks for her, even though months have passed.

“Honestly? I have no idea. I mean, I hope they do, obviously, or I wouldn’t be doing this.” I shrug, shoving a handful of flyers in his direction. “Make yourself useful.”

Spence rolls his eyes and crosses the road to see if the tackle shop will take some flyers for their customers.

They’re advertising the new racing team I want to build, and I could pee with excitement every time I think about it. It’s not a motorcycle club, nothing like the Sons of Khaos, but more of a hobby people do, like an evening dance class or whatever normal people do after a day’s work. I’ll find events that aren’t illegal street races, or create my own, and the long-term plan is to run huge events that can be fundraisers for places like Maribel’s and be able to race every week.

Some might say I’ve chosen a selfish path, but those some can fuck themselves because I’m finally doing the thing that is going to fill my cup. I’m a great racer, not too bad at the mechanic side of things—Crow’s been helping me build on the knowledge my dad gave me—and if I can help people that aren’t cut out for the biker lifestyle still be a part of something great, then yeah, I’m on cloud nine.

“Why didn’t you just become a Son?” Kincaid is my muscle for the day as Spence and I wander around town. With Harrison Beaufort still on the loose, Aleko is taking zero risks.

“Because I don’t want to go through the whole prospect thing. One, because it’s not fun, I know what goes on, and two, because Aleko would end up killing all his brothers for ordering me around. But also, I’m the Old Lady of a Son. I get a lot more respect from them this way, with none of the responsibility.”

“Yeah, you’re pretty spot on.” Kincaid nods and Spence makes his way back with a few less flyers in his hands.

“We’ve been doing this for like, an hour. Is it time for lunch yet?” For someone that was beaten up and lost his boyfriend on Christmas day, just over a month ago, Spencer is surprisingly unfazed. The bruising on his face has gone, and he looks a lot better than he did when he collapsed in the rec room at the compound. I’ve since found out that he and Steve were on the outs anyway. Once Steve started using and all that suspicious stuff, yeah, Spence was beginning to check out. He’s still sad about it, but he’s not broken up. More pissed that he now has a cat to look after.

“If we can just give the rest of these out, then we can do lunch.” My stomach rumbles in agreement, but if they don’t have pickles I may have to riot and demand we go back to my house that I share with Aleko. We have a healthy supply of pickles and pumpkin pie, courtesy of Hoops, the fucking genius.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Mackenzie Wilson, or is it Kastoff?”

Fuck. Off.

“It’s Kastellanos. And since when did you turn into such a douche, Ryan? Was there really any need for that? You could have just, you know, walked on by in silence.”

I'm blaming my extra sarcasm on the pregnancy hormones. What I really wanted to do was channel my best Dionne Warwick and sing, Walk On By , but I'm positive that would've been inappropriate.

“Why would I do that? You haven't got your pitbull with you today. Just Spencer, the EMT.” Ryan rolls his eyes upward as he says Spencer's name. “And whatever the fuck this thing is with a face full of metal and...is that...” He tilts his head and squints his eyes. “A hand tattoo over her throat?”

I don't think, I punch. Exactly the way Kincaid has taught me. Straight forward instead of taking a big swing, and I crack Ryan across the nose.

“Don't insult my friends. As you can see, I don't need my pitbull to protect me. I can protect my damn self.”

“What the actual fuck, Kenz?” Ryan cups his face, and I think I made his nose bleed.

Don't smile. Don't smile. Don't smile .

“You're just as bad as those fucking bikers. You too, Spencer. Does your boss know you hang around with criminals like this?” Ryan speaks through his palm.

“At least I still have a boss, Ryan, so stand the fuck down.” Oooh, Spencer, I love it when he gets all sassy. Wait...?

“What do you mean sti—”

“I was suspended for two months for spending a night in jail,” Ryan interrupts my question, but it's the answer I was asking for, so, there's that. “All because of your fucking scum husband.” He goes to move toward me, and though I don't need her, Kincaid is there, pushing herself up beside him, and I can see the subtle dig of the

knife she has held up against his balls.

“Step back, Fireman. Or is it ex-fireman?” Kincaid cackles, and it’s easy to see how much she enjoys this kind of thing. Like she comes alive for this shit.

Ryan growls low in his throat, only it’s not sexy in the slightest, more like an angry dog who can’t get their own way, but he does step back. “Tell your husband to watch his back, Kenz.” Like one of the popular girls in a chick flick, Ryan turns and storms off, leaving us with words he believes are threatening.

They’re not.

“Well that was fun.”

“We have very different ideas of fun, Caidy.” Spence glares at Kincaid, who shrugs, not for the first time letting the nickname he’s given her go without a mention.

My stomach grumbles again, informing me that flyer-time is over; we can continue after we’ve eaten. I’m obeying and listening to everything my body wants, and food is the number one priority right now.

“Can we eat?” I give my best cheesy smile to my two comrades in today’s task, knowing full well I only told them a few minutes ago that we’d wait.

“Thought you’d never ask.” Spence grins in response and Kincaid rolls her eyes.

We walk into the closest diner, and that thing inside me that says I should be kind niggles at my chest when I see Emily Beaufort sitting on her own with a cup of coffee. She has texted a couple of times since Christmas Eve, just small talk things, but she’s trying.

“Hey, Emily. Do you wanna join us for some food?” She may have already eaten, but it’s polite for me to ask.

She jumps a little as I gently touch her shoulder and bend down a little more to her level, but there’s an immediate smile when she sees it’s me.

“Oh hey, Mackenzie. Yes, I’d love to. Thanks.” She doesn’t hesitate, until she realizes who the “us” meant, but it’s only brief and she quickly pulls herself back together, sitting herself beside Spencer. There’s a wary glance in Kincaid’s direction, but she covers it well enough.

“Is this place close to your offices?” Because I know for sure that it’s nowhere near her house, and she told me she’s been real busy with work when I asked if she wanted to meet up sometime.

“No, actually.” Emily huffs a light laugh. “I was meeting with a friend, but they never showed, so I was just going to finish up my coffee and head back.”

“Can we do pleasantries when we’ve ordered some food, please?” Spence grins wide, showing all his teeth, and ducks his head a little bashfully at being so upfront. It’s not his usual style, but to be fair, we have been busy and I’m hungry too.

Hamburgers, fries, some spicy chicken wings, and a strawberry milkshake later, I’ve talked the ear off Emily about my new racing club. She saw the flyers, she asked, and my excited self word vomited all over the place.

“Are sponsorships something you’d consider?”

Holy Hell, are they? Er...yes.

“Yeah, I haven’t gotten around to that yet though. I’m hoping to get a few members

first, and sponsorships will be for when we need uniforms and things to begin with.” I’ve done my research, and I plan to walk before I run with this whole thing. I’ve got the next six months, at least, to get this right.

“Count me in then. Whenever you’re ready, just give me a call. We could talk about it a little more on Sunday if you wanted to meet for lunch?”

“Spence?” As my basically silent non-racing partner in crime with this whole thing, he should be there too if we’re going to talk business. I can easily get carried away, so he’s like the thing that brings me back down to Earth. Aleko is more on my level of act first, think later...we all need a Spencer in our lives.

“I’m at work Sunday, eight till eight. You remember the drill.” And I surprisingly don’t miss it. I can openly admit, the hours sucked.

A shrill ringing starts, then there’s a vibrating at the foot of the table and Emily bends down, grabbing her cell from her bag. She looks at the screen before quickly holding it to her chest.

“Sorry, I need to go. It’s one of my clients and I just remembered I’m late to a meeting.” Picking her bag and dropping some cash on the table, Emily answers the call. “Hello? Yes, can you give me a few minutes?” Holding the phone to her chest again, she looks to me. “I’ll text you about Sunday.” She finger-waves and leaves the diner.

“Thank fuck for that. I don’t like her.” Kincaid, who has been silently glaring daggers at Emily, finally speaks.

“Yeah, that was obvious. I think your death-stare helped.” Spencer laughs as she turns that stare on him. “Oh no, she got me.” He dramatically clasps his hands against his chest.

“Fuck off, Holt.” Kincaid flips him off, but she’s smirking.

“Since when did you two get to last name status?” Spencer has had a nickname for her for ages, but it’s the first time she’s used his last name, and I’m curious.

“Since I watched her do karaoke in the rec room on New Year’s.” They both share a look that says a million things, and I know none of them.

“That doesn’t explain anything.” I pull out some cash, placing it on the tray for our server with everyone else’s.

“And it probably never will.” Spence laughs at the little inside joke, which I now want to know more than ever, so I’m gonna play it cool.

“Fine. I didn’t wanna know anyway.”

“Yeah, okay, Mac. Let’s go deliver the rest of these flyers.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Aleko

“Absolutely not. Out of the fucking question.” I slash a hand in the space between Mackenzie and me as we face off, for good measure. It’s my final say.

With a dramatic flare, my wife raises her hands, the pads of her fingers forming a triangle, and slowly brings them down in front of her chest as she takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. She can try to be all zen and shit by pretending she’s meditating to be able to handle my over-the-top ways but it won’t change the fact that she is not fucking spending the evening with someone I do not trust.

“Okay.” During her little pause, like she’s searching for the words that won’t set me off, I do my own little calming ritual by placing my hands on my hips and lowering my head so she can’t see the daggers in my eyes. “I feel as though it would help me to better understand the situation if I had more information.”

Shaking my head, I try really fucking hard not to laugh at her attempt at being non-confrontational when I know for a fact what she really wants to say is closer to something like: “Don’t you fucking boss me around, you asshole.” I applaud her efforts, though, so I try to do the same.

“I don’t trust her. I don’t understand why she’s hell bent on being your friend when I’m the one who killed her step-son and we”—my hand in the air does a half circle to include all the brothers in my statement—“are the reason her husband is gone.” Again, I shake my head, because as I repeat these words, they still hold true.

“But, baby, I think that’s why she wants to hang out. I really think you saved her life. She’s free now. She’s turning Risus Pharmaceuticals around, and from what I’ve heard, there are less and less deaths happening every day.” Everything she says makes sense but my gut feelings don’t lie.

As the enforcer of the club, I strongly rely on my first impressions of people. I don’t trust easily and reading people is one of my greatest talents. I love a confident, independent woman...hell, I married one and she’s perfect this way, but Emily Beaufort doesn’t sit well with me.

“Case in point. You and me. You were my enemy’s sister but my gut told me you were nothing like him. I trusted you from the get go.” I can’t help raising the back of my hand to her face and caressing her cheek. Fuck, I love this woman.

“Yeah,” Mackenzie scoffs at my words while I’m too distracted by the soft feel of her skin. “That wasn’t your gut talking, baby, that was your dick succumbing to my magical pussy.”

My soft caress turns to something more possessive as my hand slides to her neck and my fingers curl around her throat. “My dick and my gut both agree that your magical pussy needs a little reminding of who’s in charge here.”

“God, yes.” Fuck, I love it when she becomes so pliable in my hold.

“On your knees, Cherry, and open wide. I want to see the back of your throat.” Without a second’s hesitation, my sweet Cherry kneels onto the plush carpet—I had it replaced so she wouldn’t hurt herself—and gives me the perfect view of her spread lips and flat tongue, ready to swallow my dick like a good girl.

Unzipping my jeans, I pull out my cock, hard and ready to pound, before gripping the back of her head and pushing my entire shaft inside her mouth in one slow and

agonizing go. Immediate tears spring to her eyes as she keeps them wide open for me to see the windows into her love-filled soul.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful with your mouth full of my cock.”

In and out, I fuck her mouth with slow, deliberate thrusts and bite my bottom lip every time she moans to hold myself back from coming all over her gorgeous face.

“So, here’s what’s going to happen, Cherry baby. I’m going to talk and fuck while you listen and suck.” She chokes a little on my words, and to be fair, I didn’t mean to rhyme but fuck it. Pulling back, I watch as the saliva gathered at the corners of her mouth drips slowly down her chin and falls onto her chest before I push right back inside.

This time I’m not gentle.

This time, I press my groin to her nose and grind my scent into her face so that she can smell me for days, even after she’s showered and brushed her teeth.

“I’m not going to order you around outside of the bedroom, but consider this.” My thrusts become a little more frantic as I fuck her mouth faster and faster. “We’ve been down this road, baby.” Fuck, I don’t know how long I’m going to last. “And the only thing that matters to me is your safety.”

Mackenzie’s only response is to grab my ass cheeks, fingernails digging into my flesh, and keep me deep inside her mouth. My will evaporates as my orgasm explodes right down her throat in long strands of cum, over and over again.

It’s only when she lets me go that I pull out just enough to have the tip of my dick at the entrance of her mouth. “Tongue out.”

She obeys so beautifully when we're like this.

The last of my cum jets over her tongue and I can't help replacing my dick with my fingers and spreading my seed over her lips like the possessive asshole I am.

"You're mine, Cherry baby. I will kill any man or woman who tries to take you away or hurt you, even if it's a little bit." Falling to my own knees, I slam my mouth to hers and share my love with her with a kiss that has us both feeling lightheaded. I know, because her hands fly up to my shirt as she tries to hold on.

"Now, lie down and spread your legs. I'm hungry."

"Fucking hell, I thought you'd never ask."

Her pajama bottoms are so light and flimsy that I'm afraid I'd rip them off in my eagerness to get to her pussy. From the way she's fighting them off, I'd say she doesn't actually give a flying fuck. My wife wants to come. As my mouth latches on to her lips, I moan with how fucking soaked she is.

Wrapping my arms around her hips, I bury my entire face between her thighs and feast on her cunt like she's the only reason I'll survive this day, or this life. When her walls squeeze my tongue while I fuck her and lick her and bite her swollen clit, I can't hold back my groan, and wonder if she's going to make me come all over again just from the taste of her.

"Fuck, yes. Right there...right....fucking...th—" Her orders are interrupted as I add two fingers to the mix and seek out the deepest part of her that makes her come so hard she squirts in my mouth. Curling my fingers, I hold her down as she begins bucking and crying out with her pending orgasm.

I can't speak but my fingers dig into her skin and my message is loud and fucking

clear.

“Give me your cum, right fucking now.”

“Yes, Aleko, yes, yes, yes!” Bolting off the floor, I follow her movement, smack her ass cheek with my free hand—the other still fucking her relentlessly—and keep my mouth latched on to her delicious cunt as she comes and comes right onto my tongue.

Only when she begins to relax do I kiss her swollen pussy lips and hum in pure, unhindered, satisfaction.

“Come here.”

I obey, just as she did earlier, getting on all fours right over her body while she rests on the carpet. Then she mimics my earlier gesture by putting her fingers in my mouth and spreading her cum over my lips.

This time, when I kiss her, it’s gentle and loving and full of the respect I will always have for her.

“How about we compromise?” For a second, I’m confused by her words, then realize she’s about to use my post-orgasmic brain against me.

“Hmm, you say compromise but I’m pretty sure I’m about to lose this argument.” Peppering kisses over her chin and neck and shoulders, I’m almost certain I’m not going to like what she proposes but will go along with it anyway.

“How about I get to keep my date with Emily and you come along with me?” My brain can’t find a reason to say no so, of course, I give in.

“All right. Deal.” It’s going to be Hell but if it makes my wife happy then...fuck it.

“Yay! You’ll see, you’re going to change your mind.”

“Doubtful.”

I was right. My mind is not changing as we walk into some swanky French restaurant where the entirety of the patrons are looking at me as we make our way to our table. In the far back corner, I see Emily typing furiously on her phone, her jaw set and brows furrowed. Pretty sure we could have an orgy in this place and she wouldn’t notice, that’s how intense she looks.

“Sir, can I take your...um, jacket?” The host raises his hands to, I’m guessing, take my cut and hang it up somewhere, but the growl that escapes me has him jumping back. Smart kid.

“You can take mine!” Mackenzie shrugs hers off and hands it over. Poor guy is completely overwhelmed since we’re not acting like we should be and letting him take it off our hands.

Ask me if I care.

Leading Mackenzie by the hand, I’m thinking the sooner we get seated and eat, the sooner I can get my dessert back home. That was part of our compromise. I’d go, I’d be nice, then we’d go home and I’d get to make her come so many times she begs me to stop.

It may sound like she’s getting the better end of the deal but my dick was leading the negotiations and we were all quite happy with the stakes.

“I’ve gotta go.” As Emily hangs up on whomever she had on the other end of the line, her face morphs from stressed to jovial and sweet. Yeah, I don’t buy it.

“Hey, Mackenzie, so glad you could make it.” The girls hug and it’s longer than I’d like and it’s just...not sitting right. Also, I’m the only one who calls my Cherry by her full name. Everyone else has a cute, short version, but I love all the letters of her name.

“I hope we’re not too late.” I don’t miss the slight blush on my Cherry Pie’s cheeks and it only makes me feel proud that we are, in fact, late because I was eating her pussy like some ancient Greek feast. “You remember Aleko, right?”

And this is the moment of truth. Her reaction to me will say a lot.

“Yes, of course.” We hesitate for a second when she takes the slightest step forward, like she wants to hug, and I put a quick end to that shit.

I don’t like people touching what’s mine but I also do not like people touching what’s Mackenzie’s, and every inch of me belongs to her. Without hesitation, I put out my hand, forcing Emily to shake it.

“Howya doin’?” My question is innocent enough, but that shift in her mood throws up a whole bunch of red flags for me. Her answer will determine everything.

Correction: the way she answers will be telling.

“Argh, don’t get me started. Please, sit. I’ve taken the liberty of ordering some wine. I hope that’s okay?” Sweeping the room with my gaze, I hope to fuck this meal will be quick because stuffy people aren’t my jam, and because wearing leathers and jeans isn’t the preferred attire for this restaurant, our neighbors are being all fucking snobbish and rude.

“Oh, um. I’ll just take water, if that’s okay.” My smirk is like a fucking billboard advertising my wife’s pregnancy, and although we decided to keep it discreet this

time, I won't downplay my pride. Not when it concerns my Cherry. Never.

"I'm driving." Draping my arm over the back of Cherry's chair, I kiss her temple.
"I'll nurse a beer during the whole meal."

Emily blinks, opening her mouth to answer when the server brings over a bottle of red with a fancy label on it. Castle and all.

"Servez-vous de la bière ?" Now, my French is rusty at best, but I get the jist. She's asking if they serve beer and I'm already anticipating the answer, they'll serve the most expensive beers in the world, no home grown here.

Here's the thing: my entire childhood was spent in Greece. My parents were loaded and when they died, my brother got everything. I've had the best wines, the best cheeses, the best pastries and the ultimate caviar on the market. The day I put a bullet through my brother's head, I gave all of that shit up because, to me, it represents greed, violence, and the destruction of human life. My family gave nothing back to society, they only took.

So, yeah. I know all about the one percent of our society and I want nothing to do with them.

"Oui, madame ." He turns to me like he already knows who to address for this.

The list of beers is mainly Belgian or German so I choose the one brand that rings a bell.

"I hope you're not too uncomfortable, I really love the food here and the portions are perfect." Yeah, doubtful, lady. A plateful for me is not the same as a plateful for Cherry. Well, to be fair, these days she's giving me a run for my money.

“We’re not used to all the fancy pancy but we’ll adapt, right, baby?” When Cherry turns to me, eyes bright and expectant, I can’t disappoint her.

“That’s right. We can adapt to any environment.” I catch the eye of some guy sitting ten feet away who looks like he’s just tasted horse shit. “Even a hostile one.” I could give the guy the finger but I choose peace and blow him a kiss.

I’m pretty sure he just passed out.

“Are you sick, Mac? I’m sure I’ve seen you drink alcohol before.” I don’t respond to Emily’s question, I leave it to Mackenzie to decide if or when she wants to talk about the pregnancy.

“No, nothing like that.” Emily is smiling, her pearly whites on display. “It’s just the pregnancy.” Well, there goes the no telling anyone yet plan.

Emily’s face falls for the briefest of seconds. The only reason I even see it is because I’ve been watching every one of her moves and facial expressions. Not a second later, she’s smiling again, except this time it looks a tiny bit forced. The lines at the corners of her eyes aren’t as deep and the strain on her cheeks as she tries to hold it tells me she’s putting on a show to make my Cherry feel good.

“Oh, right. That’s right.” So much for being discreet.

“Have you told everyone, Cherry?” I’m going for light but it comes out a little frustrated.

I’m not sure how to interpret Emily’s reaction. Not only that, but I’m surprised to know Cherry already told her.

When we lost the baby all those months ago, I remember Mackenzie pretending she

was okay with certain conversations, trying to make others feel more comfortable even though she was in so much pain inside.

This chick is giving me those vibes and I hate that I'm sympathizing with her right now.

The whole meal, the girls talk about Mackenzie's plans for her riding club and, fuck me, she makes me so proud. Every time she explains where her idea comes from or where she's imagining the club going, I just want to scream to anyone who can hear me that she's mine and she's perfect.

"So, I mentioned the other day that I'd be happy to sponsor you. It's the least I can do, but also because I think it's a great way to give back to the community." Leaning back into my chair, I wipe my mouth with the cloth towel, hating that what I just consumed was probably the best fucking steak I've had in decades.

Emily wants to give Cherry money and it's the first I'm hearing about it. Maybe it's because I deal with criminal activities, or maybe it's because I don't trust anyone outside of Cherry and the club, but my mind goes directly to tax evasion or any other type of crime these big corporations like to dip their fingers into.

Nope, not happening.

"Well, I don't think Cherry actually nee—" My wife cuts me off with a kick to the shins.

"What he means to say is, thank you, Emily." One thing I've learned is that when Cherry speaks through her teeth, I just need to shut the fuck up. So I do but I'm not happy about it.

"Of course." Emily is gracious and doesn't call me out on my attitude, even though I

don't really care. I just want Cherry to be happy. "Risus Pharmaceuticals would like to donate twenty thousand dollars this year."

The table falls silent as Mackenzie's dessert is served.

Twenty thousand? Fuck me, that's a lot of money for someone whose club isn't even up and running yet.

"Oh my God, Emily. I-I-Thank you. I'm not sure what to say."

I have a couple of choice words. They start with money and end with laundering.

I'm about to say something when Emily's phone rings. It's not on purpose and I'm not being a creeper, but my eyes naturally fall to her screen sitting on the table.

RN.

"Sorry about that." With lightning speed, she swipes to decline the call and before she can turn it around, I see the text message light up.

RN : You done yet?

And just like that, the small inch of trust I had evaporates.

If only Cherry could see the signs.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Mackenzie

“It’s fun while exiting corners in second and third, making you feel like a Daytona speedway God. In fourth and fifth, it can reach the sky with ease on lips and crests.” Aleko is lying with his head resting on my lap, talking around a sucker while reading from his Full Throttle magazine because he wants the baby to recognize his voice as easily as mine.

We’re at the twenty-two week mark now and my stomach has popped a little. I’ll sit here all damn day to listen to Aleko talk to our baby. He continues reading and I rest my head back against the cushions, threading my fingers through his hair.

Oh fuck...is that...?

“Put your hand on my stomach!”

“Needy.” Aleko grins, laying the magazine down on the floor beside the couch and twisting to face my body. He pops the sucker from his mouth and holds it up for me before carefully placing his hand on my stomach, just in time. “Fu—Shi—This no cursing crap is hard, Cherry, but is that...?”

“Yup. That’s our baby moving.” The fluttering inside me is freaking magical, and it’s not the first time it’s happened. I thought it was just gas, until Mom explained that the feeling was the baby. She cried, I cried, Sabrina cuddled us both into her huge bosom, then Vanessa made the four of us snacks before we spent an hour discussing the book

we're all reading.

I figured joining their new little book club would give me a break from all the research I'm having to do to start the racing club. There's a fuck ton involved and mountains of paperwork to fill out, but I'm getting there with Spencer's help.

"Baby Psycho likes hearing Daddy's voice. I'm only halfway through the article, don't worry. There's more to come." The way he speaks to our baby is one of my new favorite things. It's softer than I ever thought possible, and there's already so much pride there. However...

"Baby Psycho is still not a thing, Aleko." I poke him in the ribs, trying to give my best disapproving face, but it's not working because he just laughs.

"Oh, my sweet Cherry Pie, if only you knew."

"I do know."

Both of our cells vibrate, interrupting our lazy couch day, and for a moment I get really excited. It's April!

Ah fuck. I'm out this season anyway.

RC: Thanks for being loyal to my dad all these years. Tonight is Location B. Same time as usual. See ya there.

My heart jumps into my throat when I see who the message is from, but the old race chief's son has obviously received "the phone." He's been shadowing his dad for the last few seasons when he wasn't racing. It's good to know this year's street racing is still going ahead, though I won't pretend to not be a little jealous.

“Guess we’re off to the races in a few hours.” Aleko winks, kisses my stomach, and sits himself up, taking back his sucker and popping it between his plump lips. “Let’s get to the compound. I need to make Elektra shiny for her first official race of the year.” Like a kid at a theme park, his eyes whirl with possibilities and things he plans to do.

I laugh, heading to the bedroom to put some clothes on because just wearing underwear to a race night would be a terrible idea. Ninja and Bandit are sleeping on the dresser, like the nocturnal animals they are, but once Aleko throws on his cut and picks up his keys, I have no doubt they’ll wake up for a ride. It’ll be Bandit’s first race night, I hope she’ll be okay—yup, she. The trip to the vets confirmed Bandit is, in fact, a female, and despite being neutered, Ninja now has a new girlfriend.

The sun is setting off in the distance and the huge parking lot is full of revving engines, colorful lights, and fucking beautiful machines. There are a lot of people too, which isn’t unusual for the first race night of the season. The new race chief, Sawyer Johnston, introduced himself when we arrived, thanking Hoops for the club’s donation to his family following his dad’s death, and I’ve been sitting on the cab of Vanessa’s truck for the last thirty minutes.

“Run run, as fast as you can...” Flower giggles beside me as we watch Jonesy run from the back of one of the vans to the start line because Grinder just signaled for him to clean his visor. “How long does the whole prospect thing last for?” She crunches into her apple, garnering stares from Ninja and Bandit who are curled up in a blanket in the bed of the truck.

Bear made sure they have a supply of snacks beside them, so they’re good, they just want what isn’t theirs.

“Depends on the prospect and the club. Could take less than a year, could be a few years.” I shrug. “Why? You thinking of joining?” I keep one eye on the race, making

sure my neck tube is up and over my nose to help with the smell of fumes, but I'm interested in Flower's response, because she's pretty awesome.

"Oh, God no. I'm a Reaper for life. Literally. And I have no interest in racing, I don't think my Harley is built for that kinda riding."

"Do you have to go back to New York any time soon?" She calls the brothers out on their shit so often when they're all together, I can't imagine her not being here anymore.

"Nah. I'm actually following a lead for something that hit Glitch's radar for the Reapers. Could be here a while." She grins and winks, taking another bite from her apple.

"Lick my sucker for luck." Aleko appears beside the truck, holding up his cherry flavored candy for me. "Club's got thirty grand on this one. They're gonna be eating dust."

"It'll be good to see how Levi rides. He's signed up to join my racing club." We could be training weekly from as soon as next month if my dad's old racing friend pulls through with track space. I really want to do this the legal way. Like an homage to my dad and everything he taught me.

"Which one is Levi?" Aleko frowns, and I pull down my neck tube briefly, taking my time rolling his sucker around my tongue.

"The one with the blue underlight." I push the sucker back into Aleko's mouth before he can reply.

"That flash twat is all show. All the gear and no fuckin' idea."

“Thanks, Sledge.” I roll my eyes and he leans against the truck, hooking an arm over the side to scratch Ninja’s nose. Bandit is too busy enjoying some of the vegetable sticks Bear gave them earlier.

“Whatever. He can join your club. But if he so much as looks at you, I’ll break his face.” Aleko is scowling in Levi’s direction and I laugh.

“First, I have eyes for nobody other than you and, second, he will have to look at me, so please don’t break his face.”

“Such a pretty face too.”

“Not helping, Flower,” I nudge her and whisper.

Aleko growls, but he’s not angry. I can clearly see the smirk tipping the corners of his lips and the arch of his brow.

The roar of motorcycles gets louder as one of the women from the crowd stands front and center of the row of racers. The crowd quiets and she raises her arms before quickly dropping them and running off to the side. Six racers speed off down the makeshift track, each being timed so by the end of the night, the race chief can call out the rankings. We may all be here illegally but we still want to be relatively safe, which is why only six at a time are racing. There are a few new riders since last year, Levi being one of them, but I don’t see the rankings being much different from how they ended last season. Obviously, I won’t be at the top though, much to Aleko’s pleasure.

I’ll show him next season. I beat him once, I can do it again. It’ll be fun!

“Is that Grinder doing a wheelie?” Flower is watching the race as intently as the rest of us.

“Of course it is.” I laugh.

“Wait for it, he’s gonna do a front stand wheelie over the finish line.” Aleko’s arm is resting against the cab of the truck and his fingers are drawing lazy patterns across my thigh.

“But wouldn’t he get a faster time if he didn’t fuck around?” I forget that Flower knows literally nothing about these nights.

“Yeah, but he likes to show off. No doubt one of the brothers has a bet on it somewhere, so we’re still making bank.” Sledge answers Flower’s question, eyes firmly fixed on the race as they near the finish. “Get in!” he yells out at the same time as pretty much everyone else cheers when the riders all cross the pretend line.

Grinder looks to be around third, which is still pretty good considering the fucking around. He slows before riding over to our little area where the Sons have their vehicles all parked up and Bear is counting money from the betting.

“My turn.” Squeezing my thigh, Aleko runs around to jump onto the bed of the truck, tickling Bandit and Ninja on their noses before gripping my legs and sliding me to the edge of the cab roof. He pulls the sucker from my mouth, kisses me so hard it leaves me wanting and possibly bruised, then lifts my neck tube back up and over my nose. “Stay safe, Cherry Pie. I fucking love you.” With a grin that could make anyone swoon, Aleko kisses my stomach. “I love you too.” Then he jumps off the truck bed, crunches his sucker, and winks as he walks away, pulling up his own neck tube before swinging his leg over Elektra.

“What a freakin’ cutie. I’ve never had a boyfriend jump over shit for me like that. No girlfriends either. You’d think that seeing as I have more options, it’d be easier to find someone to throw me around like a ragdoll and do romantic shit like that, but nope. I swear, it’s way more difficult.” Flower leans to rest back on her palms,

sighing heavily.

“I’m sure you’ll find your person when you least expect it. Aleko hit me like a ton of bricks, came out of nowhere, and now I don’t want to know a life without him.”

“You’re so fuckin’ lovesick I could gag.” Flower giggles again.

“I could give you something to gag on.” Grinder, now off his motorcycle, his racing leathers unzipped and showing a very naked chest beneath, wags his brows and rests his chin on the truck cab.

“Nah. If I’m gonna have sausage, I like it big and juicy.”

“Who says it’s not?” He looks mildly offended.

“Oh, baby. I’ve spoken to all the Khaos Khunts, I know exactly how big every single one of you is.” She blows him a kiss that he dramatically catches and throws away.

“Less of the baby, you.” Grinder scowls at her, but there’s a tiny upturn of his mouth as he saunters off.

“Hey, do you know what happened with that fireman who has the hots for you?”

“How do you know—” Before I can even finish the question, Flower glares at me with a knowing smirk.

“There’s a reason I’m so fucking fantastic at my job, Mac. I listen, and I listen good.”

“Fair. I heard he was suspended for a couple of months, but Spencer told me he never went back to work when his suspension was over. So I don’t know, I guess he’s as in the wind as that Beaufort guy.” I shrug.

“He’s the drug dealing man, yeah?”

“Well, kinda. He paid people to do it for him, so I suppose you could say that.” While we’re talking, Aleko is tailed by Kincaid and Jonesy to the start line for the next race. He’s so fucking sexy in all his gear.

“Didn’t his company also make the antidote so people stopped dying from those smiley drugs?”

“Yup.”

“That’s fucked up. Money can do dangerous things to powerful people.” Flower shakes her head.

“It sure can.”

“He was your brother’s dad too, wasn’t he?”

“Ho—You know what? I’m not even gonna ask. Yeah, Harrison Beaufort is Jake’s dad. Was...whatever the term for it is now that Jake’s six-feet under.” I suppress a shudder at the memory of Jake and his club of Toxic Rebels. None of the ones left alive are here tonight, meaning they’re all long gone, and I’m grateful that I never have to see their faces again. Cameron and Booker may have been nice enough to me, but seeing them a few months ago was like a kick in the teeth. They’re all a reminder of a life I no longer lead.

“He’s not quite six-feet under, more like ground up, burned to a crisp, mixed with horse shit, then used as fertilizer. Grinder had fun with that disposal.” Bash, who’s enjoying not having to run around after the brothers now that he’s a full member, relaxes against the side of the truck as the next round of racers rev their engines, crick their necks, and get into the zone.

“Gross, but kinda cool. I’ve never ground up a body before on a clean up. I’ll have to take some notes on the next one.” Flower claps her hands together, like finding new ways to dispose of a dead body is exciting.

Blocking out everything around me, I concentrate on my man. I know exactly what’s going through his head right now, and it’s a grand total of not a lot. He is focused on that racing line, the fastest way around that turn on the end, and the cleanest route to the finish.

Engines get louder, the crowd gets louder, and they’re off. My whole body tenses up in anticipation, and while I’d love to be doing this myself, watching Aleko is just as exhilarating.

He’s the clear winner within seconds of them starting, getting out in front of the pack quickly, and my cheeks ache from all the smiling. I refrain from jumping up, because knowing my luck I’d fall and I’m not risking this baby for that.

Aleko finishes the race first and there is a roar of excitement from the Sons, right before money is being exchanged again, leaving Bear with a hell of a lot more to count.

Just as quickly as he raced, Aleko rides Elektra around to our area and passes her to Kincaid before pulling off his helmet and gloves. His eyes find mine immediately, and they’re full of hunger. A freshly unwrapped sucker is held in front of him from Jonesy, which he takes before stalking over to the truck. Pushing myself to the edge, I slide off the top of the cab straight into his waiting arms for a kiss that promises me a very fun night.

I’m honestly so fucking happy right now. This is absolute perfection. I can’t imagine anything ever going wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Aleko

I t's been a little over a month since our race season started and we've been to a couple of them, having a great time with the brothers and other racers. Funny how we don't realize how much we miss our street racing until we get back to it.

This year is special since the season will be interrupted by the greatest of events, which will no doubt also be the most exhausting. I don't mind. In fact, I can't wait to spoil that kid so much I'll get shit for it all day, every day. Guaranteed, I'll be pretzeled around the baby's finger from the get go and the number of fucks I give about that, is the sum total of zero.

"Hey." Spinning around at the sound of Mackenzie's whispered voice, I bite my bottom lip when I see her pale green bikini top peeking out from beneath her white, off the shoulder, sweater. "Vanessa's coming. So..." Frantic, she looks around at everyone standing beside me and gives them her best narrowed eyes and pinched speech. "Act natural, like this is no big deal and it's all fine."

Silence falls, and in this place, that's a fucking miracle in and of itself.

"Why wouldn't we be natural, Cherry?" I'm truly confused. It's fucking great that Vanessa is feeling strong enough to join us at the beach for an impromptu picnic.

"Well, because it's her first time since..." Throwing her arms in the air, she and her growing belly, turn and walk away. Fuck, I'm hard. Between her tits falling out of her

tops and her ass filling out both of my palms every time I fuck her, I've never been so fucking horny, so often, in my life.

The thought of keeping her constantly pregnant crosses my mind but I have to remember that pregnant women should never be in prison. Which is where she'd be for attempted murder...of me.

Yeah, I guess I'll let her choose all that shit. I'll just reap the fruit of her hormonal horniness.

"Yeah babyyyy! We're so fucking happy you're comin' with us!" No one misses Grinder's over-the-fucking-top enthusiasm as soon as Vanessa walks out of the compound. My hand flies to my mouth, palm pressed hard against my lips to hide the need to laugh my ass off. My Cherry Pie is not happy.

"You are so on my shit list!" Mackenzie's hiss is practically a yell at this point but it goes way over Grinder's head as he trots over to Vanessa, picks her up, and squeezes her into a massive bear hug.

"Come on, Cherry Pie, lunch waits for no one. Let's go!" Huffing the entire time, Mackenzie hops—more like crawls in the most awkward of ways but I'll never say that to her face—into the passenger side of one of two not-so-new trucks the club bought a couple of months ago. It's new to us but we bought them used from an app Prez made us download a couple of years ago.

"I'm glad we're going to the beach." I frown at her words because her tone says the exact opposite. "It's fitting since I feel like a whale."

It's a close call but I manage not to laugh, swallowing my urge and coughing to hide it.

“Babe, you’ve never looked more beautiful.” My grin is genuine. I love how her body changes and her love for us grows. But when I turn to wink at her, the withering glare on her face stops me from twisting the key in the ignition.

“Really? The three thousand pounds in my belly and the bags under my eyes turn you on? Or wait, maybe it’s the swollen ankles that get your dick hard.” With every accusation, my gaze travels to said part. Her rounded belly that starts just below her nice, juicy, tits feels like a miracle. Her cheeks are filled out, her skin glowing like there’s a permanent glow light on her. Her ankles? Maybe they feel swollen to her but I can’t fucking tell.

One thing I’ve learned though...to shut my fucking mouth.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so.” Oh, she’s going bratty is she?

I guess I didn’t learn my lesson well enough because I turn, snap my arm out, and tangle my fingers into her hair, pulling her just half an inch from my mouth so she can hear me loud and clear.

“I need you to pay close attention here, Cherry Pie. I don’t allow anyone to talk down to you, least of all yourself.” Tears spring up without spilling over as she keeps her gaze steady on mine. “Whatever flaws you see in yourself, they’re tiny miracles you didn’t get to experience last time, so unless you want me to spank your...” I bite my bottom lip as images of her riding my dick start playing like a fucking movie roll. “Very fine ass in public, I suggest you start being kind to yourself.”

Then I slam my lips to hers and drag out her bottom lip to let that lingering taste of her fill my mouth.

“I love you.” Her words are breathless and my heart fucking grows twice its size...just like my cock.

“You fucking better.” Reaching into the inside pocket of my cut, I take out two cherry suckers and hand one to my wife. “Here, suck on this before I make you suck on me.”

By the time we get everyone on the road and over to our favorite corner of the beach, it’s nearly time for lunch. The heat isn’t yet overwhelming but the sunrays feel fucking awesome after the winter months. One of the great things about living in Rockford Beach is the temperate weather. I had enough brutal winters in New York and unbearable summers in Greece to know that a little balance in life isn’t too much to ask.

“Where are Ninja and Bandit?” Cherry speaks as she drops her jean-shorts and whips off her sweater, leaving her in her swimsuit. I use that word loosely because she’s got barely more than two triangles covering her luscious tits and a bottom that’s nearly overshadowed by her round belly. Fuck, she’s beautiful, but also, I’m about to get stupid violent if I catch any motherfuckers’ gazes lingering on her.

I really do not want to go back to jail.

“Who’s surfin’ with me? The swell looks fun.” Boner is pulling up his wetsuit. It’s too early in the year to jump into the ocean without one.

“Nah, man. All yours.” Bear answers for everyone as we get settled and start rummaging through the coolers for our lunches. While Mackenzie piles up her plate, we all get blinded by Grinder’s winter whiteness when he drops his jeans and gives us an eyeful of his neon Speedo. Jesus, I was sure we’d burned those fuckers.

“Goddamn, brother. Tuck your junk in, man.” Bear’s groan speaks for us all.

“Whoa, someone forgot to manscape, them ball hairs ain’t trending, my friend.” Boner is laughing his ass off as he pulls up the back zipper of his wetsuit.

“Fuck all y’all. Au natural is the ultimate trend.” I can’t with this guy.

Instead of worrying about the legitimacy of ball hairs being popular on social media, I concentrate on setting up the beach tent to protect Cherry from the sun.

The sunscreen is next and hundred times more fun than anything else going on around here.

“I feel like a princess eating grapes and cheese on the beach with a hot man spreading sunblock all over my back.” Silly Cherry...

“Baby, you’re no princess.”

“Geesh, way to work up my confidence, Aleko. You want me to cut you while you sleep?” If she thinks she’s scaring me with her threats, she’s missed her fucking mark because the thought of her getting violent with me just made me fucking hard as a rock.

My hands pause on her shoulders as I lean in, my front pressing against her back. “You’re the goddess princesses come to worship on their knees.” Biting her earlobe, I take in a deep breath of her cherry shampoo and thank the fucking universe she’s still here with me.

“Hmm, is that supposed to make you my god?”

“According to your screams every time I make you come, yes, Cherry. I’m your motherfucking god.”

Turning on her knees, she places both of her hands on her protruding belly and stares at me. “You’re going to be a dad soon, Aleko. It’s time to learn synonyms for ‘motherfucker’.”

I scoff. “Foul language is a sign of intelligence.”

“Did you read that on a meme?”

“Maybe.” And I fucking choose to believe it.

“Hey, no fucking on the beach, you fucking pervs.” We both look at Grinder as he shouts across the entire group so anyone within earshot can hear him.

“Says the guy who has stories about ‘furries’.” This time I don’t try to hide my laughter and neither does anyone else as he holds up his two middle fingers at us and grins like a madman.

I love our family.

“Listen up, everyone!” All laughter stops as Hoops’s serious tone cuts through the group’s chaos. Boner, all suited up and holding his surfboard under his arm, stops dead in his tracks and gives one hundred percent of his attention to our new president. “Our warehouse is burning down.”

There’s nothing worse than having to leave my Cherry alone. Obviously not without some of our brothers hanging back and making sure our women are safe, but without me.

Our New Bern warehouse, about two hours north of Rockford Beach, is burning down. As soon as he heard Hoops’s news, Boner was out of his wetsuit and jumping into his riding clothes. His cousin took over our supply chain when the Myrtle Beach guys tried to screw us over.

By the time we get there, the local fire department has the fire under control and is on the verge of putting it out completely.

“Was anyone hurt?” The first question out of Hoops’s mouth is the same one we all have on our minds, especially with Boner’s cousin, Jed, being the owner.

“I think we got everyone out but there are a couple of my employees I can’t find.” Boner pats his cousin on the back and we wait in the background, all worrying about the same things. A criminal investigation is going to bring a fucking giant loop onto our business and that is dangerous for everyone. “I’m sure everyone is fine.” Just as Boner tries to reassure Jed, we hear the fire marshall’s truck arrive on the scene.

The smoke is heavy now that the fire is out and, to our relief, only one of the warehouses took the brunt of the flames.

“Where are our supplies?” My question is whispered so we don’t get unwanted ears listening in. Hoops nods to the warehouse farthest from the main building. Last year, Jed had expanded his site to accommodate the new deliveries and I remember something about the neighboring businesses not liking the surplus of traffic. Would rivalry cause people to lose their fucking minds? I mean, if anyone is killed, they could go from simple arson to manslaughter. There’s a big fucking difference behind bars, right there.

“Jed reassured me that our stuff is safe but we need to clear out the best we can.” Before we left Rockford, Jed had told us to bring at least two vans, and we did. Tonight, once everyone has cleared out, we’ll go in, load up, and take our supplies to Jed’s storage unit a few miles down the road.

“Crow and Jonesy parked the vans down the road and are walking up here. No need to draw any attention to us.” I chuckle at Bear’s comment since a bunch of street racing bikers with some badass motorcycles standing around watching a fire is probably noticeable enough, I’d think. But yeah, vans are creepy on any given day, even if they’re not the dreaded white ones.

“We need to figure out what happened so we know how to react.” Shade is speaking in hushed tones and the way he’s staring at the remains of the main warehouse, it seems he’s talking to himself. I answer anyway.

“Way I see it, it’s either aimed at our business and the fucker missed by a mile, or it’s a beef between locals and our shit’s safe.” It seems unlikely that we’re at the epicenter of this problem. No one besides the Sons and Jed knows about our stash here.

“Doesn’t matter,” Grinder’s normal joking attitude is on the back burner. This is the killer talking. “We have to step in and shut it down or else we take our shit elsewhere. Simple as that, really.” We all agree and the conversation ends there as the fire department reels back their hoses and the police surround the site with yellow tape.

The smell is fucking painful to my lungs so I step back farther into the parking lot and into one of the few spots with shade.

From the corner of my eye, I see two young men and an older lady walk up to Jed, and from the relief on his face, I’m guessing these are the employees who were unaccounted for, which means we’ve got one less thing to worry about and three families who won’t be going through Hell.

“Yeah.” Hoops answers his phone and walks away since the noise around here is deafening. From the look on his face, the news isn’t good.

“That was Glitch.” As soon as our President speaks, we all turn and follow him because whatever that short conversation was about, it’s fucking important.

Standing far from the spectator crowd—every fire fucking has one—we all gear up for the bad news.

“Harrison surfaced in New York City. Some documents were signed, he doesn’t know what they were but we’re guessing it has something to do with Risus Pharmaceuticals giving all power to Emily Beaufort.” Yeah, this doesn’t help my suspicions about the woman. Then again, this could be good news for our town. “Also, he’s been in contact with the remaining Irish back in New Jersey. The CCTV cameras Glitch was able to hack showed that they were pissed off.”

“I mean, I would be, too, if some fucking rich douchebag got my men killed then bailed like the fucking coward he is.” We all nod and grunt and, in Bear’s case, growl at Grinder’s comment. The Irish wanting to skin Harrison makes sense but then...why didn’t they?

“Yeah, thing is...” Hoops pauses like he’s fucking acting in a soap opera. “These people are all tied up in one way or another. My guess is, they need him alive more than they want him dead.”

“Money,” I add, it’s the only thing that makes sense.

“Fucking money,” Shade agrees and everyone else nods.

“Well, he’s back in hiding and, for now, he’s still in New York. Glitch will let us know if he gets any more hits.” Hoops looks over at the burnt down building before turning back to us. “We need to take care of this bullshit first. Get our shit, move it, and go back home. I have a feeling we haven’t seen the last of that fucker. Not by a long shot.” He’s right, but contrary to his tone, I’m hoping that piece of shit comes back just so I can slit his throat and paint his house with his blood.

“Hey, guys?” Jed runs over to us, frantic and stressed out. Alarm bells go off in my head and by the hard lines of my brothers’ faces, there’s no doubt they’re feeling the same. “We’ve got a problem.” No shit.

“The fire marshall just showed me a picture of one of the back walls that wasn’t completely burnt down. Asked me if it meant anything to me.” We’re used to these kinds of close call situations, we know how to keep our cool, but Jed here? He’s fucking losing his mind faster than a forty year old virgin in a porn movie.

“What was in the picture, cousin?” Boner gives Jed a hug like he’s trying to support him, like family does, but really, he’s trying to get him to calm the fuck down.

“A message written in red paint.”

“Fucking hell. What’s with the half answers? Just spit it out already.” No one has ever accused me of being patient.

“This 1’s 4 U’.” Squinting, I look over the grainy image but I don’t see anything that says this is about us. Literally anyone could have used generic red paint and written that threat. And I mean anyone. If it weren’t for the height of the message on the wall, I’d say a kid wrote it. Come on, no self-respecting adult would abbreviate like that past the age of sixteen.

“And why would this have something to do with us? Didn’t you say your neighbor is pissed at you?” I ask, all the while taking note of the tint of the red—more tomato than strawberry.

“I guess it could be.” Then he turns to us and asks. “Can y’all off him for me?”

Oh for fuck’s sake.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mackenzie

“O h my God, that’s as good as being woken up with your dick inside me.”

Aleko grumbles and stops massaging my feet and lower legs, looking up at me from the bottom of the bed.

“Don’t lie, Cherry. There’s nothing as good as when my cock is surrounded by your warm pussy. Do you need a reminder?” He grins and presses his thumb into the pad of my foot, continuing the massage.

“Mmm. You could just do that for a little longer.”

I roll onto my back, away from my new pillow fortress that makes sleeping on my side comfortable, and realize I’m not raised enough to see him over my bump. With only a month and a half to go now, my stomach feels giant.

“What my birthday girl wants, my birthday girl gets.”

His hands move from my feet up to my lower legs, one on each, gently massaging my muscles. I’m going to suggest we try blindfolds at some point because every touch, every gentle slide of his finger, feels like so much more without watching him.

I’m in a very different place for this birthday, physically and mentally, but sharing it with Aleko like this, again, is something I hope never changes.

Leaning down, he lifts one foot and kisses the top of my arch, following the same line as his fingers and working his way up to my knee. He repeats the action with the second leg, over my ankle, across and up my shin, then he continues up my inner thigh, stopping a whisper away from my pussy lips.

Again, he does the same with the other leg, this time starting at my knee, and when he finally reaches the part of me begging for his attention, he gently blows over my clit, making me moan and tilt my hips for more.

My cell begins vibrating on the bedside table, but there is no one else in the world I want to speak to in this moment because I have Aleko right here already.

“They can wait,” I pant, threading my fingers through his hair and letting my head roll backward.

“On your hands and knees, Cherry.” Aleko kneads the flesh of my thighs before helping me sit up and get into position. I thought moments like this would be awkward while this pregnant, but if anything, it’s just more. The trust that we’ve built is like something from a fairytale and each gentle touch as he helps me move is simply another way he loves me.

He makes sure there is a cushion beneath my bump so that I’m comfortable, then he spanks my bare ass.

I gasp, simultaneously shocked and turned on, spreading my knees farther apart so he can see how wet I already am for him and encouraging another spank.

“Does my needy wife want a reminder of who she belongs to before we have to be sociable?”

“Mmmhmm.” I wiggle my ass a little from side to side and arch my back slightly.

“Ow, did you jus—?”

He bit me. He bit me on the ass cheek.

“Is it bleeding?”

He’s chuckling, but peppering kisses all over my back, his long fingers spreading across my skin as he caresses every inch of me all at once.

“No, baby. But it’ll leave a bruise. We should tattoo one when Baby Psycho is born because I fucking love how my teeth look on your ass.” To make his point, he kisses and licks the bite and all around it.

The small sting of pain is worth the pleasure, proven when his warm mouth finds my core.

“Oh, God. Yes.”

Aleko takes his time, flicking the tip of his tongue across my clit and making me cry out each time it makes contact. Pushing back against his face doesn’t help him speed up. If anything, his touches become agonizingly slower, lighter, until he chuckles again.

“Aleko.” His name is a plea from my lips, full of want and need.

“Okay, baby.” His deep voice vibrates against my flesh and I gasp when he sucks my clit into his mouth, quickly followed by his fingers sliding into my pussy.

Pure contentment spreads through my body and my toes curl as Aleko feasts on me, pushing a finger against my asshole, and I fucking detonate.

“Fuck, shit, yes!” I’m panting now, trying to ride through my orgasm, and as soon as I feel the head of Aleko’s cock against my entrance, I find myself pushing back onto him, ready to be full of him.

He takes the hint, slapping my ass lightly at the same moment he thrusts all the way in, holding himself still for an agonizing amount of time. Though, realistically, it’s probably only like a second before his thick cock slides out, leaving just the tip.

I groan out in frustration, eager, no, needing to be filled over and over.

The bastard chuckles yet again, slapping both palms down onto my ass cheeks and gripping firmly before slamming into me.

“Oh, yes.”

I love the rumble that vibrates through him when he enjoys my screams, so I embrace every sensation flowing through my senses and allow myself to make all the noises Aleko evokes.

“That’s it, baby. You take my cock so well.”

The thrusts get faster and he reaches around to pinch my clit. It’s all I need to explode, coating his dick with my release. He follows me over the edge, his movements erratic, and I feel myself tense around him, squeezing out every last drop of cum. I have to consciously keep my eyes from rolling into the back of my head from pure ecstasy, the sensations almost too much.

Aleko slowly slides out, immediately holding a soft cloth at my entrance to clean me up.

“I’d love to push that back inside you and make more babies.”

“It doesn’t work like that when there’s already one in there.” His scowl—as if the principles of biology are inconvenient to him—has me chuckling as I carefully roll onto my side. Aleko spoons me, placing a soft kiss against my shoulder as he wraps his arms around me.

“Do you really need a baby shower for your birthday? Can we just stay here all day?” I can’t see his face, but I just know he’s pouting.

“Vanessa organized it and ordered that each and every member is there.” I sigh and sit up, turning to look at him lying there, all tattooed and naked and sexy as fucking all hell. Turning his question back on him, I ask, “Do you really want to go against Vanessa’s wishes now that she’s making a huge effort to involve herself again?”

Anticipating my needs, Aleko sits up and climbs across the bed, then stands in front of me, holding out his palms to help me up. He winks, smirking like a goofball, before leading me to the bathroom.

“You have a great point, Mrs. Kastellanos. We’ll go to the baby shower, once I’ve given my baby a shower.”

It’s June, which means it’s fucking hot outside. And being the size of a freaking whale isn’t helping. The many gazebos are extremely welcome though, and the hand fan that Spencer delighted in presenting me with when we arrived isn’t bad either.

Being hot and irritable may be my main M.O., but Bear has the barbeque on, the snacks are plentiful, and I’m surrounded by a fuck load of people who have become my family. Ninja and Bandit are up in our suite, settled in their bed with the air conditioner on. Lucky fuckers.

I just wish the brothers weren’t so on edge. I get it, this whole Beaufort situation isn’t ideal but since Griffin’s death, they’ve installed so much security and upped their

rotation watches so much, it's almost suffocating. But it's fine, it's for our safety and I won't fuck it up this time.

"Why do we have to drink from baby bottles again?" Crow eyes the offending object in his hand, which is almost empty of the beer Violet poured into it a few minutes ago.

"Because that's what people do at baby showers." Vanessa still has her bad days, but today isn't one of them and her bite with the brothers is back. And while she may not be the president's old lady anymore, she'll always be a part of this club and hold their respect as such.

"I like it." Grinder sucks at the teet of his bottle with wild abandon.

"Is that cause it's a lifesize replica of your dick?" Sledge roars with laughter, as do many of the others, but true to form, Grinder doesn't look offended.

"Nah, man. But if that's what you wanna imagine as you suckle on the teet that you describe as my cock, go right ahead." Grinder wags his brows and they all laugh, ribbing each other mercilessly and making the sweat running down my back worth it.

"I thought that Emily chick was supposed to be coming today?" Flower sucks at her bottle and sits beside me, on the opposite side to Aleko, who has been dutifully refilling my water whenever it gets low and is probably on his third cherry sucker in the last hour. Flower has been spending a lot of her time away from the compound working, but she's using this as her base while she's in North Carolina. Something about the vibe here being bitchin'.

"Yeah, but she called this morning. Had a meeting or something this afternoon that she couldn't get out of." I shrug, remembering the call with her after our shower this morning. After her generous offer to sponsor my racing team, I figured I'd continue

to give her the benefit of the doubt. She's a lot less nervous these days, and like Vanessa, I suppose, she's had a bit of a grieving period seeing as her husband is still missing. There's also the whole running his company thing and likely cleaning up a lot of his messes. The smiley face drugs are still rife, but Spencer confirmed there haven't been any deaths from it for at least a couple of months.

"She works in an office, right? Who the fuck arranges a last minute meeting for a Saturday evening?" Flower rolls her eyes and shakes her head, not asking the questions for any answers.

"Is that Emily?" Vanessa lights up my whole world when she hands me a paper plate with two chicken legs, a hamburger, and a hotdog. I nod, eyeing the food and dropping my attention from everything else. "That's a shame, I was looking forward to meeting her."

"You're not missing out on much." I nudge Aleko in the rib for his jibe.

"What in the actual fuck are they for?" Bash points out a whole heap of balloons waiting to be blown up that Kincaid and Jonesy are placing in piles across one of the waist-height brick walls surrounding a small tree and flowers.

Groans start from the brothers until Hoops clears his throat, basically telling them all to shut the fuck up so Vanessa can explain this next baby shower game to them.

"Get yourself into teams of five. You'll each take it in turns to blow up your balloon, stuff it up your shirt, then pop them one by one. First team to blow up then pop all five, don't have to use their baby bottles for the rest of the evening." Vanessa grins, pleased with herself. And I've got to say this is one hell of a baby shower slash birthday.

"Why aren't you getting into a team?" I raise my brows at Aleko.

“Because I’m sitting here with you.” He grins as though that explains everything, rolling the sucker around his tongue so the stick twists and turns.

“I wanna see you play.”

“I’ll play with you.” His grin turns feral, and fuck me, that single brow arches beautifully.

“As tempting as that is, I wanna see you play the game!” And holy crap is it tempting. Fanning myself is only cooling me down so much. “I thought you said this morning that what the birthday girl wants, the birthday girl gets?” I do my best attempt at fluttering my eyelashes, but it only makes that handsome smile spread wider across his face.

“Okay. For you.” Aleko pulls the sucker from his mouth and kisses the crap out of me, earning some hollers and whoops from his brothers, before standing and joining them.

Vanessa organizes everyone who’s playing into teams. Shade is with Crow, Diablo, Violet, and Boner. Grinder insisted he and his housemate were on different teams to make the competition more fun. His words. He’s with Kincaid, Spencer, Bear, and the most handsome man I’ve ever laid my eyes on. Aleko. Shaking his head with a smirk as he’s handed a balloon. The final team is made up of Hoops, Bash, Jonesy, Sledge, and Flower.

Taking Aleko’s empty seat beside me, Vanessa gets comfortable. Mom and Sabrina are just the other side of her, with equally large smiles on their faces. Watching everyone have fun and eat their food seems to fill their cups.

“Now decide what order you’re going in...get ready...go!” Vanessa calls over the background music, and the teams begin.

Violet, Hoops, and Aleko are first to blow up their balloon, with their teams cheering them on.

“C’mon, Violet, blow harder,” Boner encourages.

“Bet that isn’t the first time she’s heard that before.” Crow makes a rare joke, making them all laugh, and I love that I’m seeing more moments like this with the Sons.

Aleko and Hoops manage to tie a knot in the end of their balloons and shove them up their shirts quicker than Violet.

“Take the fucking nails off, Vi. If Grinder’s team beats ours, I have to do his laundry for a fucking week!” Boner is really into this whole game, the veins on the sides of his neck protruding with his frustration at Violet’s balloon tying skills.

Bear and Flower are next, and my mouth drops in shock at how quickly the balloons grow. Shade starts blowing his up a few seconds later as Boner shouts, “Finally!” But he’s now way behind my man’s team, because I swear Bear only needed one blow.

Spencer’s next, and he blows like a pro. I’m just waiting for Grinder to say something. They’re all still cheering on their teams and Vanessa chuckles beside me.

“How’s the new cabin coming along?” I am continuously fanning myself, even as the night draws in, it’s still fucking hot.

“Just the electric and a few other things left to organize and I think we’re good to move in.” Vanessa’s smile makes me happy, but wait...

“We?”

“Your mom and Sabrina are my new roommates.” She shrugs, the smile unwavering.

“Mom didn’t tell me that!” I look around Vanessa to Mom, who is giggling away as she watches the game, but she heard, and she glances at me sheepishly with a light shrug. I turn my attention back to Vanessa. “But congratulations, ladies. When do you think you’ll be in?”

I make time to eat the offering Vanessa handed me earlier, taking a bite out of one of the chicken legs perfectly grilled by Bear.

“I think Shade said about a month or two.” She sighs heavily, looking to the floor for a second and closing her eyes before shaking herself out of it. “I’m excited.”

I believe her, but I also don’t. Her pain is still a daily struggle, even on the good days.

“Are you still keeping the sex of the baby a secret?” Vanessa switches the conversation to me, and that’s okay.

“Yeah. We don’t even know. When the doc asked, I couldn’t bring myself to say yes. I’m just happy there’s a healthy baby in there.”

An almighty roar erupts and I watch as Grinder stabs the balloon beneath his shirt with a knife he just pulled from his boot. He’s about two seconds faster than Jonesy for Hoops’s team, and already gloating big time as Boner’s the last to pop his balloon.

“Three experienced blowers on our team, brothers, what did you expect?” Grinder points to himself, Spencer, and Kincaid.

“I can’t even argue with that.” Spencer laughs, shaking his head as he makes his way over to grab some food.

“Team Baby Psycho for the win!” Grinder shouts out, grabbing cans for him and the

others and throwing their bottles in the trash.

Aleko is quick to return to me, but he doesn't ask Vanessa to move or anything. No, the man spreads my legs and sits on the ground between them, bringing my knees onto his shoulders so he can massage my calves.

He kisses one, then the other, and twists to look up at me, that panty-melting expression doing things to my insides that even a wiggling baby can't compete with.

"Happy birthday, Cherry Pie."

I smile, unable to contain the pure happiness spreading through me.

"Thank you. But Baby Psycho still is not a thing."

"Oh, it's totally a thing."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Aleko

I can't sleep. My eyes are wide open, staring at the ceiling, mind whirring and impossible to stop. Beside me, Mackenzie is sleeping like the dead. And I don't use that adage lightly, considering our past. Any day now, she's due to have our little nugget, and as terrifying as that sounds, it's also the most exciting time in our lives. Then there's the issue of my little nickname for him. She says it's not gonna happen but she's just gonna have to get over it. "Baby Psycho" has stuck.

Even though the imminent arrival of our kid takes up the majority of space in my brain, the other significant reason has everything to do with the Beauforts and that motherfucker, Ryan. I still don't fully understand the link between the two but from the intel we've got, it has to do with the smiley drugs that hit Rockford like a category five hurricane. Beyond that, we can't find out how they fit together. Is Ryan just a low ranking dealer? I mean, sure, in my eyes, he's a prime douchebag but, come on, how bad can a fireman be? He was so adamant about "saving Mackenzie from the big bad biker" that I can't wrap my head around him selling deadly pills to the young kids in our town.

What worries me the most, however, is the fact that even with the police looking out for Ryan's license plates, they aren't getting any hits. That tells me he's not on the roads unless he's driving someone else's car, which means we're fucked. Thank fuck Glitch was able to get his hands on the camera surveillance systems from Jed's place. Deputy Shipman assured us they were actively working with the New Bern police to find the guy who set fire to the warehouse. To her benefit, she could have asked why

we are so interested, but she hasn't. What she did say is that our little arrangement is feeling more like a one way street than a mutually beneficial pact.

Then there's the question of Emily. These past few months she and Mackenzie have grown close. Not Mac-and-Spencer close but enough that they see each other on the regular. Do I like it? Nope. But even I can admit that, so far, she hasn't shown any signs of being a Machiavellian cunt. If anything, she's been helpful, especially when it comes to my Cherry's new racing club.

It's not like I leave Mackenzie alone for long periods of time. I'm just not capable of doing it. And when business calls, I make sure the brothers are here to band together around her. It drives her crazy, but unlike last year, we're communicating and making sure we're not acting hot headed.

Okay, so she's not acting hot headed but I still have my moments.

One thing I can say, Emily has been keeping my wife busy and happy so I can't really hate her for that but it doesn't mean I trust her completely. To be fair, I trust no one outside of Mackenzie and the club. Well, maybe the Reapers since they went to war with us. What's keeping me up at night is this feeling that nothing is in my control. Not Cherry's choice in friends—and I've tried to dictate but she's not having it—not club business where our warehouses are burning down with strange fucking notes on the wall, and definitely not with the assholes responsible for all of this shit.

I mean, who the fuck puts dangerous drugs out on the streets, for profit, developing some sort of antidote they can sell to all of the fucking medical providers to offset said drug? For fucking profit. Who does that? Risus Pharmaceuticals, apparently. Glitch was able to put two and two together when the numbers he ran from Rockford Beach matched the New York City numbers. The common denominator is Harrison Beaufort and we do not believe in coincidences.

A small snore gets my attention and as I turn my head to check on my Cherry, I notice the small pinch in her brow. These last few weeks, sleeping hasn't been easy on her and the many trips to the bathroom have made her cranky as fuck. Or maybe it's the fact that I can't help but chuckle every time she grumbles and moans about having to heft her way up and over to the toilet. It's cute.

With the moon giving me just enough light to admire the soft slope of her nose, the deep arch of her brow, and the full flesh of her lips, I roll to my side and just watch her.

I watch her sleep as Baby Psycho gets ready to meet us.

I watch her breathe, a steady rhythm that soothes and relaxes me.

I watch her...be. Beautiful, strong, healthy, and brave. Most importantly, mine.

Placing my hand over her round belly, I spread my fingers wide so I can cover as much of her as I possibly can. Within seconds, I feel my tiny Psycho pushing against my palm and the sheer pride I feel inside is like nothing else in this world.

"Hey, little buddy. You ready to come out?" My words are whisper soft, no doubt only I can hear them, but it doesn't matter. I love talking to him or her or whatever...it doesn't matter. Our baby is loved and I want my words to reflect it. Another push against my hand makes me grin as I watch what looks to be a tiny foot or hand pressing against me. Fuck, my heart is so full.

Dragging my gaze from my hand, up over Cherry's belly, and to her rising and falling chest, I land on her slightly parted lips and smile. Life is perfect.

Except the peaceful moment is broken like glass on a cement floor as Cherry takes a deep breath and sits upright, eyes wide open and a loud, guttural yell pouring from

her mouth. In the same instant, I'm on my feet, looking around the room, half expecting to see some kind of heinous monster and ready to slay it for her.

Needless to say, we're the only two in the room and it takes me a minute to realize we may be dealing with real labor and not the Braxton Hicks she's been having the past few days, on and off.

"Oh my fucking God! Make it stoooooop!" I'm pretty sure everyone on the fucking compound just heard my wife screaming at the top of her lungs. Any other time, I'd be smirking, flexing my sexual prowess to the brothers, but this is not that and I'm convinced they might come in here thinking I'm legit hurting her.

"I can't...what can I do? What do you need? Who do I call?" Fuck, I should know all of this. We've talked about all of this.

"I swear to fuck, Aleko, I'm about to push your fucking baby out of my vagina. If you don't call the midwife right fucking now, I will tie your balls together and play rapid fire ping pong with them." Holy shit, my flinch is full bodied. I think I even step back for a second, afraid she might actually make good on her threat.

"Ah, midwife. Right. Okay." Scooping the phone off the bedside table, I reach for her hand so she can squeeze it when necessary. By the time the midwife answers—it's fuck off o'clock in the morning so kudos to her—Cherry is less murderous and trying to get up. Because I like my junk right where it is, I don't comment on how difficult that simple move is for her. She knows without me pointing it out.

"Hey, Lilah, I'm pretty sure it's time for Mackenzie to pop one out." I recoil as Cherry whips her head around and shoots me with her laser-sharp glare. "I mean...she's having contractions." Cherry grins, and for a second, I think she might be fucking with me. Do I ask her? Fuck no. If she wants to play with my emotions as she's bringing our baby into the world, more power to her. I'll hand her the whip for

her to slash me.

With the understanding that when this is all over, she'll be begging for me to punish her.

I grin, she narrows her eyes then blushes. Oh yeah, we're on the same page.

Our suite door flies open just as I'm hanging up with Lilah, our midwife, and in comes my mother-in-law, completely ignoring the fact I'm in my briefs and Mackenzie is in her underwear and a t-shirt that barely covers her belly.

Fuck, she's beautiful. I'm going to miss seeing her pregnant, but also, I can't wait to see her back on a bike doing what she loves most.

"Is it time, baby? Come on, put on some pajama shorts and let's walk around the compound." Darlene is more lucid than I am. We've talked about this, about walking off the contractions, ice chips paired with lots of fluids, and letting gravity do the work. But, fuck me, this whole thing is sucking out my brain power one panicked cell at a time. Before long, Baby Psycho will be born but I'll be too catatonic to appreciate it.

"Lilah is on her way, baby." Ignoring everything else around me, I stalk up to Cherry, sink my fingers into her hair, and slam my lips to hers. They're cold with a hint of sleep since she's just woken up and hasn't brushed her teeth, not that I give a fuck. Our tongues meet and our breaths combine for a brief second. I think we both forget our lives are about to flip upside down for the better, if not harder but more beautiful.

"Let's do this, baby." My whisper is for her only. From the corner of my eye, I can see Darlene looking away, giving us this final moment where it's just the two of us, before we are transformed from a couple to a family.

And I can't fucking wait.

"Yeah," Mackenzie's scoff is playful but firm. "By 'us', you mean 'me', right?"

Trapping her bottom lip with my teeth, I pull it until I have to release it. "Be nice."

My wife grins just before she doubles over and screams like someone's just sliced her open. Fuck me, I wish I could protect her from this pain and I hate that I have zero control over any of this.

"Breathe, sweetheart, breathe deep." Darlene's voice is soothing and sure, knowing exactly what her daughter is going through, contrary to me.

"I'll go grab ice." Darlene nods at me and that small gesture makes me feel like I'm finally useful.

As soon as I open the door to our suite, it's like the entire fucking compound is there and I don't know why that sight is the one that gets me. The one that makes this all feel real.

"Is it out?"

"Is she okay?"

"Boy or girl?"

I have no idea who is speaking but they're all brothers so I answer them all with a grin.

"She's having contractions, midwife is on the way, I'm getting ice."

“Well fuck, too early for Champagne, then.” I recognize that voice and I’m not surprised Grinder is already thinking of celebrating before the baby is even born.

“Yeah, let’s give it a few hours, you fuckwit.” I laugh, he frowns.

“I’m opening it as a good luck charm. Pre-birth tailgate party!” For just a second, I stare at him, then realize my wife needs ice more than he needs attention.

“Knock yourself out, Brother. I’m staying sober or else she’ll have my balls.”

I don’t walk, I run to the kitchen downstairs and fill up a bucket with ice chips, and just as I’m closing the freezer door, I hear Bear.

“Lilah’s here!” From under his arm, I see the dark, messy, bun of our midwife’s hair. She’s in sweat shorts and a long-sleeve shirt that looks a lot like the women’s national soccer team jersey. I’d ask if she’s a fan or a player but, honestly, I don’t give a fuck at this time.

“Life saver! Come on, I’ll take you up.” Again, I try to run back to Mackenzie but I’m distracted by Bear’s voice.

“It’s fine, man. I’ll take her up, you run with the ice chips.” I whip around so fucking fast, I think I lose eyesight for nanosecond. My glare is scathing when I get Bear’s attention.

That motherfucker just grins at me, Lilah at his side with the top of her head barely reaching his pecs. I know what he’s thinking and I swear to fuck, if he distracts her from her job, I will chokehold him until he passes out.

To be fair, I’d probably need help.

“Go, you fool. She’s fine.” Fuck, my wife is more important than whatever he’s trying to do here. And I thought he and Flower had a thing going on.

“I’m gonna need you to grab the pups.” And by that, I mean Ninja and Bandit.

“Yeah, man, of course. Go!” Fuck, I love this guy.

“Thanks, Bear. Oh and by the way?” I call out over my shoulder as I jog away. “You’re the Nugget’s godfather.” I don’t need to look at him to know I’ve made him happy.

“You fucker. Of course, I am. Who else would it be?” I don’t respond, it’s a done deal and we both know it. There was never any other choice.

When I reach the top of the stairs, I make a turn for my suite when I hear her scream again. She’s in the hall but I can’t see her because every-fucking-one living here is standing around her. Goddamn it, she’s not a circus attraction. I get it, we’ve never had a baby in this compound and this is all new and feels like a future for our club but fuck, man.

“All y’all need to get the fuck away from my wife. Now!” To my satisfaction, they all scatter like mice caught between a rock and a hungry tomcat.

Run, bitches, run.

The look Mackenzie gives me is everything. Gratitude and love and a certainty that she’s made the right choice in giving me her heart.

Damn straight.

“Here, take some ice.” I hand her a couple of chips, which she takes without

hesitation.

“Listen to me.” I lean in, hoping she’s not about to break my heart. “Screaming helps me, okay? I’m not holding back, I’m letting it go so I can handle the pain.” Her tone is sure and steady so I nod because who the fuck am I to give her any kind of advice?

“Howya doin’, Macky girl?” I roll my eyes at Lilah’s nickname for Mackenzie. I swear to fuck everyone wants a cute name for her.

“I’m good, hanging in there.” My brave girl talks around the ice chip and in real time I see her face contort, her mouth open and her eyes close. Then she screams, the sound like an alarm inside the halls of the compound. All the while she’s trying to walk and nobody thinks this is weird. Or dangerous? Am I the only one freaked out right now?

“Okay, so we’ve talked about this the last few days. You’ve been in early labor and judging by the time between your last contractions, this is probably active labor. How far apart are they now?” Darlene answers Lilah but I’m too busy looking at Mackenzie, who doesn’t seem worried. In pain? Sure, when she’s having contractions, but otherwise, she looks great. As stunning as ever.

From that moment on, I pull my strength and courage from my wife.

Her bravery guides me when we go to the birthing room we’ve all set up for the occasion. It’s small, but it’s got everything she needs. And who knows? Maybe we’ll have more babies coming in the future. It used to be a communal shower back in the days of the psychiatric hospital and we’ve been using it as storage. These last few months, though, we’ve put up a wall and half the room is now decked out with new paint, a large bathtub, a queen sized bed, and a couple of dressers with whatever candles Mackenzie wanted to use to soothe her. Cherries was my first thought but she vetoed that. Apparently, cherries make her think of sex. I’m okay with that.

For six hours, Mackenzie goes from bathing to walking to screaming to cursing me before starting all over again. The whole time, I'm at her side. Lilah comes and goes, giving us some private time until the contractions started getting more serious, close and closer and clearly more painful. Did I almost pass out when her water broke? I'll never admit to that but holy fuck, the earth moved beneath my feet at the sight.

Everything begins to move so fucking fast, I wish I could pause just so I can appreciate how fucking amazing my Cherry Pie is.

"Here we go..." Lilah's voice is gentle, sure and reassuring. She and Mackenzie previously decided they'd set multiple scenarios up. Mackenzie didn't know if she'd rather the bed, the tub, or the crouching position for the birthing process. In the heat of the moment, I don't think she's even really thinking about it as she lowers herself onto the mattress set up at the foot of the bed.

A warrior cry like I've never heard before rips from her throat while I stand beside her, one of my hands on her neck holding a cold towel and the other squeezing her hand. Or more like, allowing her to squeeze mine.

"You're doing so good, Macky girl, nearly there." Lilah's calm and gentle tone does nothing to dull my girl's screams as she pushes and pants...until I hear the most beautiful sound of my life.

"Hey, baby, welcome to the world." Lilah lifts and places our baby onto Cherry's chest, a serene smile on her face before she then turns to me. "Do you want the honors?" She holds up a pair of the strangest scissors I've ever seen in my life and points to the baby's umbilical cord.

It's spongier than I imagined when I cut the cord before handing the scissors back to Lilah.

“Oh, Aleko. Look at our baby.” This right here, this is the moment I’m gonna remember forever.

“Okay, Macky girl, you need to breathe, and when your body tells you, I want you to push again. That placenta is going to need a little help.” I like Lilah, but I swear to fuck I did not need to hear those words.

I’m imagining the worst, obviously. Movies love to make us think it’s a catastrophic thing happening. Like a gushing river of blood flowing everywhere.

It’s not fun to watch, but it’s a fucking relief when I physically feel Mackenzie’s body lose its stress. It’s like the pain and discomfort leaves her body for a moment.

“I just need to check baby over for a second.” Lilah gently takes our baby from Mackenzie’s arms, and I swear she’s already pining.

“You did good, Cherry Pie. So fucking good.” I can do nothing but kiss my warrior of a wife. She’s beautiful with her damp hair sticking to her forehead, her skin glistening and glowing, and her sleepy eyes full of love.

“Well, you had two names picked out. So, I present you...Gryffin Kastellanos.” At Lilah’s words, Mackenzie gasps and I swear to fuck I have tears in my eyes. Neither of us had even thought to check when he first came out, just happy we had a healthy baby. “Here you go, congratulations. I’ve just checked him and he’s all good. Especially the lungs.”

I’m not gonna lie. I’m scared as shit right now, but Mackenzie? Fuck, she takes our Baby Psycho and kisses him on the forehead then looks over at me, tired eyes and bright smiles. “Hey, Gryffin. Come meet your dad.”

I barely register the moment Lilah leaves the room because all I can see is my son.

All I can see is his trembling lips and his unfocused eyes as he moves his head to the side like he can smell food in his mother's breast.

“Hey, Nugget. I'm so fuc—happy you're here.” Lifting him from Mackenzie's arms, I raise his forehead to my lips and linger there, inhaling his scent. I've heard of the baby smell but until now I thought it was all made up shit.

It really isn't. And just like that, I have a new addiction.

“Are you in love?” Darting my gaze to my Cherry Pie, I grin wider than I ever have, it seems.

“Oh, Cherry Baby, love feels like a fraction of what I'm feeling.” When Gryff starts stirring, I deduce he's hungry and I can do fuck all about that so I hand him right over to his mama. “Time to eat, little Nugget.”

Just like that, my world grew from us two to us three, the trifecta, the perfect geometrical figure. The mother, the father, and Baby Psycho.

“I know what you're thinking and Baby Psycho is not a thing, Aleko.”

Yeah, that's what she thought about Cherry Pie.

Chapter Thirty

Mackenzie

“I’ve expressed enough to last a week, Aleko, so no, you won’t run out of milk for Gryffin in the three, maybe four hours I’m at Rocks Off with the girls.”

Aleko mock-scowls at me, the upturn of his lips giving him away as he pins me against the truck with his palms against the metal. Gryffin is in my arms, literally the center of our world.

“Just making sure my boy has plenty of the good stuff.” First, he bends to kiss Gryffin’s forehead, then straightens to kiss me, ever so softly.

“Have you tried it yet?” Grinder interrupts our little moment, reminding me of our surroundings.

With an amused expression, Aleko arches his brow first to me, before flipping off Grinder. “Fuck off, man.”

“Oh, you have! I tried it once, thicker than I imagined, but it tas—”

“Shut the fuck up, Grinder.” Aleko shoves him playfully, and I cover Gryffin’s tiny ears from all the cursing.

“Don’t worry about covering his ears, Mac. Uncle Grindy’s gonna teach Baby Psycho all kindsa words when he grows up.” His grin is wide and full of mischief, making

me roll my eyes because this poor kid is certainly going to have a colorful life.

I won't always shield him from it though. I love each and every one of these people, why wouldn't I want my son to be like them? Well, maybe not Grinder specifically. I heard him talking about an eyeball collection at one point and just no.

"Y'all better call him by his name this evening, because Baby Psycho is not it." Pointing my finger at them both, I give them my best "I'm serious" glare.

"There you are, darlin'. Is that lovely Emily lady meeting us there?" Mom hasn't had one of her episodes for about nine months and has been involving herself in more group activities, tonight being one of them, and she looks better than I remember seeing her for a long ass time. Her dark hair is smooth, like it's been straightened, and it sits just above her shoulders. She's wearing a cute navy-blue dress that floats around her knees and a black jacket to cover the tops of her arms because she's self conscious about them.

Her beautiful blue eyes are outlined with a dark kohl, and damn, my mom is stunning.

"She is, yeah. You look great, Mom."

"So do you, darlin'. Now where's my grandson? I haven't seen him for at least four hours." Mom scurries over to me from the entrance of the building, with Vanessa and Sabrina in tow, both also looking equally beautiful having made an extra effort for our girls' night out. "Move aside, Aleko, Nana's coming through." Gently pushing Aleko aside—because he totally allows it—Mom softly strokes Gryffin's hand. "See you tomorrow, little man. Nana loves you." She then blows him a kiss and smiles at me before getting into the back seat of the truck behind us.

Sabrina follows Mom, and Vanessa makes a point of coming over too.

“Be good for Daddy, little one.” She gently strokes her fingers over his tummy and he stirs a little in my arms, reaching for her thumb and gripping it. The day Gryffin was born, Aleko asked her if she’d like to be one of his unofficial grandparents. Seeing as these are the people he sees as his family, it seemed right. She snuggled Gryffin so damn close when she heard his name for the first time and said she’d be honored to be his grammy. It was all very emotional, and it still makes my heart swell every time I remember the moment.

Vanessa kisses Gryffin’s tiny fingers and carefully releases her thumb before sighing contently and heading to the truck.

Gryffin’s falling asleep after a big feed before we came outside, which means now is the perfect time to hand him over. But I don’t wanna. He’s so friggin’ cute.

“C’mon, Mama K, hand him over. Time for you ladies to head on out. Jonesy’s getting impatient.” Bear approaches, his arms out wide. I know what he really wants is some Gryffin cuddles. It’s like we’re all addicted to this tiny bundle of awesome and can never get enough.

Emotions almost get the better of me as I think about how many people love and adore this beautiful baby boy, tears threatening to spill, but I push them back because it took far too long to do my makeup.

“I’ll see you in a few hours, baby boy.” I lightly kiss the top of his head, inhaling his unique baby scent before handing him over to Bear, who immediately softens and looks ten times larger when Gryffin is in his arms. At a month old already, he seems so big, but with Bear, it takes me right back to day one.

“I’ll be inside once the girls are on the way, Brother.” Aleko pats Bear on the shoulder, but he’s looking at Gryffin rather than his best friend.

Like I said, addicted. Everyone.

“C’mon, Grinder, Shade has the poker game set up and ready to roll. Psycho, if you’re not quick, we’ll blind you out.” Bear strolls into the building as if he didn’t just say he’s about to take my baby to a poker game.

“Don’t do anything I would do, ladies.” Grinder winks and practically skips inside after Bear.

“Poker? Really?” I look up through my lashes to Aleko, who just shrugs, giving me that trademark smile I love to hate. “Whatever. No smoking in the same room as Gryffin. Instructions on how to heat up his milk are in the kitchen, pinned to the fridge. Diapers and everything else he needs are in the diaper bag. His—”

“We’ve got this, Cherry baby. Go. Have fun with the girls.” Aleko pins me back against the truck and my clit honestly and truly flutters. “I love you, Mrs. Kastellanos.” His lips on mine almost make me forget the world until a banging on the window behind me makes him pull away.

“I think Vanessa’s just as ready for this night out as you are.” Aleko chuckles against my neck as he nuzzles in.

It’s been almost ten months since Prez’s death, and while she’s been a lot more social, Vanessa has barely left the compound. I feel like she’s just as excited as the rest of us to be going out though.

However, I feel the whole mom-guilt thing too, and while I know Gryffin is in safe hands, I can’t help thinking I should just stay with him.

Mom and Vanessa have both taken him off our hands for a few hours at a time in the last couple of weeks—I’ve used those hours to sleep or take a long-as-fuck

shower—but this time I’m not simply down the hall or even in the same vicinity. At a month old, Gryffin’s not yet sleeping through the night fully, but he’s a happy, healthy baby, and I couldn’t ask for anything better. Yeah, I’m gonna complain like fuck, because this parenting thing is hard—and apparently it doesn’t get any easier—but that doesn’t mean I’ll ever be ungrateful for him.

“I should go and say goodbye, just once more.” I pout as Aleko opens the passenger door to the truck and tries to usher me inside.

“Cherry baby, you said goodbye a thousand times when you fed him, changed his diaper, and I saw you whispering when Bear came out to get him. He’ll be fine.” He slips his fingers between mine, squeezing my hand.

Glaring at him through my lashes, I slap my palm against his chest. “I know.” I sigh, and Ninja appears on his shoulder a second later. I swear he’s judging me with those cute tiny eyes of his.

“You’re supposed to be on my side, Ninja. Where’s Bandit?” As if she heard her name, I see the fabric of Aleko’s hood moving, but she stays where she is, preferring to sleep in this heat.

“Bandit is being sensible and staying out of this one. Have a good evening with the girls. Jonesy will be with you for the duration, and the security at the club will have eyes on you too.” Palming my cheeks, he kisses my forehead, then my nose, my chin, and finally, he reaches my lips.

It’s not the kind of kiss you want your mom to see, but there isn’t a world where Aleko and I could hide our need for each other.

When he pulls away, Ninja has already scurried back to the comfort of Aleko’s hood with Bandit. Meanwhile, my clit is throbbing for attention. Not that I’m ready for

anything yet because it still feels like my insides are falling out of my broken vagina, but it's something for me to look forward to. Hopefully sooner rather than later because my husband is fucking phenomenal.

"Put her down, Psycho." Vanessa laughs and Aleko shakes his head. My cheeks heat, but I'm not embarrassed.

"Okay, ladies. Have a great night. The brothers and I have Baby Psycho all set up. We're good." He winks, grips the tops of my arms and spins me to face the truck, then spans my ass and walks toward the building. Quickly.

"That's not a thing!" I yell as he gets farther away, pulling a sucker from his pocket and holding it in the air.

"Totally is!" His shouted reply makes the others laugh and I turn to glare at them all.

Mom, at least, pretends to look sorry, holding her empty hand over her mouth as though she wasn't just laughing. Vanessa and Sabrina? Well, they're dabbing at their eyes, trying to stop any tears from falling.

"Okay, ladies. Who's ready for some drinks and dancing?" I'm ignoring the Baby Psycho comment now, because the name is kinda cute, but I'll never admit it to anyone. Maybe Aleko...on my deathbed.

Tonight was arranged for us by the brothers. To be honest, I think it was mostly Shade as he's been pushing for Vanessa to leave the compound more often. Of course, though, we're going to Rocks Off because they have security surrounding the place, and we have Jonesy as our designated driver.

It doesn't take too long before we're pulling up outside the club, the neon sign flashing above the building. One of the security guys is by the door within seconds of

Jonesy turning off the engine and he opens the passenger door, followed by the back door, to let us all out.

“Good evening, ladies. Candie is waiting just inside, ready to take you to your private room.” He tilts his head ever so slightly before gesturing inside with his arm.

“Thanks, John.” Jonesy fist bumps him then stands by the entrance, waiting for us.

“Is this really where the men have sent us? To a strip club?” Mom is more curious than anything, having never been here before.

Sabrina places two fingers on top of her closed left fist with a light nod. I actually know that one, it means “of course.”

“Well, I guess even now I can still experience new things.” Mom chuckles as we walk inside, the muffled beats from the music helping me to get into the night out mood.

“Vanessa! I’m so glad they made you come out tonight, girl.” Candie opens her arms wide and wraps them around Vanessa, her dusky-blue hair looking a little purple with the reflections of the red lighting.

“Hey, Candie. Good to see you again.” I wave awkwardly because it’s been over a year since I met her, and I’m not even sure if she’ll remember me from my whole one night of working here.

“Girl, get over here.” She lets go of Vanessa and wraps me in a hug too. “Well done on taming the Psycho. How’s Baby Psycho?” She pulls away, grinning.

“Oh no, not you too. Nope. No. Not a thing.” I shake my head and mom’s arm falls across my shoulder.

“Oh, darlin’. I think it’s a thing.” Laughing, she lightly pinches my chin and winks. It’s so good to see Mom like this.

“Candie, this is Darlene, and I think you might have met Sabrina at the compound before.” Vanessa introduces everyone.

“I have.” Candie slides one palm across the other, then brings two separated fingers to her eye before pointing to Sabrina. “My ASL is a little rusty, but I’m trying to say nice to see you again.” Candie smiles and holds her hands up like she’s surrendering.

Holding out her thumb and pinky, Sabrina shakes her fist back and forth, mouthing, “You too.”

“Your other friend is already here. She’s in the private room waiting for y’all. I asked Bruno to prepare you each a Cherry Bounce. They’re my fave...” Candie begins to lead us through the club, the rest of what she’s saying drowned out by the thumping music.

The fact that the drink and Aleko’s nickname for me are super similar is funny, but I know that a Cherry Bounce is like a staple cocktail for North Carolina. Having only been able to legally drink for like, just over a year, and being pregnant for over half of that, I haven’t exactly broadened my horizons in alcohol tasting. Beer and shots don’t count.

A woman with short black hair and a sparkling gold bikini is dancing around the pole to the beat and she’s fucking amazing. The way she works that pole is impressive, and in those heels...? Well, she’s pretty phenomenal.

“There you all are!” Emily stands as we enter the large private room, her perfectly manicured hands clapping together. The sticks in Emily’s hair look like something I’ve seen in a K-drama, and they’re so pretty, but there’s no way they would hold all

my hair up as neatly as hers.

“Hi, Em!” We all greet each other and grab a seat.

There’s space in here for us to dance, and to sit around the three square tables that have been pushed together to make it bigger. It’s just as luxurious as the main part of the club, but the music isn’t quite as loud, like we can actually hear ourselves think, and it’s just on a much smaller scale.

Glasses of red liquid are waiting on the table in front of the luxurious red velvet chairs, and matching red drapes cover one of the walls.

“I’ll wait at the door. There aren’t any other ways into this room, so you’re all good.” Jonesy nods and places a chair by the entrance of the room, just on the outside.

I won’t even try and persuade him to stay inside with us because the entertainment outside of the room is much more to his taste.

“Have a good night, ladies. There’s a glass jug on the table for refills, and when you’re ready for more, tell Jonesy to get Bruno on it.” Candie blows us all a kiss and leaves after Jonesy.

A few drinks later, we’re all laughing with one hand raised in the air, waiting for someone to say, “Uno!” Except Vanessa, because she is the one who laid the wild card and decided on this consequence.

It’s something we could easily be doing while sitting around the clubhouse, but the new surroundings make it more fun somehow. Yeah, we’re wild.

“Nooo! I was so close.” I add four fresh cards to my hand and Mom pretends she’s not laughing as she decides what color to play next.

“Yellow.” Mom leans in to me. “Sorry, but not sorry, darlin’.” She chuckles.

“Uno!” Emily places her second-to-last card on the deck, triumph all over her features.

“Thank God for that. My arm was beginning to ache.” Mom translates for Sabrina, making us all laugh.

“Drink up, ladies. Uno means drink.” Vanessa holds up her glass and we all swig a few mouthfuls of our drink.

I think I’m close to done with the drinking though. My nose is tingly and I want the alcohol to get out of my system quickly for Gryffin.

“Yes!” Emily lays down her final card and throws her fists in the air. “Pretty sure that’s the only thing I’ve ever won in my whole life.” She bounces with excitement, sipping at her drink.

“One more round then we should head home, I don’t care if it makes me a sap, but I’m missing my baby.” I shrug, baring my teeth in a please-agree-with-me smile and pass the cards to Vanessa as it’s her turn to shuffle and deal.

“Sure thing, darlin’.” Mom winks and nudges my shoulder with hers.

“Can we compromise with two rounds? I’m not ready to go home yet. I haven’t had this much fun for months,” Emily pleads.

“You should come to the compound for a barbeque night sometime. They’re always fun.”

Emily’s eye twitches a little before she responds to Mom. “I could, but I get the

impression I'm not particularly welcome there."

"I won't hear it." Vanessa stops shuffling and looks at Emily, her glare fierce. "You're a wonderfully resilient and strong woman. You're not responsible for the piece of shit you call a husband." Then, as if she didn't just get all serious on us, Vanessa resumes shuffling and takes a deep breath. "This round, if you're on the receiving end of the wild card, you need to tell a joke. If anyone laughs, you can play your card, if not, miss a turn." The smile is back, as though she's shoved the hurt back down, deep inside herself.

"There you go. What she said." I gesture to Vanessa. "Have you still not heard from him?" I can't help but ask because he's been missing for fucking months. Not that it's actually any of my business. I'm curious.

Emily sighs before speaking. "No. Nothing at all. The thing is, I know he's a bad man, but he gave me everything I have. He...he saved me and made me his. I liked that, you know?"

"No judgment here, Em. It's a difficult and painful situation I wouldn't wish on anyone."

"Girls...the room...it's...sp—" Vanessa's head falls forward, banging against the table, swiftly followed by Sabrina, making Mom and I jump.

"What the fuck? They haven't drank that much, have they?" I'm beginning to worry that we've broken them.

"Emily, what's going on?" Mom's tone is firm, not a hint of the panic I'm feeling in her voice.

Looking away from Vanessa and Sabrina, I see Emily's smirk. But it's not the nice

and friendly kind that says this is a funny situation, it's the I have a secret and I'm doing something wrong kind.

"If either of you screams or calls for help, they're both dead. I've poisoned them. And they'll only get the antidote once you two have calmly escorted me out of the building and into the car that will be waiting for us." Calmer than I've ever seen her, Emily explains what the fuck is happening, and it's fucking insane.

"Emily, what is this all about?" Mom's voice has a slight tremble, but she's holding it together well.

"You'll see, won't you? This is his plan. I made him wait until you had the baby first, Mac, of course. Not being able to have them myself, I couldn't deprive the world of that beautiful child. Gryffin really is a lovely boy." Emily stands and I see red.

Throwing my chair backward, I punch Emily in the face and her head swings to the side with the force.

"You keep my baby's name out of your traitor mouth." I could keep going, but her threat against Vanessa and Sabrina holds firm. To be fair though, she only said not to scream and to walk out calmly...she said nothing about not punching her.

"You can have that one for free, but he won't be happy." Emily clutches the side of her face and scowls, a little fear in her eyes, but it's gone quicker than it appeared.

"What did you give them?" I have a little knowledge of some poisons, but it depends how fancy this bitch went.

"That's not your concern. Now get your bags, and we're out of here."

"Fine." Jonesy is just outside the door. He'll know for sure that something is wrong

when Vanessa and Sabrina don't walk out with us and we get into a car that isn't his truck.

With one last look at the girls, I know they're still breathing because I can see their bodies slowly rising and falling with each breath. It's as though they're in a deep sleep.

Emily loops her hands through Mom's and my elbows, leading us out of the room toward whatever the fuck this crazy ass has planned.

How can someone go from wanting to invest in my new casual racing team to fucking kidnapping and poisoning?

We get to the main exit and we haven't been stopped. Jonesy wasn't at his post by the private room door, and now my adrenaline is flowing.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Mom seems surprisingly calm, but I note she's breathing in and out, very slowly, no doubt counting in her head to keep from freaking the fuck out.

I wouldn't blame her.

Nobody stops us, but I try signaling to Candie behind the bar. I think she realizes we're not all leaving. Hopefully. My eyes feel strained from trying to make her go check the private room.

It's too late for me and Mom though as we slide into the back of the waiting black car. I don't look up, pulling my cell from my bag as discreetly as I can and keeping it low.

Me: Emily crazy.back of black car East from Rockford Drive help.

I turn on my live location and shove my cell back into my bag after putting it on silent. I don't want to draw attention to the fact that Emily is a shit kidnapper who clearly didn't think of everything.

"You doing okay, Mom?" I grip Mom's hand and squeeze because she is very much not doing okay. She squeezes back, still counting her breath lengths and closing her eyes.

"Fine, darlin'."

"Will you two shut the fuck up? I'm making a call."

Looking up, I see Emily turning to us and waving her phone, but that's not the thing that has my stomach leaping into my throat.

What the fuck is he doing here?

Chapter Thirty-One

Aleko

“Keep that up, brother, and you’ll be getting chicks around here preggos with just one look.” While Shade is giving Bear shit for doting on Gryff, I’m mulling over my cards and wondering whether I should up the stakes or fold. The safe thing to do is fold to make sure I don’t go through my stash of cash faster than a racer goes through rubber.

We’ve set up the poker table in the middle of the rec room, next to the pool table and behind the living area where most of the brothers hang out, drink, and get their dicks wet. Tonight, it’s only us. No smoking, no drinking, no women. Well, except for Kincaid at the table playing against me, Boner, Shade and Grinder.

Bear, stoic as ever, responds to our Sergeant at Arms with only his middle finger from the hand resting on Baby P’s back, scowling like he just pooped on his parade.

Speaking of...

Raising my gaze up at my son, I see his sleeping face turn slightly red, his brows pinching, his body tensing before going lax all over again.

The effect is immediate.

“Fuck me, Psycho. The hell you feedin’ that kid?” Boner, who is sitting closest to Bear’s comfortable position on the couch, brings his t-shirt to his nose, covering it up

like it's a riding scarf.

"Tittie milk. I only had a little, once a few years back, and it gave me the shits for hours." The room goes silent as we all stare at Grinder and his nonexistent filter. To be honest, I don't even want to know where he got breast milk because the opportunities for him are endless. "Here's the thing." Grinder pushes his tokens to the middle of the table then looks at his cards, all the while explaining the benefits...or not, of human breast milk consumption. "It's not as healthy as social media gurus like to tell us."

"Tell you , maybe. I've never fucking heard of anyone saying anything about drinking some poor woman's milk." Shade is shaking his head, probably just as done with this conversation as we all are. "But I do know, this is not a conversation I wanna have while you do your abra-fucking-cadabra shit and taking all of our money." Grinder's specialty is getting us distracted during the games so he can cheat his way through the deck. Sometimes he gets us so fucking drunk we just hand him over our money without realizing what the fuck is happening. Not tonight, Satan. Not tonight. There's a no alcohol rule for me and Bear since we're handling the baby, and the others have barely started on their beers. He can't dupe us when we're sober.

I don't think...

"No shit. Quit ya yappin' and fuckin' play." Boner's laughing as he kicks Grinder's knees under the poker table.

"Y'all are lacking some basic cultural shit." Ignoring Grinder's tsking, I fold and get up because that baby ain't gonna change itself.

"Come on, Bear. Gotta clean him up or else he's gonna get a rash." Bear grunts at my words but hands him over anyway. No way would he risk the baby's well being.

“I want him back.” I don’t think my best friend understands that Gryff’s mine.

“Don’t get greedy, Brother. I wouldn’t want to have to revoke all privileges.” I have to swallow my chuckle when I hear Bear growl behind me.

Gryffin stirs, the first signs of his unhappiness beginning with a whimper, until I bring him to my chest, his ear to my heart, and soothe him with my voice.

“Hey, little Nugget. Time to change that stinky diaper.” We’ve equipped all of the common bathrooms with changing tables because I’m too fucking lazy to go up to the suite to change him. It’s time efficient and one thing’s for sure: when you’re a new parent, it’s all about the least amount of unnecessary effort and making sure our lives are easier. It helps that we have so many people around willing and able to babysit.

Placing Gryff on the table, I lean over and kiss his forehead as he squirms, his legs and arms pumping like he’s ready for the baby Olympics.

“Whatcha doin’, little Nugget?” Popping the buttons to his onesie, I take both ankles with one hand and lift his tiny butt to push the fabric up and back. “Dang, that’s some potent poop you’ve got there.” I’m surprised how easily I can auto censor my language and how quickly it goes back to normal when I speak to my brothers or Cherry.

I make quick work of changing his diaper and just before I close up the adhesive tapes, I kiss his little belly and inhale his fresh, clean baby scent. Fuck, it never gets old.

“Hey, Psycho. You’ve got a text from Mac.” Bear holds out my phone since I didn’t think to bring it with me.

“Hold up a second, let me get his clothes back on.” I love that Mackenzie uses a

diaper rash cream that doesn't have a fragrance, I'd hate for anything to take away from his natural scent.

Before grabbing my phone, I finish up with Gryff and kiss his neck as he starts pulling his head to the right, searching out the nipple. "I gotchu, little Nugget, hold on, now." Smiling, I grab my phone, activating the screen with my thumb.

With Gryff resting against my chest, I open up Mackenzie's message thread, expecting her to tell me she's coming home later than planned. It's fine. I mean, she deserves some time to herself where her only worry is how many shots she can do before her head explodes.

To be fair, I'm sure she won't drink but a glass, maybe two, so it doesn't stay too long in her milk. We've got enough in the fridge that she doesn't need to pump until tomorrow so, no worries there.

Except when I read her message, every hair on my body stands on end.

"What the fuck?"

"Dude, the baby." Bear hears the urgency in my tone and he's right there, taking Gryff so I can get into action mode.

Cherry: Emily crazy.back of black car East from Rockford Drive help.

"Are you reading what I'm reading?" I angle my phone so Bear can see the message, hoping I'm freaking out over absolutely nothing. Wouldn't be the first time and, knowing me, it won't be the last. Especially with Gryff taking such a big part in our lives.

"Pull up her tracker and find her. That's her warning you about something. Take the

guys, too, I'll stay with Gryff." As if to protect him from anything and everything, Bear places one of his huge hands at the back of Gryff's head and takes a step back.

"Come on." I call out my order as if Bear needed any more prompting, but saying the words helps me organize my thoughts. All the while, I'm pulling up Mackenzie's tracker but getting nothing. I'm guessing she sent that message early on and they've since found it. They...she said Emily.

I fucking knew I didn't trust that woman. Damn it!

"Violet, I need you to take Ninja and Bandit, put them back in our suite and heat up Gryff's milk like we did before and give it to Bear." Taking my suite key out of my pocket, I hand it and our little rats to Violet, happy she's taking my demands seriously as she scurries up the stairs with them.

"The fuck's goin' on?" Shade is already on his feet. He knows I only get this way when it comes to Mackenzie, and since Vanessa's with my wife, he's instantly on high alert.

"Hey! What's this shit?" We all whip around at the sound of Hoops in the rec room, followed by Crow and Axle. None of us answer and he doesn't wait to continue. "Candie just called saying they found Sabrina and Vanessa passed out in the private room at the club, Mac and Darlene are nowhere to be found."

"Fuck!" I hold back my roar because I'm not about to transfer my anxiety onto my son. "Kincaid, Grinder, Boner..." I look around. "Where the fuck is Sledge?"

"What's up, matey?" As if summoned by the fucking god of war, Sledge strolls in with a satisfied grin on his face.

"Let's go. Mackenzie's in trouble." I don't need to tell them more but I do pull up my

second tracker: the wedding ring.

As soon as Glitch suggested I put some kind of fancy pants tracker inside her ring, my first reaction was hell fucking yeah and why didn't I think of it first? For a brief second, however, I had second thoughts, afraid my Cherry Pie would blow a fucking gasket. Right now, though? I'm considering naming our second born "Glitch." Do I understand the nanotech shit happening on my phone? No, I do not. Do I need to understand? Also, no. The only thing that matters is that her red dot is moving and I can follow.

"Gotcha! Come on!" We don't bother getting all leathered up. Most of us are in jeans so we grab our cuts and run for our bikes.

"She's heading East on Oleander." I'm scanning the map as I make my way to the bike.

"You all come with me, we're going to Rocks Off." Behind me, Hoops calls out his own orders as we all get up on our bikes and ready to get our women.

With my phone popped into the holder, I'm following the tracker toward the outskirts of town. As fast as we're going, we seem to be catching up to them but not knowing the final destination makes me nervous. No, it terrifies me because I have an idea of where they may be headed and there is no scenario where that ends well.

Lowering my head behind the bike's windshield, I give a flick of my wrist, downshift once, then let her rip while mentally flipping off law enforcement. Even if they try to follow us, I'd leave them in the dust within minutes. Hell, they know my bike and my plates, they can come pick me up at the compound once I've got my wife safe in my arms.

The next time I look down, I notice the tracker has stopped and, fucking hell, they are

exactly where I anticipated. Behind me, my crew is following in formation as though I'm their president. Not because I outrank them, I definitely don't, but because I'm the one most eager to get my Cherry Pie home to our son.

Thankfully, Gryff is safe with Bear so that's one less worry I need to think about.

As we take the turn off Gordon Road, I have to follow the map from the tracking app because I'm not familiar with this part of the Rockford Beach International Airport. Usually, to drop off or pick up, we use Airport Road, but Emily is taking them to the private runway, which can only mean one thing.

She's trying to kidnap my wife and holy fuck, the heat of rage that travels up my spine transfers to my bike because just as I turn onto Aviation Drive, I see the fucking black car and a Cessna, probably M2, all engines on. As we get close enough, the stairs are pulling up the front, seconds away from getting airtight, which means they're ready to take off any minute.

We're still too far away and by the time we're close enough that I can see the shadows inside the porthole windows, the small, probably six or seven seater, is already moving forward.

If that plane takes off, I might lose my Cherry Pie forever and that cannot...no, that will not happen. Not ever again. And this bitch, Emily, will not be the reason my son grows up without a mother. Fuck that. And fuck them for thinking I wouldn't go to the ends of the world to get her back.

I'm at the tail end, the plane picking up speed, but I'm not sure what to do here. At this point, I could easily pass the Cessna and force it to a stop, but that's assuming they will fucking stop. My other option is to force it to stop by any means. Once that plane is in the air, it's game over.

Squeezing Philia with my thighs to keep her steady, I reach back and pull out the gun from my holster. I'm right handed, right eyed, which means my holster is too, so letting go of the throttle makes me lose precious seconds on the plane's speed.

As soon as I'm holding the gun with my left hand, I pray to all the fucking gods that I don't fuck this up. Kincaid and Sledge are on one side of the plane and Grinder, Boner and I are on the other. With me slowing down, they both pass me by, and once they're out of range, I shoot the first shot.

Obviously, I don't want the plane to fucking explode, but I also do not want it to take off so I aim for the fuselage, which means the entire middle length of the plane is fair game. I just need to make sure I don't accidentally shoot Mackenzie or Darlene, and with zero visibility, that risk is real. My boys do the same and Kincaid gets original, shooting out the front tire. It's Boner's last bullet that catches the wing on fire, causing my heart to stop beating and scaring the fuck out of me.

As we're speeding alongside the plane, it doesn't seem it, but we are already going well over a hundred and fifty miles per hour and I'm guessing they were reaching take-off speeds. When the tire blows out, the plane skids to the side and we all have to get creative to pull on the brakes and avoid getting trampled by the fucking Cessna.

Grinder peels to a stop while Kincaid burns a neat half circle before coming to a complete halt. I'm not sure what the others do because I'm suddenly gliding sideways, my jeans burning across the tarmac and my leather cut protecting me from some serious injuries. The sparks are all around me with the side of the bike scraping against asphalt. I release both handlebars and let myself get dragged by the velocity of the fall across the grass on the side of the runway.

Once the plane is no longer moving, I ignore the pain that'll no doubt catch up to me later and run like a fucking madman to the plane.

At the top of my lungs, I make my fury known.

“I will blow this fucking plane up to kingdom come before I let you take my wife.
Get out, now, or you all fucking die.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Mackenzie

Who the fuck have I been spending time with over the last ten months? Because Emily Beaufort is like a whole other person right now, kneeling at her husband's feet with her palms resting against her thighs and her head lowered while he glares at my mom in silence with the creepiest grin on his face. Mom is also silent, her eyes closed and her breaths uneven. She's trying so hard to stay calm, but it won't be long until she breaks. There was a restraining order against this man after he made her life Hell once before.

I need to get us off this fucking plane.

"Why are you here?" I whisper to Ryan, who is sitting next to me, hoping the law-abiding man I thought I knew is still in there. The fact that he's here at all is fucking insane, but he's quietly obeyed the orders Harrison Beaufort has given him so far without question.

The car ride over here was only the beginning. He was like a stone wall, didn't even turn to acknowledge me or Mom. If Emily hadn't made sure we saw the gun in her hand, I would've made an escape attempt before now. But from experience, getting shot fucking hurts and I'm not risking my life like that again if I can help it. I have too much to live for now.

My son won't grow up without one of his parents.

Ryan's ignoring me and I'm desperately trying to figure out how to get these handcuffs off. Maybe then I can grab the gun Ryan's holding at his side and get the fuck off this plane before it takes off.

"Ryan?" I whisper again.

"I told you to be quiet, girl." Harrison stands, but not before stroking Emily's head like a dog. Long gone is the confident woman I thought I knew.

Mom whimpers when he moves closer to her and presses his palm against her shoulder. It does something I can't quite explain to my insides.

"Yes, you have. And you've got us trapped in this sardine box so...what now? What's the whole evil villain plan you've got going on here?" I smile internally as he moves away from Mom, coming to tower over me instead.

"You talk too much for a woman. Your brother told me that you needed a beating every now and then to keep you in your place. Is that what you need, little girl?" He begins unbuckling his belt and his sinister sneer reminds me so much of Jake, it makes more sense that he was such a psychopath.

"You said she was mine, Mr. Beaufort." Holy shit on a stick, Ryan can talk.

Wait...

"What?" I spin my head toward Ryan, who stands from his seat beside me and is now at eye level with Harrison.

"Well keep your woman in check then, Ryan. I can call The Firm and have you kicked out just as quickly as you were accepted."

What in the actual fuck are they talking about?

“Of course, Mr. Beaufort, sir.” Ryan glares at me, but there’s a hint of apology in his eyes so I think this could work in my favor somehow. “Behave, Mackenzie. He outranks me, so he can punish you when he sees fit. Just stay quiet and it’ll all be okay.”

“You need to be firmer. Never explain yourself to a woman.” Harrison shakes his head and re-buckles his belt before taking his seat once more. “Emily, lick my shoes.” She follows his instructions and I’m trying to not gag at the sight. “See? No reason given, and look how well she listens.” Bending down, he grips Emily’s chin and roughly pulls her mouth to his. But it doesn’t look like the fun kind of rough. Then he simply shoves her aside, where she resumes her submissive pose.

“I’ll have to get Darlene trained to an acceptable standard.” It’s not easy to stay silent, but he’s doing what I asked and giving his villainous speech, so I’m gonna let him continue while I wrack my brain for an escape route before the plane starts moving. Harrison turns his attention to Mom, who still has her eyes closed and her cuffed hands fisted. “It would have been easier if you didn’t run from me years ago. Breaking the younger version of you would have been a much sweeter treat. But alas, you got away...” He chuckles, and I’m positive he’s talking to himself at this point because his captive audience doesn’t really give a shit. “The fates had a different idea because our son found me, my love. He told me everything. So of course, I had to arrange a little accident for your husband, and the drugs I provided kept you in one place. You were nice and pliable every time I paid you a visit.”

My whole body trembles with the need to kill this man. It’s as strong as my need to kill my brother, and I did that...but like with Jake, I need to do this right. I’ve learned my lesson that spontaneity is not my friend. Which means no outbursts, no matter how difficult that is.

“It just so happens you lived in the perfect little town for me to experiment with. You’d be surprised at how many people are willing to sell drugs or break the law for a little extra money.” Harrison huffs a laugh. “Peasants are all the fucking same. Easily addicted to a quick thrill, even though it’s dangerous. Then there’s the ones who like to think they’re a part of the solution, buying the antidote to the problem I created in the first place...ha fucking idiots. So I’m making more than enough for us to live out our lives on my new island...”

“Are you going to behave?” Ryan’s whispered words revolt me but I suppress the shiver that begs to roll through my body and use this as an advantage.

Gritting my teeth, I sigh heavily and lean into Ryan, resting my head against his bicep. I feel him flinch a little but he quickly relaxes into it as Harrison continues his little rant that I’m blanking out as much as possible.

I nod, reaching my cuffed hands up and stroking his arm, but I make it look awkward as hell.

“Ryan, the cuffs hurt. Could you loosen them, just a little?” Tilting my head up, I look through my lashes and he scowls.

“I’m not dumb, Mackenzie. You know I can’t do that.”

“STOP!” Mom’s scream makes me jump and I twist in my seat to see her hands in her hair, twisting huge clumps, her head bowed as she rocks in her seat.

“Oh, Darlene. There’s that feisty girl I remember from all those years ago.” Harrison moves so quickly, backhanding Mom once, twice, and a third time before she passes out.

“Get your filthy fucking hands off my Mom!” I struggle with my seatbelt, finally

getting it undone, and stand. As soon as I do, I realize what a mistake it was, but there's only so long I can hold back on my instinct here.

"Who the fuck do you think you are, little girl?" Harrison turns that backhand on me, impacting my cheek and knocking me to the floor. My face heats and I hold my palm up to my cheek. It's going to bruise. "Ryan may be your new master, but your mother belongs to me. Which means you also belong to me, and I won't tolerate disobedience." He's towering over me, his belt off, and he whips it down across my back, the buckle making me scream out on impact.

I'm at a disadvantage here and I need to be smarter.

The belt swooshes through the air once more, and I can't contain the scream again as it whacks against the same spot on my back as last time.

"Mr. Beaufort, c'mon. Let me deal with her when we arrive. You said there's a trainer The Firm uses sometimes, we'll get him to come to the island and she'll be the perfect submissive in no time." Ryan stands between me and the next hit from Harrison's belt.

"Do you hear that, girl? Your new master is taking responsibility for you. Aren't you a lucky little slave?" Harrison sits back down with Emily still at his feet. "Last warning for her, Ryan. Keep. Her. In. Line."

My blood is boiling with rage and hatred, but Ryan's obsession with me is my only advantage at this point.

"Yes, Mr. Beaufort, sir." He turns to me, dragging me up by the arm, but it's not painful, just forceful. "Please sit and be quiet. This isn't the biker compound you've been living in, Mac. This is the real world. If you'd just said yes to being mine in the first place, things wouldn't have gone this far."

I want to rip his face off as he carefully sits me down in my seat, but I'm getting the gist of what's going on here, so I play the perfect little submissive and furrow my brow with worry.

"I'm so sorry, Ryan. I agree. Thank you." The words taste like acid on my tongue, but I say them anyway, resting my head against his bicep again when he sits beside me.

"For what?"

Hook...

Line...

"For saving me."

"Really? I knew it. I knew that place was bad for you. It's okay now. I have you." Sinker.

He drapes his arm across my shoulders, using his hand to pull me closer, and I have to resist the very real urge to gag.

Instead of asking, this time I rub gently at my wrists, hissing quietly in pretend pain. I carefully scratch the cuffs over my skin though, to leave visible marks for Ryan to see. The scream of motorcycle engines reaches my ears. It's faint over the noise from the plane, but it's there, and I fight the urge to jump for joy. We're not out of this yet.

The plane begins moving then, without warning, and my heart drops to my stomach. Fuck . Time isn't on my side here.

I hear Harrison grumbling something about hurrying the fuck up, but I ignore it,

playing up the pain in my wrists a little more. It's useless, Ryan doesn't say another word, but Harrison gets up and walks to the cockpit, telling the pilot off for taking so long.

This is it. I need to do something now, before this plane takes off, and it needs to work.

Harrison hasn't got a weapon that I can see, and Ryan's gun is back in his holster against his ribs. I don't think I can grab it, but I have a pretty good feeling that he won't use it on me.

Standing quickly, because Ryan didn't put my seatbelt back on, I rush over to where Emily is still kneeling and tear out the hair bodkin from her neatly coiffed bun.

“What the fuc—”

I stab Harrison in the eye with one of the sticks, the easiest and softest place I can do real damage with what I have. Grinder told me that I should always aim for the eyes because even if they don't die, they're blinded for life. Hopefully I've shoved it in far enough that he does die quite quickly. He yells, Emily screams, Ryan stands and grips his gun. Out of nowhere, Mom is tackling Ryan just as pop pop pop sounds are hitting the side of the plane. She grabs his weapon, pointing it at the wailing Harrison, and shoots, right before an explosion causes the plane to veer off the tarmac. A few more shots go off, the screaming doesn't stop, and I lose my struggle to stay standing, being thrown to the other side of the plane and landing on a now-very-dead Harrison, bleeding out.

I need to get to Mom. She's been knocked unconscious by something, and the gun is beneath her. I'm hoping she's only unconscious anyway because I can't deal with any other outcome.

“What are you doing, Kenz? You said you’d be mine.” Ryan tries to grab me as I step over him to get to Mom, and the first thing I do is check her pulse. Thank fuck for that. She’s alive. Now I need to keep myself alive too because I need my boys. They need me. There are no other options.

My gaze catches on the wing outside the window as the flames erupt as if by magic, but I refuse to be distracted so I reach for the gun and point it at Ryan. As far as I can tell, he’s been doing Harrison’s dirty work because he’s a fucking simp for his lifestyle and was promised he could own me. Ha. No.

“Fuck this shit!” The pilot suddenly appears, his hands in the air and he opens the door, letting the stairs down and being shoved to the ground in his attempt to escape the charging Sons of Khaos.

My man and his brothers barge onto the plane, making the space look even smaller than before, and Aleko’s eyes immediately find mine.

He wastes no time in stalking toward me, purpose in every step, before he grips the back of my head, my hair tangled between his long fingers, and kisses me so hard my lips bruise. Pulling back, but still with his hold in my hair, the smirk that makes all my dreams come true spreads across his face, and yeah, he raises that damn brow.

“Going on our honeymoon without me, Cherry baby?”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Aleko

I wish we had the time to make jokes and torture these fucking pricks but there's a wing on fire and the gas tank ain't far behind.

"Come on, everyone off the fucking plane. Now!" I'm staring at Harrison's dead body, something sticking out of his eye and clearly lodged in his brain, and wish I could bring him back to life just so I could kill this motherfucker all over again.

But that's all right. I've got Ryan over here I can play with.

The brothers get Darlene and Emily down the stairs and I have to push my Cherry off on Grinder so I can force Ryan off. I can't believe I'm trying to save his life.

"I don't have to tell you what's about to happen here, do I?" As a fireman, he knows the dangers of playing with fire.

"No, you don't. You also don't need to tell me what it feels like to have Kenz. She told me she's mine, you realize that, right? She's fucking terrified of you." Oh, for fuck's sake. Is this guy for real?

"Look, have it your way." Prez once told me, you can only save those who want to save themselves and, to be honest, I couldn't care in the least if he lives or dies.

Turning on my heel, I jog out down the aisle and practically jump off the five steps in

one go, then I sprint as fast as I possibly can.

Everyone I love is off the runway and sitting, safely, on the grass. My running speeds up as Mackenzie breaks free from Grinder, who scowls like she's just ruined his life, and heads straight into my arms.

Like in the movies, the plane behind me explodes into a ball of heat at my back just as my Cherry jumps on me, arms and legs wrapped around my neck and waist. Unlike the movies, the sheer blowback from the explosion propels me forward and we both fall into a heap on the grass.

"Fuck me, Cherry baby. Your love is like a bomb!"

"You're so cheesy, Aleko. And ouch, that hurt." I'm not stupid enough to tell her that if she'd stayed with Grinder, she'd be fine right now. Besides, she's in my arms where she belongs and that's all I need to know.

"Did your fireman get out?" When I ran out, I didn't look back so I have no idea if the guy was following me.

"Yeah, he's passed out on the tarmac." The lack of emotion in her tone makes me chuckle. Damn, she's hardcore.

Fucking perfect.

"I swear, this kid eats more than you do." Mackenzie has been seen by the doc, her wounds tended to, and now I'm watching my son nursing on my wife's breast. It's the most soothing image ever. Despite wanting to turn back time so I can kill Harrison Beaufort myself for daring to put his fucking hands on my old lady, I couldn't have asked for a better outcome.

“Then he’ll be just fine.” I grin, a cherry sucker in my mouth and a burning love for my family in my heart.

Earlier tonight, we hightailed it out of there within minutes of the explosion, knowing the police would already be on their way, the fire department’s wailing siren dangerously close. Mackenzie insisted that she check on Ryan, her EMT training kicking in. But as soon as we ran up to him, the piece of metal stuck in the back of his head told us everything we needed to know.

With no other choice, we got on our bikes and came home. I’m sure we’ll get some kind of visit from Celia Shipman and her sheriff’s department, but until then, we’re just going to enjoy this time together.

Emily stayed back, shocked and catatonic. We couldn’t put her on a bike, it would have been too dangerous. Mackenzie feels bad, thinks we should have tried harder, but fuck that. The woman kidnapped my wife. I don’t give two fucks what happens to her.

I mean, sure, she could very well tell the police Mackenzie killed that fucker, but from the look on her face after Grinder whispered in her ear, I think she’s going to shut her mouth and leave us out of it.

“Look, he fell asleep while he was eating.” I’m already watching him, I can’t take my eyes off him.

“Smart kid.”

“You’re impossible.” I grin at Cherry’s words, knowing impossible is code for awesome.

I watch in silence as she so naturally takes care of our baby, the way she holds him

and the ease with which she feeds him. I've never seen anything more beautiful.

"Hey, babe?" Her whisper pulls me out of my admiration.

"Yeah?"

"I'm just now remembering...in the plane, Beaufort was giving his evil villain speech and he mentioned The Firm? Does that mean anything to you?" There are two big things wrong with this conversation, the big one being...why is she thinking about Beaufort while we're here in our little safe bubble.

"Never heard of it." Leaning in, I kiss her shoulder and whisper. "We'll deal with all things Beaufort and the aftermath of it all later. Right now, enjoy this time with us."

And we do until my need for her is almost too much to ignore.

"Here," I tell her, rolling off the bed gentle as can be. "I'll put him back into his bassinet." Wearing only my briefs, I walk around the bed and take my conked out son in my arms, his head to my nose. I'll never get enough of his baby scent but, right now, I need to make sure my wife is okay.

Without rocking him too much, I place Gryff in his cozy little bed and make sure his fingers are tucked into his tiny pajamas so he doesn't scratch himself. In the last month, I've learned more than I have in ten years. Babies are a full-time job for us both and I fucking love it. Being in the club and raising a kid won't be easy and probably not acceptable in the eyes of most people, but we're not most people.

We're Psycho and Cherry, raising our Gryffin with every ounce of love we have.

"I know that look." She does, and she's spot on.

With a grin wide as can be, I turn off the light and let the room bathe in the nightlight we installed so we could look at the baby without using our phones or turning on the overhead.

“Yes, you do.”

Covering her with my body, I glide my lips across hers and slide my tongue inside her mouth. My sucker is long gone but we share the taste of it for as long as the kiss lasts.

Her greedy little hands at the front of my briefs, Cherry pushes the fabric down and pulls out my cock—hard and aching for her.

“Aleko.” My name on her lips is like water to a parched mouth. It soothes and heals me, makes my heart swell to twice its size.

“Mackenzie,” I whisper back, but I don’t push inside her, afraid it might be too early for sex. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’m fine. Be gentle and make love to me.” Well, it’s impossible to say no to my Cherry. Reaching down to wrap my fingers around my shaft, I slowly, oh so fucking gently, slide my dick inside her hot, wet pussy, one excruciating inch at a time. It’s been a month since I’ve been able to feel her, to be inside her. To be one with her. It’s not just about the sex—okay, that part is fucking amazing—it’s about the connection to her. The way our bodies come together like they were created for one another. Not having that for four weeks was its own type of Hell on Earth.

“Thank you for giving me a family, Cherry baby.” My hips don’t snap, they move like waves crashing on the shore every time I bottom out inside her.

“You...you saved me.” Fuck, her words do things to me. My club saved my life but

Mackenzie and Gryff saved my soul.

We make love, in silence and with a softness we've never experienced before, until the need to come gets the better of us.

With a gasp, my Cherry squeezes my cock just as I feel myself losing control. Well aware that, right now, she's primed for pregnancy again, I quickly pull out and come all over her belly. Jets of my cum land over her skin and once I'm finished, I roll to my side and spread my seed over her sweat-beaded flesh.

In my state of post-nut clarity, I can't help but think back on all the things we've gone through together. We've fought hard for each other, both against outside forces and between the two of us. We clawed our way through Hell and, somehow, managed to come out the other side more in love with each other than we had been at the start. We got a pet together, we moved in together, we made a home together, we made a whole ass human together.

There isn't another human on this planet I could imagine doing half of that shit with, let alone all of it.

Mackenzie owns me in my entirety, heart and soul, for this life and however many come after it.

"I love you, Cherry baby." Her wide grin tells me everything I need to know.

Our lifestyle may be different, but she wouldn't trade it for the world.

Fuck, she's perfect.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:47 am

Bear

Three months later

After the Beaufort plane incident, the sheriff's office rounded up Psycho, Grinder, and Boner since they were caught on video, clear as day. Our girl Kincaid was smart enough to avoid getting caught. Celia Shipman had found Emily on the tarmac, without a scratch on her, in a catatonic state.

No one talked. No one ratted. Our lawyers were able to get the case thrown out on account of the kidnapping, and since Beaufort's body was never identified, Mac was in the clear for manslaughter.

Grinder and Boner, who practically smiled at the fucking camera, stayed longer than Psycho, who was smart enough to be on the other side of the plane, hidden from the cameras.

All in all, the club did okay. We got our girls and no one on our side was hurt.

Emily? Well, that's a whole other can of worms.

From what Mac told us, she was a victim too. Sure, it was in a different way, but still, we don't fuck with innocents and because she'd been mindfucked, we decided she deserved a reprieve. Now, if she comes back after us, that's a different story altogether.

"All right, settle down, we've got business to discuss and the number of pussies you

taste-tested this weekend, Sledge, ain't on the schedule." Hoops smacks the gavel on the solid oak wood table, getting everyone's attention. Fucking finally. This group is missing a few brain cells from way too much partying.

"Well, it fuckin' should be." Even when he mutters, Sledge's Brit accent comes in loud and clear. But Hoops is right, we've got business to address and the sooner we get to it, the better.

"My Cherry Pie wants to ride later. You in?" Psycho hands me our pet rat, Ninja, while Bandit runs laps around the table, stopping every time someone hands her a snack. I say "our" because even though the rats are technically Psycho's, we all get to play with and take care of them.

"Sure." We fist bump, knowing we'll be having fun after Church is done.

"First order of business, let's give an official big welcome home to our boys who spent almost two months in County. Grinder and Boner, livin' it up behind bars." Everyone cheers as the two best friends put on a big show with the bowing and the crotch thrusting.

"Thank you, thank you. It's good to be back, brothers. Dick in jail ain't what it used to be." And...we all groan. Fucking hell, that guy's visuals always hit front and center.

"Christ, that's just..." Yeah, we're all Shade right now. Speechless.

"I'm serious, they're getting younger and younger and I'm sorry, I'm not into jailbait." Cue in the collective groan yet again.

"Dude, stop." Boner's rubbing the bottom of his eyes as if wiping tears away. "They called you The Meat Grinder." That's when the table erupts in laughter as Grinder just shrugs and sits back down, ready to work.

“Okay, enough. Boner, what’s the update on your cousin, Jed?” Hoops gives the floor to Boner, and just like that, we’re serious and listening. As the new Secretary, Crow is furiously taking notes and I have to fight the urge to chuckle. Nobody ever reads them, but it only takes one time of having to check on something for bad minute-taking to bite you in the ass.

“Yeah, so I’ve been in touch with him on and off. He even came to visit in County about a month ago. Said nothing’s happened and everything seems quiet up there. He got the insurance for the repairs and our stock has been put back. It’s business as usual. As far as the graffiti is concerned, we’re thinking it was a prank, it’s the only thing that makes sense.” Everyone around the table nods just as Ninja nestles into the pocket of my cut. Poor little thing seems tired all the time when compared to Bandit, who runs around like she’s on speed.

“What do y’all think?” At Hoops’s question, we all take a second to reflect. One by one, the brothers agree that it’s been over six months since the warehouse fire and something would’ve happened by now if it was meant for us.

Personally, I’m not sure, but I’m just an overthinker when it comes to these things. I’ve never met a coincidence that sat well with my gut. Not a one. But I nod anyway because my sixth sense freaks everyone out, and right now, I’m not sure of myself.

“Okay, but let’s err this side of caution, we ain’t got brothers to spare.” Sledge nods to Hoops as they silently decide to move to the next topic.

“Bear, Psycho, did y’all look into this Firm thing?” I let Psycho answer Hoops since he’s taking lead on this.

“It’s a dead end for now. Called Glitch up in New York and he’s working on it, sending out feelers in the dark web or some shit, but as of right now, we got nothing. On a positive note, Mancini is apparently ruling that bunch of assholes with an iron fist, so that takes the heat away from us.”

“Why don’t we have our own Glitchmeister?” All heads turn to Grinder because he’s right, it’s definitely time to find someone to work on our techy shit.

“Here, here.” Boner fist bumps Grinder and we all agree.

“Get on it. Find us someone we can prospect.” Hoops points a finger to Grinder and Boner then looks to Crow and Axle. “What’s the sheriff saying about the drugs? Do we still have something to worry about?”

“Nah, with Beaufort’s death and the board taking over Risus Pharma, the pills have disappeared like fucking magic.” We all sigh with relief, and for a brief second, I think of Python who lost his life because Harrison Beaufort wanted to get richer than he already was.

I hate greedy motherfuckers.

“Fucking finally. All right, so we need to discuss Christmas.” Crow slams his notebook shut to get everyone’s attention.

“Fuck yeah!” Grinder leans in as his lips spread into a huge smile. “Favorite holiday ever. Well, second to Halloween, of course.”

Crow ignores him and continues talking. “Vanessa and the ladies want to organize a Christmas run for the kids of Rockford Beach. With everything that happened in recent months, she feels we need to give back to the community. Make them feel safe.”

Yeah, she’s right. We need some good PR for damn sure.

“So,” Crow continues after a dramatic pause. “We’ve all been volunteered to distribute presents to kids whose parents can’t afford to put much under the tree...” Opening his notebook back up, he flips through the pages and mumbles, “Got it.

December twenty-second, four to six. We're closing off two blocks on either side of the pier so only pedestrians have access for those two hours. They're setting up activities, stands, face painting and I don't fucking know what else..."

"Hell yeah, I've got dibs on the slutty nurse!" Grinder's serious, which begs the question...

"What slutty nurse?" Psycho and I both ask at the same time.

"Uh, me. Duh." I think he's confused.

"You putting on a blonde wig, too?" Boner's looking him up and down, nodding as if he's liking the idea more and more.

"That's sexist. I meant a male nurse. And by the way, we shouldn't have to differentiate. A nurse is a nurse is a nurse. But the slutty part is important, I want to show off my new jail buffness." Doing his best impression of Popeye, Grinder kisses his biceps as he flexes.

Someone needs to tell him he missed Halloween and his only option is to dress up as slutty Santa.

"Aaand...Church is over." Hoops bangs the gavel and shakes his head at our antics. "Prez was a saint with y'all."

"That he was, Brother. That he fucking was." And I mean it. He is missed every fucking day but Hoops is filling his shoes nicely...he just needs a little more experience and a whole lot of patience.

I fucking love riding. The freedom, the wind, the way my mind is focused on one thing only. It's a great way to wind down and let go of our demons.

Psycho whizzes by on his back wheel, giving me the middle finger as I laugh inside my helmet. That fucker has fifty lives and takes them all for granted. I'm less about the stunts and more about the speed. With a body size like mine, you can't go around testing the limits of man-made machines and not expect to get hurt.

Speed though? That's all right. It's cathartic, even.

Before I let loose the throttle, Mac rides up beside me on her new-ish bike, Scarlett. The red is fucking visible all way to Georgia but apparently nobody cares about that. Least of all, her.

"One on one?" I taunt her, nodding at the straight line ahead.

"Fuck yeah!" Mac is like a sister to me, especially since Psycho is the closest thing I have to a real brother.

Knowing she's got the advantage of being a top-notch racer, I don't count down, I just fly before she's ready. Gotta get my advantages where I can, right?

I'm about to get passed by Mac when something catches my eye up ahead on the side of the road.

My gut tells me to slow down. To stop. To park my bike and to make sure everything is alright. It's how my mama raised me. When you see someone in need, you give what you can, even if it's only advice.

"Hey, you doin' alright? Need some help?" I make my presence known way before I get to the hood of the car that's parked on the side of the road. White smoke is billowing from the beneath the metal and I can't actually see the person yet.

"I'm fine." Oh fuck.

I have a thing about voices. The breathy, deep sound of a woman who thanks you for an orgasm comes to mind immediately, and when I get to the front of the hood, my entire body freezes up.

Holy fuck. Legs for days and an ass made for biting is all I see until she places both of her hands on the hood and looks up, up, up at me.

My first concern is her messy bun about to fall apart and into the fan or the belt or any number of places that could be problematic.

My second thought is...

How do I make her mine?

Mackenzie and Aleko have their happily ever after, but what about the rest of the brothers we hear you ask? Well... Bear's story is next from the Sons of Khaos.