



Rebel (Dark Slayers MC #23)

Author: *Aria Ray*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: I came home to save my family's business. Now I'm being hunted, and the only one who can save me is a gruff, tattooed biker—with a smart mouth and a serious authority problem.

My father's illness pulls me back to my hometown, forcing me to take over our struggling electrical company. I have no choice but to rely on Rebel—reckless, impossible, and the best damn electrician in town. He makes it clear—he works with me, not for me. We clash over everything, but every fight leaves me wanting more.

Then the break-ins start. My office. My home. Someone's after me, and the police don't care. Rebel does. Fierce and unyielding, he drags me into his world of leather, loyalty, and rules I don't understand.

But just when I start to believe in him—in us—my past comes knocking, dangerous and unhinged. Now Rebel isn't just fighting for my business—he's fighting for my life.

And I'm not sure my heart will survive either way.

"Rebel" is the 23rd book in the "Dark Slayers MC" hot and alluring romance series featuring bikers who will remind you why you like the bad boys so much. They're protective, rough, and running on pure diesel and adrenaline. Each book in the series is a standalone with a guaranteed happily ever after for the couple, though it is recommended to read them in order for maximum enjoyment.

Total Pages (Source): 28

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Rebel

I stomped into the clubhouse, frustrated as hell, and claimed my regular seat at the bar. Not that prospects like me had regular seats. But this was simply the seat I claimed when no one else was sitting in it. I wouldn't fight a brother over this seat—even if it was my favorite. I ran one hand through my shoulder-length hair, wondering what the hell was going on in my head that made me think about shit like this.

Rosie gave me a knowing grin. “Let me guess, you got another penalty for paying your business taxes late again?”

I snorted a laugh. “Good guess, but no. It's only because they're not due yet. There's still plenty of time for me to screw that up between now and then.”

“You're terrible at handling the paperwork for your business. Did you ever think about hiring someone?” She pulled out an ice-cold bottle of my favorite beer, handed it to me, and then leaned on the bar with her chin in her upturned hand looking all kinds of cute. Thunder snatched up Rosie almost the very minute she walked through the door years ago. He was always bragging about it and that made me envious of his luck in getting such a perfect woman to dedicate herself to him.

Snapping out of my angst over not having an old lady who adored me, I grumbled, “I can't afford to hire anyone. My mother passed away last year, and it takes everything I earn to keep home workers in place for my grandmother. Hiring someone to keep my books is out of the question.”

“I’m sorry about your mother. Your grandmother is lucky to have a grandson like you looking out for her.”

I didn’t want to talk about that, because I felt guilty that I wasn’t able to take better care of her. So, I steered the subject back to what had put me in a bad mood, “Keep guessing, beautiful.”

Tapping the nails of her other hand on the counter, she appeared to be thinking real hard. “You didn’t get another ticket for hauling an oversized load in your pick-up truck, did you?”

“Nope,” I told her with a grin. I genuinely liked Rosie as a person. Of course everyone here loved her because she was so friendly and nice. As far as my club brothers’ old ladies went, she outshone all the rest. “Keep going,” I told her. “Because when you finally get it, you’re gonna kick yourself because it’s so obvious.”

Thunder came strutting into the bar from the back where the club offices were located, clearly keen on spoiling our fun. “You had to rewire another job after Livingstone Electrical fucked up again.”

Pointing the end of my beer bottle at the lucky bastard who claimed Rosie before I had a chance to even meet her, I said, “Bingo. It’s the third time this month.”

Thunder dropped down onto a barstool beside me, his brow creased. “You know Livingstone did all the electrical work on this clubhouse several years ago when we had to rebuild after the fire. Old man Livingstone knew every damn thing there was to know about electrical services.”

“That was before my time, but it looks like that old man fucking forgot everything he ever knew about wiring a damn house. It’s getting so bad, their customers don’t even

trust them to fix their own mistakes for free. They'd rather call me and pay me to do it all over again and sue Livingstone to get a refund."

"That doesn't begin to fucking make sense to me," he grumbled.

When Rosie leaned over the bar and gave him a cold beer and a kiss, he accepted both gratefully. When she tried to pull back, he wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and tugged her close for another more lingering kiss. Truth be told, I wasn't really jealous of the love Thunder found with his old lady. He was a solid brother who deserved a sweet, loyal woman who was crazy about him. Being thirty-eight, I was just way past ready to find my one. I spent years in the military, and never really got the chance to settle down, but now I was free as a bird I realized what was missing in my life. The love of a good woman.

When they broke apart, Rosie told on me like the true-blue old lady she was. "Benny was flirting with me. He called me beautiful."

Thunder cupped the side of her face with one hand and told her, "You are fucking beautiful, baby," before he slipped his hand through her long red locks.

No sooner did his right hand drop away from her cheek than his left shot out to clock me in the jaw.

I held up both hands, "I totally deserved that."

Thunder's eyebrows shot up. "Yeah, you fucking did. Now, jump behind the bar so I can spend a little time reminding Rosie why choosing me for her old man was such a fucking outstanding idea."

I sighed, after working all day, I was hoping to kick back and relax tonight, especially since it was supposed to be my day off from prospect rotation. I fucked that up by

letting my admiration be known for a senior club brother's old lady. Truth be told, I was lucky to get off with a punch and extra bar duty.

I got to my feet and hopped across the bar. Pointing a finger back the way I came, I told Rosie, "You heard your old man. Take the evening off, you deserve it."

"Thanks Benny," she told me as she lifted up the swinging portion of the bar top so she could get out without the daring, theatrical leap I took to get behind the bar.

"Thank your old man, not me. Because if it were up to me, I sure as hell wouldn't have volunteered for an extra night of bar duty," I said grumpily.

Thunder turned around on his barstool and Rosie slid into his arms. "I know just how to thank you, don't I babe?" Her tone was always soft and loving when she talked to her old man.

Thunder's voice dropped an octave. "You know damn near everything there is to know about me, precious, including how to thank me just the way I like best."

They kissed again and wandered off hand-in-hand, while I was stuck doing Rosie's job serving drinks on a Friday night. Damn, I could never seem to keep my big fat mouth shut. Calling her beautiful had crossed the line just enough to provoke Thunder's ire, I thought as I rubbed my sore jaw.

While I was standing there pondering how I managed to screw myself over yet again, a serious feminine voice drifted to my ears from the bottom of the stairs leading to the second floor. "You know what you need?"

I didn't even look up. "Home for a three-day weekend, Dusty? How's UCLA?"

"Yeah, it's my mom's birthday. UCLA is great but you didn't answer my question

about what you're missing in your life."

"Not a thing, Dusty. Especially not a cat." My eyes went to her arms and the large calico cat she was holding.

"Don't be like that."

"I'm not being like anything, sweetheart. But I know you think everyone's problems can be solved with a feline. I ain't got time to look after myself, let alone another creature."

"Did you hear that, Katy Purry?" Dusty was speaking in a baby voice. "That horrible man called you a creature."

I turned around to tell her to go away and found that she'd crept up right behind me and was holding up the calico cat. The moment I locked eyes with the animal, it meowed. Fuckin' thing was adorable and probably the biggest cat I'd ever seen. She moved the cat around in the air, almost hypnotically and my eyes couldn't help but follow the movement.

"She really likes you. I can tell. Want to hold her?"

Against my better judgment, I allowed Dusty to foist the cat into my arms. She was really cute and soft. I liked the way she snuggled down and purred.

"She likes you," Dusty said.

"Look, I really can't have a pet right now. I work twelve-hour days and in the evenings I'm prospecting here. It's not fair on an animal," I said, trying to hand the cat back to her.

“She’s got a home,” Dusty started. “My friend is going to take her, but she’s on vacation at the moment. Could you look after her for a couple of weeks? I’d do it, but I’ve got to head back to LA on Sunday.”

I let out a sigh.

“Please, my dad said you would. He told me that you were complaining about how empty your house was. It’s the perfect solution.”

Damn Celt and his big fucking mouth, “Okay, sweetheart. I’m just fostering her, right?”

Dusty grinned at me, though I’m sure I saw a twinkle in her eye, “Right.”

I had a horrible feeling that Katy Purry was gonna become a permanent houseguest. Goddammit, what was I supposed to do with a cute purring cat? I set her down on the counter, pulled out my cell phone and ordered some fucking cat food and then got distracted ordering a bunch of other cat stuff to be delivered to my house.

“Okay, Katy Purry. I guess we’re gonna be spending some time together.”

After settling the cat in one of the empty rooms I started prepping the bar for the evening rush, wondering what in the hell I was going to do about stabilizing my business. It was becoming increasingly obvious not only that I was rubbish when it came to handling the paperwork side of running a business, but taking care of that was a full-time job in itself. I was only one man, I couldn’t be answering the phone, fielding calls about potential jobs, preparing and mailing invoices, keeping up with tax payments and every other damn thing it took to run a small business, and still be out in the field earning enough to pay my own bills and keep my grandmother’s care workers in place. And the icing on the cake was that I didn’t know what the fuck else I could do that even came close to the salary I was earning as an electrician. That

made getting another job a moot issue. I was stuck between a rock and a hard place, and I'd be damned if I knew a way out.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Lacey

I was staring across my desk at my boss who'd pulled a chair up to have lunch with me, like always. I don't think his mother liked him very much, because who names their kid Edward Edwards? It was just one of many oddities about this pudgy, arrogant man who never stopped talking.

Trying to eat my lunch while chatting with Mr. Edwards was an impossible task. The list of reasons I didn't particularly like dining with him was long. At the top of that list was the fact that he had no table manners. He also had a habit of monologuing instead of having a two-way conversation. And then there was also the fact that he had a nasty tendency to share too much information about his personal life. Since I got paid for lunch and that cut my workday by an hour, it meant I was still officially on the clock, and I couldn't really tell him to buzz off.

It also made me uncomfortable that he complimented me nonstop over really insignificant things, while talking shit about his soon-to-be ex-wife. I didn't know what his problem was. I always liked Sandra. They were both in their mid-forties and when I first came, they seemed like a match made in heaven.

Now that they were getting a divorce, he had pushed her out of the business. He was the one sending his electricians out to do jobs. None of his employees liked him. His wife had been the oil that soothed the friction between Edward and his staff. Now, he was trying to run the office himself and failing so badly that I had to step in and help. It was clear to me that he was one of those men who thought his wife's job was easy compared to his, so taking over her part was gonna be a no-brainer for him. Even now, it was clear he didn't even realize he was in over his head because I was picking

up the slack.

If it hadn't been for me, he'd be close to bankruptcy right now. Since my father was an electrician, I'd grown up in the business and helped my mom run my father's office during the summers when I was out of school. I knew everything there was to know about being an office manager. I was supposed to be extra help but went full time when he booted his wife out of the office.

He just talked and talked and talked every day at lunch—and as it was only the two of us there most of the time, I couldn't escape.

“And you know what I told her? I said that at this stage in my life, I've got no room for dead weight. Since she can't carry her share, we're finished.”

“Umm, that was harsh,” I told him.

“In the business world there is no such thing as too harsh. Now, she was a good housekeeper. I'll give her that. But housekeeping is in a woman's blood. She don't get extra bonus points in my world for doing what comes naturally to her.”

“Oh wow. Do you really believe all that, Mr. Edwards?” I asked, shocked at some of the things he was telling me.

“Of course I do. I'm a lot more experienced than you are when it comes to relationships, Lacey. I told Sandra that it takes more to keep a man satisfied than being a good cook and housekeeper.”

His gaze turned lecherous as he added, “Things have been dead in the bedroom for years and I'm not going to tolerate that anymore.”

My eyebrows flew up before I could stop myself. Hearing about his sex life just

crossed the line for me. He was still blabbing about his personal life when my phone rang. It was the ringtone I assigned to my mother's number.

Thankful for the interruption, I quickly grabbed my phone and said, "It's my mother calling. She only calls me during work hours if it's really important. I've got to take this."

He made a gesture with one hand towards my uneaten food. "Of course. Family comes first. Just be sure to make it short so you can get your lunch down before your hour's up. Just because I like you doesn't mean you get to skirt the rules."

"Yes, sir." My tone was worlds more docile than I felt when it came to this man.

I excused myself and took the call as I walked outside for some privacy.

"Hi, Mom. Is everything okay?"

"We're doing just fine, dear. We are. Nothing is wrong here in Griffinsford. Nothing at all." Her panicked voice did not match her words.

"Are you sure?" I asked cautiously. "You sound a little stressed."

At that, she broke down crying and I rushed to my car so my boss couldn't overhear our conversation. "Mom, tell me what's wrong." At this point my own panic had risen a notch.

"Nothing. I just needed to hear your voice," she stammered, still tearful.

"Look, I don't know what's going on but if there is anything I can do to help, you know I'll drop everything and do it."

“That’s what’s so painful. We do need you, but I feel terrible asking you to drop everything to help us out. You finally got a job you love and living in the big city has always been your dream.”

My mind was working overtime as I tried to wrap my head around what she was hinting at. I told her cautiously, “Los Angeles isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. It’s expensive, crowded, and everyone here is so superficial that it’s hard to make friends.”

“What about your job? That’s going well, right?”

“When I applied for it, I thought it was the perfect part-time job to hold me over until I could find a full time one. My boss owns an electrical firm, just like Dad.”

“It can’t be that different working for a small business in Los Angeles as opposed to Griffinsford,” she responded, sounding less tearful.

“It’s not the job itself that’s difficult. It’s more that my boss is an arrogant, condescending prick who’s in the process of divorcing his wife and he keeps giving me outrageous over-the-top compliments. It feels like his romantic attention is shifting to me and I don’t want that.”

“Are you sure about that, sweetie? If he’s doing stuff like that, it’s not professional conduct for the workplace, especially for a boss towards his employee.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m pretty sure I’m not misinterpreting the situation because today he started talking to me about his ‘dead bedroom’ and how men have needs.”

“Oh no. No, no, no. Do not put up with that behavior! Quit if you have to, but don’t ever let a man put you in a situation you don’t want to be in to keep your job.”

“To be honest, I’ve been thinking about putting in my notice and looking for another job.” There was a short pause before I offered something I suspected she would consider a blessing. “I’ve even been thinking about coming back to Griffinsford, where people talk to you when you say hello and things actually make sense.”

Cue the waterworks again, only this time when she spoke, she sounded relieved. “We need you, Lacey. We need you here with us badly.”

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on or do I have to pick it out of you?”

In a gush of words she told me everything. “Your father was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s two years ago. The doctors told us with the new treatments and medications, he could live a normal life for many years.”

Shock roiled through my gut. “He’s okay, right? Tell me he’s okay.”

My mom could hardly get the words out for crying. “He’s fighting it hard, Lacey. But the disease has progressed much faster than the doctors anticipated. He had to give up doing jobs about six months ago because he couldn’t remember certain things. It’s gotten to the point that I have to stay right with him, or he’ll wander off. He tried to make himself eggs one morning when I was asleep and nearly burned the kitchen down.”

Sympathy welled up in my heart for both of them. “So, the two of you tried to fight the good fight together and it’s getting impossible to for care for him on your own, right?”

“Oh we don’t need you to help take care of him. We do okay when it’s just the two of us. I unplugged the stove so he can’t cook for himself anymore. When a problem pops up, I always find a solution for it. Anyhow, I can still take him places, go on walks with him if he decides he has to walk, and I can distract him when he gets

anxious. For now, we're okay together."

That all sounded dodgy as hell to me considering she just said he almost burned the house down, but I asked, "What do you need? Just tell me and I'll be all over it in a heartbeat." My voice was firm and decisive, because I truly would do anything for my parents. I loved them and they'd always been there for me, so now was my chance to return the favor.

"The problem is financial, Lacey. We spent our entire savings paying off the house and cars right before your father was diagnosed. The rest went towards his care before his disability was approved. The office should be earning enough to cover our expenses, but it isn't."

"Why not? Livingstone Electrical is the only licensed electrical company in Griffinsford. Business has always been good. Who did you put in charge of the office?"

She hesitated long enough for me to suspect that my father's favorite technician was put in charge. She finally confirmed my fears, "Your father decided putting Mark Shepard in charge was the right move when he had to retire."

I reminded her angrily, "Mark couldn't manage one big box install on his own. The store's grand opening had to be pushed back by a week. Dad was none too happy with him over that cockup."

"Oh I remember all about that. I tried to talk your father out of it, but he insisted Mark was the best and the brightest of his employees. Mark had also been there the longest. Your father said loyalty should be rewarded."

"So what do you need me to do?" I asked.

“Having you back working for the company would be a great help,” my mom said.

I thought things over for a few moments before I responded, “If I come back, I want full authority to do what needs to be done to get the company operating again. I’m telling you right now, Mark Shepard has got to go. Do you think Dad will fight me on that issue?”

She got tearful again before admitting, “Some days he doesn’t even remember he had an office. One day he asked me whatever happened to his students, like he thought he’d been a teacher at some point.”

Shock rolled through my mind all over again. I just couldn’t imagine my father that far gone. “Jesus, Mom! You should have told me what was happening.”

“I know. Looking back, I feel so foolish for thinking we could do this on our own.”

“Okay, I’m coming home right now. Don’t you worry, I’ll do whatever it takes to get the company back in the black.”

“What do you mean by right now? You can’t just walk out of your job.”

“Wanna bet? If my boss is left in the lurch, maybe he can start treating his wife right so she can come back to work for him.”

“What about your apartment?”

“I’m paid through to the end of the month. I’ll pack whatever my car can hold and come back for the rest later this month.”

“I hate to ask, but how soon can you come?”

“Today is Friday. I’ll work the rest of today and turn in my resignation at the end of the day then I’ll head straight to you. I’ll have to spend the better part of the weekend in the office, trying to figure out exactly what went wrong.”

“Oh, Lacey. Are you sure this is what you want to do? I’m not pressuring you, am I?”

“Of course not. I was thinking about coming home as one of my options. Running Dad’s office just gives me a good reason. To be honest, even if by some quirk of fate, Mark was managing the office perfectly, I’d come home just to spend time with Dad. He needs his family around him right now. That means both of us. You should never have had to shoulder this burden alone.”

My mom was sobbing as she spoke. “I really appreciate you giving up your dream of living in the big city to help us, Lacey. You’re a good daughter, much better than I deserve.”

That was a bizarre, fucked-up thing to say, but I didn’t get into that because now was not the time. Instead I told her, “I’m going to pack my car right after work and leave. That will have me arriving in Griffinsford around eleven tonight. Is that going to be okay? I don’t want to upset Dad’s routine.”

“That’s sweet of you to be concerned about your father, Lacey. I think if you use your key and slip in quietly, he’ll probably sleep right through it. I’ll help you unload your car in the morning.”

“Alright, that sounds like a plan. I love you, Mom. Just hang in there a few more hours and I’ll be there to lend a hand.”

Before she could respond there was a loud knock at my window. When I glanced up, Edward pointed to his watch. The angry expression on his face made me grateful that I was leaving today. Something about this man triggered my Spidey senses in the

worst way.

“Sorry Mom, I have to go. My lunch break is over. I’ll call you when I’m on my way, okay?”

“Yes. Drive safely, ladybug.”

I smiled that she used my nickname from when I was little.

When I got out, I had to listen to a lecture all the way back into the office building about how I didn’t get paid to gab on the phone, how he was gonna have to dock my pay for the time I spent outside, and how he was forced to answer his own phone while I was out. Christ on a cracker. This man was downright obnoxious.

The rest of the day flew by. I organized everything so it would be easy for Mr. Edwards to find stuff after I’d gone, and I even typed out a paragraph on each of the jobs in progress, which electrician was assigned to them, and basic details of the jobs. If he couldn’t get by with the information I was leaving, then I didn’t know what to tell him.

Right before I left for the day, I typed out my letter of resignation, thanking him for the opportunity to work for his company, and explained I was leaving because of a family emergency. Then I signed off on it, snapped a picture of it with my cell phone and put it into an envelope. When I went to deliver it to him, he had his door shut.

A chill shot through my body when I heard him screaming and cursing at his wife, calling her a stinking whore and worthless piece of shit. I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t know how horrible he was, but I just never really understood how deep the hate ran between him and his wife.

Unsure how long he'd be on the phone with her and not wanting to talk to him after such a heated conversation, I shoved my letter of resignation under his door and beat a hasty retreat. The moment I pulled out of the parking lot, my anxiety clicked down.

As I drove away, a tiny, crazy little part of my mind told me that I had dodged a bullet and warned me that after he read that letter, he might lose his shit because it'd be one more huge problem to hit him, right after the blow out he just had with his wife.

Then the rational part of my mind kicked in and I realized that I was nothing to this man, just a peripheral person who existed only in his work environment. I wasn't worth a personal visit where he begged or coerced me to stay. Nope. He was likely going to just call the employment agency that sent me and ask them for another person to fill my spot. I laughed a little at the thought of him being upset over losing such a good worker. Employees were all interchangeable and I was certainly nothing to write home about.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Lacey

T onight I was sitting across the table from Zoe and her younger sister, Alison. This would be the first Saturday we'd met up in years. Sipping a cold margarita, I was thoroughly enjoying getting caught up on everything that had been going on since I left town. Zoe was the older sister figure that I always looked up to growing up. If I was being honest, I'd admit to idolizing her a bit. Hearing how she hunted down stories about corruption in our town, I realized she was part news reporter, part blogger, and part detective.

"Your parents must be so proud of your success," I said enthusiastically.

"Yeah, they are," Zoe confirmed. "My vlog, News Not to Miss , has half a million subscribers now. Obviously, not all my viewers are from Griffinsford. Folks tune in from all over the world. I guess some people just like a glimpse into small town corruption."

Alison spoke up, smiling and happy. Her cheeks were red, maybe from drinking a little too much, "We're so proud of Zoe. She's even been interviewed on one of the national morning shows as an example of the difference between individuals in small towns being vigilant as opposed to vigilantes."

Zoe smiled ruefully over her margarita, "If they only knew the real story about small town vigilantes their heads would explode."

I glanced around the Dark Slayers clubhouse, wondering if she could be referring to the men roaming around in leather cuts with the club emblem emblazoned across the

back. “I never saw you hooking up with a biker in my crystal ball.” Before she could get defensive, I added, “Even if this isn’t a one percent club and all the members are law abiding former war heroes, my stupid brain keeps saying bikers equal bad news.”

Zoe and Alison laughed, but it was Zoe who addressed my comment. “I think you’re getting bad and badass confused. My Storm is a total badass, but he doesn’t go looking for trouble.”

Alison agreed with her sister. “Same with Grit. He was never in the military though. My old man isn’t one for starting fights, but he’ll sure as hell finish one in a heartbeat, especially if anyone messes with me.”

Something uncomfortable squirmed in the pit of my stomach. “Aren’t you afraid he’ll get hurt finishing fights? I mean anytime there’s physical contact, there is a risk that someone might get injured.”

Alison had already had three drinks and snort laughed at my comment. “I forgot, you haven’t met Grit.”

Suddenly, a huge muscle-bound biker started moving through the bar towards us. He was like nothing I’d ever seen in real life. This dude had muscles stacked on top of muscles. “Did I hear someone mention my name?”

“My old friend, Lacey, is afraid you’re gonna get hurt if you end up in a fight.”

Her gigantic husband’s stern expression morphed into one of amusement and he pressed his lips together as if to keep from laughing. After a few seconds he said proudly, “I ain’t never met the man yet that could beat my ass. And that’s saying a lot because I used to fight in underground bare-knuckle boxing tournaments for fun.”

My mouth dropped open because my childhood friend married herself a brute. I gave

him the once-over and decided that he could probably hold his own in fight with a gorilla. Lifting my glass to Alison, I told her, “Forget what I said a minute ago. Your husband is what all the creepy things in the dark should be afraid of, not vice versa.”

Everyone laughed, including Grit. Alison tried to take a drink of her margarita but spilled it all over the table. Zoe and I scrambled to wipe it up with napkins. Grit grabbed her glass and set it aside. “I think you’ve had enough to drink for one night. You want to come downstairs with me for some fun, or should we head home to the kids?”

“No going home. We’ve got a babysitter for the whole night, and I plan to take advantage of it.”

Grit grinned like her words were music to his ears. “You got it, sweetness. We’ll head downstairs.” He tugged her up out of her chair and she followed him. Halfway across the room he whispered something in her ear that made her break out in gales of laughter.

I shoved the wet napkins aside and asked, “So, is your husband like Grit?”

Zoe tossed me a mischievous grin. “Hell no. Storm came from money, rejected his family because they were all assholes, and founded this club because too many men were coming out of the military with PTSD and not finding the support they needed. In fact this club sprang from a support group he originally ran. They would meet up regularly, and discovered they had a shared love for biking and brotherhood. That’s how the Dark Slayers MC started.”

“Yeah, but why pick a name like the Dark Slayers? That sounds kind of wicked.”

The amusement fell off Zoe’s face and she became serious. “The Dark Slayers is the perfect name for a club of men who are all trying to slay their inner demons. Storm

has told me a little about what it was like serving in Afghanistan, and from what I could tell it was brutal.”

“That actually makes sense,” I told her. “But Alison said Grit was never in the military.”

“Grit was Storm’s best friend growing up. They were also tight with Storm’s cousin, Celt. So, it was only natural that they would want to support Storm in this venture even though they weren’t veterans. I’d say about eighty percent of the brothers in this club are ex-military. The rest are just looking to do some good with their lives and hang out with like-minded men who love riding the open road.”

“Wow, Zoe. You should be the spokesperson for the Dark Slayers MC. After listening to your impassioned speech, I want to join up myself.”

She relaxed back into her seat. “The Dark Slayers doesn’t need a spokesperson or any extra PR. There are men fighting to get into this club. Storm turns down applications all the time.”

I glanced around the room again, getting a good vibe from the brothers and their guests. “Well, I can see why. Even a numbskull like me can see how special this club is.”

Zoe picked up her glass and took another sip. It was such a long sip that she drained her glass dry. She raised her hand and motioned to the bartender for another drink.

“You want a refill as well?” she asked.

“I’d better not. If I drink any more, I’m not going to be safe to drive home later.”

“You can stay here at the clubhouse. That’s what I’m doing tonight. I’ll have the

prospects make up a room for you.”

Zoe saw my hesitation and added, “Just so you know, it’s perfectly safe here. All the bedroom doors lock from the inside and Storm would strip any man of his cut for acting inappropriately with a guest, particularly a guest of mine.”

Since I’ve always trusted Zoe, I took her at her word. “Alright, I’d love to have one more. The next round is on me.”

Zoe laughed and held up two fingers to the handsome bartender. “Nobody pays for their food or drinks here. It’s a private club. The brothers pay their dues, and the club runs several businesses that bring in more than enough to cover operations.”

“Now that you mention it, I thought it was weird that there wasn’t a cash register on the counter.”

“That would be why,” she responded merrily.

“You are in such a good mood tonight. I wish I had your energy.”

“Storm’s been gone to a meetup of allied clubs for the last three days. He’s coming back anytime now, and we made a date for a little basement time.”

“What’s this fascination you and Alison have with this club’s basement? I don’t get it.”

About that time, the handsome bartender thunked our margaritas on the table and answered my question before Zoe could get to it. “We have a discreet sex club in the basement. If you want to check it out, my shift ends in an hour. It would be my pleasure to show you around.”

I'd just taken a mouthful of my drink and promptly spat it out.

Zoe waggled her eyebrows. "Girl, you lived in LA for years. You can't tell me you were never even curious about sex clubs."

I didn't see any reason to lie, so I told it to her straight, "Sure, I've been curious. I just never had enough nerve to go because I didn't know anyone there. It seemed risky, you know?"

The handsome bartender was somehow still standing at our table. He responded, "Yes ma'am, I sure do know. The thing is, our club is safe for nice women like you. All you have to do is say the word no, and if whoever you're with doesn't stop, every man in his club will jump up and make him stop. When you're in the Dark Slayer's clubhouse, you're always safe."

I glanced at Zoe, and she nodded. I turned back to look the hot biker up and down. Unless I missed my guess, he stood a little taller and flexed his arm muscles slightly. I quickly realized he was preening for me, hoping I'd take him up on his generous offer. It had been months since I'd been with a guy, and there was no doubt he was hot. But while I might have been curious about sex clubs, the thought of doing all kinds of stuff out in the open in a biker clubhouse wasn't exactly my cup of tea.

He added quietly, "No one here will think bad of you, and I specialize in one night stands because I'm apparently too incompetent to have long term relationships."

The tone of his voice led me to believe he might be telling the truth, so I told him, "I'm loving all the honesty, mister."

"Benny. My name's Benny. You can call me Benny."

I squinted my eyes at him. "Did you just repeat your name three times to I would

remember it?”

He flinched slightly. “That obvious?”

“Yeah, but look, why don’t you let me think it over. I’ll let you know, Brad,” I joked.

He shot me a disparaging look. “You’ve got a cruel sense of humor, woman.”

Someone called his name, so he rushed back to the bar. It was only then that I saw his vest said ‘Prospect’ on the back. I made me wonder if that’s why he didn’t have a kooky name like the others.

Zoe had her chin resting on her fist and was lazily sipping her margarita through the straw. “That prospect is right. Having a one-off with one of the brothers in the basement doesn’t turn you into a club girl.”

“Life’s been pretty rough lately and I haven’t had sex in months. That handsome prospect is all kinds of tempting, but I’m not being judgmental, I don’t think faceless sex in a basement is what I need right now.”

“Yeah, I get that, though Benny’s a great guy. And by the way, what did you mean when you said your life had been pretty rough lately?”

I waved her away. “I’m sure you don’t want to hear all my problems.”

“What if I do?” she responded lazily. I could tell she’d drunk enough to be feeling good without being drunk. “I’m interested in what my friend has been through. So, spit it out. I told you all about my life. Now, it’s your turn to tell me what’s been going on with yours.”

I glanced away for a second to gather my thoughts. “My dad was diagnosed with

Alzheimer's two years ago and my parents never told me. Now, it's progressed to the point that he can't work, and my mom needs to stay home with him. Unfortunately, the person they chose to run their business has been skimming money off the top, not responding to customer complaints, and letting the other employees get away with doing shoddy work. I moved back yesterday to take over the family business and spent all day digging through the paperwork and found things are much worse than my mom or I thought. Come Monday, I've got to fire two of my three electrical technicians and unless I can find a top-notch replacement, our family business is going to go bankrupt, and we're not going to have enough money to take care of my father."

Zoe just stared at me for a long hard moment before saying, "Damn! That was a lot."

"Yeah, it's pretty heavy stuff. Bet you're sorry you asked, aren't you?"

She made a little circle in the air in front of me. "No, I mean that was a lot of words. Girl if you can say all that and use good grammar, you aren't drinking nearly enough."

I couldn't help but smile because it was becoming clear to me that Zoe probably had just as many drinks as her sister. She was just better at holding her liquor and she had me fooled there for a minute. As I sat there watching her slurp away on her margarita, one thing became very clear to me, I could not let my drunk friend lead me into doing something my sober friend might not have advised. That prospect sure was cute, but a one night stand wouldn't solve my problems, and if anything it might make them worse.

I stopped drinking the nicely mixed free drink so I could drive myself home. I needed to be at home to get ready to go back to the office tomorrow. I only had one more day of no one around to go through the rest of the information, lock up the important stuff, and get the termination letters written for the two employees who had violated

my father's trust when he was medically compromised and at his lowest.

Zoe put her head down on her arm, which was draped across the table and closed her eyes like she didn't have a care in the world. I didn't know what to think of this situation. The bartender, Benny, walked back over and asked, "Is your drink okay? I'm only asking because I noticed you stopped drinking it. I can make you something else if you want?"

"It's fine. I decided not to stay the night but thanks for the basement offer. I've got a lot going on in my life right now and can't afford to get distracted by hot bikers and booze."

"That's too bad. Most women consider a tumble in the hay with a hot biker a stress reliever," he said before giving me a panty melting wink.

"Yeah, I'm sure that's true. The problem is I need to get outta here but obviously I can't leave Zoe asleep on the table in a crowded bar." When he didn't immediately respond, I asked, "Is she even safe here?"

A booming voice said, "She damn well better be safe among my club brothers. If they let anything happen to my old lady, I'll gut the lot of them and burn down the place."

"She was just asking, Storm. She didn't mean to insinuate anything," Benny told him quickly.

Storm knelt down and pushed a strand of hair out of Zoe's face. "My beautiful wife does not normally conk out on tables. She's exhausted from chasing after our kids."

Benny murmured, "I guess the welcome home will have to wait."

"You got that right Prospect." Standing up, he carefully scooped Zoe up into his arms

and turned towards the stairs. “I’m putting her to bed and I’m gonna catch some sleep myself. See that no one disturbs us unless it’s a matter of life or death.”

“Or something to do with your kids.”

“Damn straight, Prospect.”

“Roger that, Prez. Have a nice sleep. We’ll have hot coffee and breakfast on the grill waiting for you when you wake up in the morning.”

“Like always,” Storm muttered as he walked off with an armful of wife.

Glancing at Benny, I asked, “Do you think Storm hates me?”

“What?” he responded in a surprised tone.

“They say first impressions are hard to overcome, and I just made a bad one with one of my best friend’s husbands.”

“Look, I don’t know anything about women, but I do know a thing or two about men because I am one. We don’t typically hate on women for stupid shit like what just happened. Storm is a battle-hardened veteran who doesn’t take crap from anyone except Zoe and his kids. I wouldn’t count on him to remember you, much less harbor resentment over a misplaced question.”

I didn’t know what to say to all that, so I decided to channel some Zoe attitude. “That was a lot of words. You must not have drunk nearly enough tonight.”

Benny looked at me like I had two heads and pointed out politely, “Yeah, I’ve been working the bar. They don’t let us drunk pour here.”

Feeling all kinds of awkward now that Zoe was gone, I stuck out my hand for him to shake, “Well, it was really nice meeting you, Benny. I’m gonna take off now.”

He reached out and gave my hand a firm pump before jerking his chin off to the side and saying, “The door’s that way, ma’am.”

Can someone be polite and rude at the same time? If they could, then that’s exactly what this man was doing. Sure he was hot, but I’d clearly hurt his feelings by turning him down. I turned on my heels and fast-walked out the front door before getting into my vehicle. Rubbing my hand over face, I wondered why I even bothered to try socializing. I felt like a duck out of water in the Dark Slayer’s clubhouse. Regardless of how well Zoe and Alison fitted in, I sure as hell didn’t. I started my engine and headed home, noticing the time on my vehicle’s clock was nearing midnight. If I was lucky, I’d grab five hours of sleep before I had to be back in the office.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Rebel

When my shift ended last night, I went for a ride on my bike instead of trying to hook up with one of the club girls. Something about getting rejected by Zoe's awkward friend stung my pride. I'm a righteous man. I work hard, try to do the right thing, and I'm as ripped as any guy in our club. I saw the way her eyes crawled over my body, as though she liked what she saw, so I wondered what I'd done to put her off.

Maybe it was something I said. I wasn't used to getting judged and found so lacking that a woman wasn't even willing to have a one-night stand with me. Maybe I'd been hanging around the wrong kind of woman, and she was just a nice woman who didn't do one-nighters.

Anyway, today was another day. It was Sunday. I didn't usually set appointments for myself on Sundays because I prospected for the Slayers on the weekend. Today, Forge put me in charge of the grill. We prospects grilled breakfast and dinner seven days a week for whatever brothers were in the clubhouse. I'd stayed the night and got up early this morning and started prepping for breakfast.

I started the coffee, put meat on the grill, and was working on eggs when Storm and Zoe came strolling out of the clubhouse. Zoe immediately went for coffee, but Storm walked over to me. "Zoe's been looking for her friend. Do you know what happened to her?"

"Yeah, she decided not to stay after all. She said she had work to do today. Don't worry, she was safe to drive."

Zoe came over, handed Storm a coffee and took a sip of hers. By the expression on her face, it was clear that it burned her mouth a little. Storm told her, “Benny said your friend left last night because she had work today. Does that ring a bell?”

Zoe frowned, “Yeah, she’s just taken over Livingstone Electrical. Her father got too sick to work and the man he left in charge has been stealing from the company and running it into the ground. She’s gonna fire most of her employees tomorrow and then she’s gonna be shit out of luck if she can’t find replacements.”

Storm’s head swiveled around to stare at me. “Wow, how unfortunate is it that Zoe’s pretty friend is desperate for a good electrician and you’re desperate for someone to take over your office duties. Seems like the two of you are match made in heaven.”

Anxiety twisted in my gut at the thought of being rejected by this woman for a second time. “I don’t know, Prez. She didn’t seem to take a liking to me last night. And I’m not sure I want to work with a woman who rejected me without giving me a chance.”

Zoe snorted a laugh, “You invited her to go to a sex club with you the second you met her. You ought to know that no friend of mine is likely to take a strange man up on an offer like that right out of the gate.”

I brought one hand up to scratch the back of my neck as I thought over her words. “Yeah, I can see where you’re comin’ from with that one. The bottom line is I blew it with her, so I don’t see her wanting to work with me.”

Zoe rolled her eyes and strolled off with her coffee. Storm just looked at me in that disparaging way he sometimes did that made me feel dense. “It’s too early in the morning to deal with your shit, Benny. I’m gonna drink my coffee, eat my breakfast, and spend time with my wife but rest assured, I’m sure as hell going to circle back around later to talk to you about this situation.”

“Sure thing, Prez,” I grumbled as I filled a huge plate of food for him and Zoe to share.

I considered the idea of striking a deal with the lady that didn’t even see fit to tell me her name. It did not seem likely that she’d be interested in working with me or allowing me to work for her.

Memories of my last visit with my grandmother rose in my mind. She was frail and using a walker to get around. The caregiver I hired to take care of her was chasing her around with a protein shake, trying to get her to drink it. I ended up putting it in the blender with a scoop of ice cream and watched her gobble it up. My gran had always loved ice cream so mixing with her Ensure seemed like a no-brainer to me. I really needed to find her a decent caregiver, someone who’d actually think to do that kind of thing.

But decent caregivers cost money. I leaned back against the building, coming to the realization that I really didn’t have a choice. Maybe I would have to figure out a way to work for that woman. When push came to shove, I sure as fuck was not going to put my pride before earning the money I needed to make sure the woman who helped my momma raise me had what she needed in her old age. I decided that by the time Storm circled back around to me, I was going to agree to whatever he suggested. What choice did I really have?

As the morning wore on, I began to see the logic in Storm’s suggestion. Trying to look at the situation optimistically, this might be exactly the opportunity I’d been looking for, one where I could work all the hours under the sun, get caught up with all my bills, and start banking the money I was gonna need to take care of my grandmother as her condition deteriorated. Nursing homes cost big bucks, and I had to make sure I was prepared for that eventuality.

By the time Storm called me to his office, I was ready to step up and make a deal.

What I wasn't expecting was to find the woman from last night sitting in front of his desk in a nice comfy chair. I slowed my steps, suddenly cautious for no real reason at all.

Glancing at her again, I noticed she was wearing a nice pantsuit like Zoe was prone to wear. Her long legs were crossed, and she was wearing pumps with spiked heels. Damn, my cock for noticing those heels. Her long, dark hair was pulled back into a low bun at the nape of her neck giving sexy librarian vibes. She was wearing gold earrings and had her nails polished to match her suit. Fuck, I needed to stop staring at this woman before my cock exploded.

"Come in and have a seat, Benny." Storm's voice was nothing short of exasperated.

I walked in and took the seat beside her.

"I'm Lacey Livingstone," she said as she extended her hand. "I realize I didn't tell you my name last night."

"Nice to meet you again, Lacey," I said as I shook her hand.

She murmured, "Thank you, Storm, for bringing us together to talk this out."

Storm gestured to me and sighed. "I got him here. It's up to you to convince him to make a deal with you."

Lacey pivoted her body so she was facing me. "It's my understanding from talking to Zoe and Storm that you're a decent electrician."

"I'm an out-fucking-standing electrician," I told her a little too vehemently. "Who do you think your customers get to fix the shit your team fucks up?"

Her eyes flashed to Storm and then back to me. “I didn’t realize our customers were coming to you.”

“There aren’t many electricians in the area with a Master Electrician license. I’ve been doing this for a few years now. I got eight thousand hours of supervised work experience when I did my apprenticeship in the military and sat for the licensing exam. Since I got out of the military, I’ve gotten experience working on commercial as well as residential jobs. Once word got out that I know my shit, of course they started calling me to call me to fix what’s broken.”

“You’re new to this area, right?” she asked.

“I don’t know if you consider me new. I grew up in Griffinsford and like many men from this area, I served in the US Marines until I got sectioned out for medical reasons.”

“What kind of medical issues do you have?”

I glanced at Storm. “With all due respect, ma’am. That’s none of your damn business.”

Her expression registered shock and she immediately rephrased the question. “Is it anything that could impact your ability to perform your job duties?”

“No.” I said, tight-lipped all of a sudden, because she was digging for information, information I considered personal.

“How would you describe your work style?”

I huffed out a laugh. “What the hell? Is that a real question?”

“Yes, there’s no wrong answer. The more I know about your work style, the more I can adapt mine to support you while you’re in the field.”

Nothing she just said made a lick of sense to me, so I deadpanned back, “My work style is I get shit done. Every morning I go through my work orders and do the most important one first then move on to the next until I clear all my work orders for the day. If it takes a couple of hours, that’s fine. If it takes sixteen hours, that’s fine too. Whatever it takes, I get the job done.”

“How do you handle complaints?”

“Don’t know. I’ve never gotten one yet.” Pride surged in my chest as I said that out loud.

“You’ve never had a complaint? None at all?”

“Of fucking course not. If you know how to wire shit and talk with your customers when problems pop up, there shouldn’t be any surprises after the job’s done.”

“What’s your biggest worry about coming to work for me?”

“Lady, I ain’t interested in working for you and if I was, you couldn’t afford me.”

Storm cleared his throat and interjected, “What Benny means to say is that he might accept a collaboration of sorts. He’s having the opposite problem that you’re having, in that he’s good at wiring shit up but not at keeping track of the paperwork, getting his business taxes paid on time, and stuff like that. He needs an office, and you need an electrician. It doesn’t take a fucking rocket scientist to figure out that you two could help each other and in doing so, help yourselves. Does that make sense?”

Lacey nodded like a bobblehead doll. “I’m sure we could work something out.”

“For me, this isn’t anywhere near a done deal,” I told her. “We’d have to work out issues like how to keep you from poaching my clients, what’s the pay gonna look like, whether I’m responsible for sourcing all my supplies and a bunch of other details about how to keep our businesses separate but ensure they’re still functional.”

“Yes, of course. We can work all that out. If we can come to an agreement, when is the soonest you can start?”

“As long as I can still service my own clients, maybe as soon as tomorrow.” Sighing, I told her, “If you want, I could even show up at the office tomorrow to make sure things don’t get out of control when you do those terminations.”

“That would be amazing. Maybe you could come at eight in the morning, and we could hash out the details, take care of the terminations, and grab some lunch.”

“That sounds good. I have a job already scheduled for late afternoon tomorrow. And I probably should tell you that I don’t normally work on the weekends unless it’s an emergency.”

“I understand completely,” she murmured, looking way more hopeful than I felt about us working out a mutual compromise.

When I got to my feet, she extended her hand again and I reluctantly took it. I shook her hand just to be polite. I wasn’t at all sure she was in a position to do what I needed, or that she’d be willing to compensate me properly. Those two points were deal-breakers for me.

She said, “Bring all your paperwork so I can see what I’m up against.”

“Sounds good, you might want to have a proposal sketched out. Expect some changes based on my needs.”

“I get that you’ll want to have your say and that the deal has to work for both of us. We’re smart people. I’m sure we can work out a compromise.”

“Great. I’ll see you in the morning Lacey.”

The minute I hit the bar, Zoe came to sit beside me. She slid me a cold beer and I noticed she had one for herself as well. “Since I’ve never had the pleasure of having a good old-fashioned chinwag with the club president’s old lady or had her fetching beers for me, do you mind telling me what this is all about?”

“God, you are the prickliest man I have ever met. I was just wondering how your meeting with Lacey went. If you don’t want to talk, I’ll leave you to your own thoughts.”

“If you must know, I left that meeting with a bad feeling that Lacey has it in her mind that I’m going to end up being her employee, specifically, the little worker bee who is obsessed with the queen bee. If so, she’s barking up the wrong tree.”

“Now why would you think bad of her when you don’t even know her?”

“When was the last time a woman took a chance on me? Do you have any idea?”

She shook her head, clearly confused about why I was being so difficult.

“Let me just say, never. Not once has a lady like yourself and Lacey ever given me a chance, professionally or otherwise. That leads me to believe that she just wants to use me to save the farm, so to speak.”

“Then use her right back,” Zoe told me. “Storm told me about your grandmother.

You need money, striking a deal with Lacey could be the way to make a little pile of money to get your own business off the ground. If you had money, you could rent office space and hire a bookkeeper, right?"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I need in order to make my business work. If she's willing to be reasonable, we might be able to work out a mutual compromise."

"Look Benny, I realize that you don't know Lacey like I do, but I can vouch for her. She's good people. I can't imagine her intentionally screwing you over. She's really open and easy to talk to. If you have problems, just go to her, and talk it out. You can do that, right?"

"Yeah, I sure the fuck can. If she double-crosses me, I'll drop her like a hot potato. If that happens, I don't want it to affect my standing in the club. Remember, you and Storm orchestrated this whole thing, if it goes bad, it's not on me."

Zoe just shook her head. "Okay that was my best effort at talking you through your anxieties and clearing up any misconceptions you had about Lacey. You're on your own from here on out."

She got up from the table and stalked towards Storm's office.

My new cat rubbed herself against my leg, so I bent down and picked her up. She rolled over in my arms and looked up at me with her big green eyes. I rubbed her tummy, wondering what was going through her mind right now. Since I stayed at the clubhouse on the weekends, she was okay with me here, but what would happen tomorrow? I didn't like the idea of leaving her on her own too much while I worked.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lacey walking by. She barely glanced in my direction and kept on walking. Zoe's friend was all kinds of stuck-up and I didn't know how to handle her. Being an intelligent man, I knew that it was a 'me' problem

instead of a 'her' problem.

As I looked down at my foster cat, I felt her dig her claws into my jeans. Reaching down to remove her paw, an idea formed in my mind. "Hey Katy Purry, you want some pretty pantsuits to sharpen your claws on?"

Glancing out the window to watch her climb into her car, I decided to beat my fancy-pants boss at her own game. I'd suggest cat care as part of the deal and see just how much Lacey was willing to compromise to get what she wanted from me. Katy would stay in the office during the day, it was a win-win situation. What was the worst that could happen? Her saying no way? If she flat out refused, then maybe I could use that to get a concession I really wanted. Devious, I know, but I wasn't planning to be totally cutthroat with the poor woman. We both needed this deal. I just planned to inject a little fun into the negotiations.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Lacey

I made sure to come into the office an hour early today. Benny was scheduled to be here in an hour, and I wanted to make sure the office was cleaned up in order to present it professionally. Mark Shepard left the office a complete mess when he left on Friday, with invoices littering his desk, used coffee cups all over the place, and unpaid bills filling the wastebasket. I cleared some of it up over the weekend and was determined to finish it up this morning.

My phone jingled just a few minutes before eight. After a quick look, I rolled my eyes and slipped it back into my purse. My old boss got extra bonus points for disengaging his ‘asshole gene’ long enough to try and lure me back with promises of better benefits. I might have been tempted if he weren’t such a creep and just plain mean. Only a complete idiot would sign up for more of what he was dishing out when I worked there.

When Benny showed up this morning, I was just putting the vacuum away. The office looked almost like I remembered it growing up.

“Good morning, Benny. I’m glad you decided to follow through with our meeting this morning,” I said with a smile.

He stopped short and glared at me. “If I say I’m gonna do something, I do it. A man is only as good as his word.”

I shut the closet door and gave him a nod. “Women too. Keeping your word isn’t just a man thing.”

Before he could respond, I heard a meow from what I thought was his tool bag. “Do you have a cat ringtone on your phone?”

He smirked at me. “No, I brought Katy Purry. I’m fostering her and she gets anxious when I leave her all alone.”

Ignoring that, I said, “Follow me, please. I’ve drafted out a contract I want you to look over.” When the cat meowed again, I felt the need to state the obvious, “You know you can’t take your cat out on jobs, right? That wouldn’t be professional.”

“Oh, I’m well aware of that. I’ve got other plans for Miss Purry.”

We walked into my office, and I sat down behind the desk. Benny took one of the two empty seats in front of my desk and put his cat carrier on the other.

I didn’t really know what to make of this man who brought his cat to iron out the details of a professional partnership agreement. It seemed out of the realm of possibility that this could be construed as normal in his world. If Zoe and her husband hadn’t vouched for him, I would have turned the handsome bastard away at the first meow. By the way he was smirking all over the place, I was almost certain that he had some trick up his sleeve. I just couldn’t imagine what it could be.

I slid the rough draft of our agreement over the desk for him to read along as I explained each part. He picked it up and started reading, so I quickly launched into the speech I had prepared.

“The first part of the agreement stipulates that we’ll keep both of our businesses separate. Livingstone Electrical has been in business for over thirty years. Until very recently we were well respected in Griffinsford. I intend to do everything humanly possible to get our family business back on track.”

“Do you even have the authority to speak on behalf of Livingstone Electrical? How do I know your parents won’t blindsides me further down the line by refusing to follow this nice partnership agreement you’ve sketched out for us today?”

This guy was smart, way smarter than he looked. I’d have to give him that. But I was smart enough to have solved that problem over the weekend.

I pulled out a notarized copy of the power of attorney my parents signed for the business appointing me to act in their stead moving forward. “Since I’m their only heir, in addition to having their express permission to make whatever decisions I see fit to get the business back on track, I stand to inherit the business in the unfortunate event of their death.”

“Shit,” he responded sounding a little shocked. “You talk about your parents dying with the kind of casual ease that someone with a cold heart would.”

My mouth dropped open because he wasn’t the only one shocked by this conversation. “I love my parents dearly. Don’t ever make the mistake of thinking that because I can discuss their death that I’m not dreading that with every fiber of my being.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re right. I recently lost my mom and can tell you right now that I sorely underestimated the gaping hole losing a parent leaves behind.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. I truly am. However, it’s probably best if we keep our conversation professional today.”

His eyebrows flew up again. “Sure, Ms. Livingstone. Whatever you say.”

“Look Benny, I’m not trying to be rude.”

“You can call me Mr. Ross. You were the one who said to keep things professional. Let’s move on. We’ve got this whole partnership agreement to get through and you’ve got employees coming in soon.”

“I texted everyone and asked them to come in at ten this morning. But you’re right. We’d best get through this material.” Taking a second to catch my breath, I felt anxiety twisting in my gut. This man had a way of catching me off guard and putting me on the defensive. I couldn’t let him get to me. I had to overlook his prickly personality and make this work.

I glanced up at him as I rearranged the papers on my desk. He was wiggling his finger in front of the cat carrier, tapping the cat’s feet.

Getting back on task, I picked up where I left off. “Mr. Ross, if you’d like to read over the first section. It deals with the structuring of our partnership. You keep your own clients, and so does Livingstone Electrical. All the calls that come in through our company line belong to my family’s business.”

He took the piece of paper and gave it a cursory glance, but didn’t look up or seem interested in asking questions, so I continued, “If you forward the calls from your business line to me, I’ll answer using your business name and those clients will obviously belong to you exclusively. I’ll keep your electronic appointment book, which you can sign into at any point to maintain an awareness of your workflow. I can flag which clients are yours, invoice them whatever your going rate is per hour, and forward that money to your business account immediately.”

“That all sounds fine,” he commented. “I’ll give you as much notice as possible when I need a day off. Obviously, if emergencies come up, we’ll have to reschedule jobs.”

“I understand completely. If you jump down to the next paragraph, I’ve built in some consequences for poaching each other’s clients. There’s a penalty of twenty-five

percent on top of whatever was billed.”

A smile ghosted across his face. “It’s weird that you felt you needed a consequence. I would have gone with a verbal agreement and mutual trust on that one.”

“I prefer something a little more tangible. Plus, I thought you’d appreciate that clause because I’m the one taking all the incoming calls, which puts you at distinct disadvantage. In any event, I’ll keep track of when your taxes are due and calculate what you need to pay based on the income you generated for your business. And I’ll keep track of all the information you need in order to file your taxes at the end of the year. You can use my tax specialist. I’ll be happy to send your information alongside my own but I’m not paying for that. I’ll forward you his invoice and you’ll need to pay that on your own.”

“It looks like you’ve thought of everything. I saw that you outlined all my responsibilities as well. You wrote that this is a front-facing position, dealing directly with customers. I’m to give estimates, source and pick up my own supplies, complete jobs in a timely manner and communicate with you about what work was done, so you can bill for it. I’m not going to read it all out loud because it’s a fairly comprehensive list.”

“It’s all pretty standard. Did you note the hourly rate our company is willing to pay?”

“Yeah, that seems generous enough. The issue for me is that you want me to keep two separate travel logs. I don’t see that as necessary.”

I responded mildly, “Well, if you don’t fill out a travel log, I can’t pay for your mileage, which has always been standard operating procedure for Livingstone Electrical. We can both write that off on our taxes, so you should be as eager to do that as I am. The last thing either of us wants is to owe a larger tax burden than necessary come tax time.”

He frowned, “Yeah, I guess all those cents add up.”

My eyebrows shot up because I was struggling to understand what his problem was with tracking mileage. “Livingstone typically has anywhere between three and six employees at any given time. If you add up the mileage to and from jobs, running around to pick up supplies and all the other things you do professionally, it adds up. Why should we forgo the tax credit?”

“I guess you’re right. I should start thinking like a bean counter if I’m ever gonna run my own business efficiently.”

“I’ve decided to go ahead and put you on our company health insurance and you’ll be covered whenever you drive one of our company vehicles. All the work you do through this partnership will be covered by our business insurance, so you don’t have to worry about purchasing your own business insurance if you haven’t already.”

Leaning over the desk, I gave him a stern look because I couldn’t let him think that because I was a woman, I was a pushover. “I’ve intentionally written the partnership agreement with generosity in mind, so I don’t want you coming back to complain later. Whatever we decide today is the deal. No takebacks or modifications. If you don’t hold up your end of the agreement, I will terminate the partnership.”

“There are a couple of things I need in order to make this partnership work from my perspective.”

“I’m all ears,” I told him, eager to hear what I could have possibly left out.

“I want you to be responsible for sourcing and purchasing materials for the Livingstone jobs. I don’t have time for that. It cuts down on my productivity.”

I frowned at him. “How am I supposed to know what supplies you prefer to work

with?”

“You ask me. We talk about it. I’ll probably just tell you when I send the estimate.”

“Alright. I suppose I could do that. I did sourcing and purchasing for my father, so I know how time consuming that can be. Was there anything else?”

“Yeah, I want a solid forty-hour workweek.”

I was shaking my head before he even got the words out. “I’m sure that once we get geared up again there will be enough work to go around, but in the meantime, I’ll need to split the Livingstone jobs between you and my one remaining electrician.”

“I’m not gonna waste my time working here when I could be working for myself, while you give all the best assignments to your Livingstone employee. I’m more valuable to your company than he is, because I’m a master electrician and can work circles around him.”

I hated that he was putting my back against the wall on this issue, but if there was one value I learned from my father, it was to respect loyalty. “Harvey Snodgrass has been with our company for twenty years. He’s the one who alerted us that Mark was running the company into the ground. He deserves a fair shake when it comes to hours.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure out a way to make it work, Ms. Livingstone.”

This man was as difficult as he was annoying, and I wanted this meeting to be over as soon as possible. “Is there anything else?” I asked, trying to keep the irritation out of my voice.

“One more thing,” he said with a smile that looked a little smirky. Pulling the big

calico cat out of its carrier, he held her up for me to see. “I need you to keep Katy Purry here with you during the workday. She gets neurotic if I leave her alone too long.”

My eyes snapped from him to the cat and back again. “Absolutely not. That’s an absurd request and I don’t know anything about cats. We had a dog growing up.”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “You got to write a whole bunch of shit into the partnership agreement. I agreed to all of it. You said we would compromise. I haven’t seen a lot of compromise from you thus far.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” I told him, truly in disbelief that he was trying to get me to pet-sit for him. “Can’t you have her kenneled?”

“Nope. There’s no money in the budget for that,” he said so casually that I was almost convinced it must be true.

“How about friends or family?”

“Do you think if I had someone to help me out with my cat, I’d be dragging her to your office? This is something I need, and you promised to compromise.”

Rubbing my temple, I tried to think of a way out of this situation. “I meant that I was willing to compromise on professional issues and I did. I agreed to source and purchase materials for you. That saves you the time and trouble of turning in receipts and waiting for reimbursement.”

“Yeah, but most of that partnership agreement is filled with things you wanted. I can’t help it if my cat has an anxiety disorder and can’t be left alone all day. Plus, it’s not like she’s a dog. You don’t have to walk her or bother with her at all. I’ll put out some food and water and clean out her litter box every evening when I pick her up.

She just needs to see that there's a human in charge. This should not be the big ask you're makin' it out to be."

I sighed, "Fine, she can hang around the office with me during the day."

The moment I capitulated, he let her down on the floor and she stretched and pranced away to explore her new space. Jesus, I couldn't believe I just agreed to pet-sit for this man.

"That's great," he said brightly and tossed what looked like a pen in my direction. "She likes to play with a laser light."

Looking down at the object I caught, sure enough, it was a laser pointer. I ran one hand over my now throbbing temple. This was just great. I didn't know a single thing about cats, had never held one a day in my life and now I was practically a full-time cat sitter.

I really didn't like the smug expression on Benny's face and had a vague suspicion it was because I had turned him down for that one-night stand a couple of nights ago. "I'll update the partnership agreement, and we'll sign off on it in front of Harvey. He's a notary. That should make it all legal."

"You mean enforceable in a court of law, right?"

Damn this man. He was pushing all my buttons this morning. I took a deep breath and pretended like I hadn't heard that last question. "Just give me a few minutes."

"I'm gonna go out and get Katy's stuff from my truck."

"I'll buzz you out. We keep the door locked outside of business hours."

“Great, don’t forget to add the section on Katy Purry. It’s a big part of what makes this partnership work for me.”

“I’ll bet it is,” I muttered under my breath as he walked out of my office. Damn, damn, and double damn. When I said I’d do anything to save my family business, this asshole just had to test my limits. I got the distinct impression this whole cat thing was some kind of power play, one that I clearly had lost. One thing was for certain, I was going to have to be on my toes when dealing with Benny. I wasn’t going to let him get one over on me again.

I got to work amending the agreement, buzzing Benny out and back in again. At least he was planning to stick by my side when dealing with the terminations. I wasn’t afraid of either of the men involved but I wasn’t looking forward to doing it alone, just on the off chance that one of them became irate.

My phone buzzed again. A quick look told me it was another text from Mr. Edwards with yet another incentive to get me to come back to LA. I’d stopped responding to them after the first one. It felt uncomfortable having to tell him no multiple times.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Rebel

I made short work of setting up Katy's litter box in the private restroom attached to Lacey's office. I did feel a twinge of guilt about dropping the whole cat situation on her, but she was a good sport about it. Hopefully, Dusty's friend would turn up soon and it would only be a temporary arrangement. I gave her head a scratch, after only three days I was getting quite used to my redheaded feline companion. I never admitted to my club brothers that I still got anxiety sometimes when I heard loud noises, but I'd found that when Katy was sitting on my lap things didn't seem to bother me half as much. I put her food and water bowls on the tile near the back exit because I was told that door was never in use. After dumping a small basket of cat toys near her desk, I sat down just in time for Lacey to pull our paperwork off the printer.

Since I'm not stupid, I carefully read every single word. To her credit, Lacey had added the parts I requested and what she wrote was a fair and accurate representation of our conversation. The doorbell chimed and after checking the front door security camera on her desktop computer, Lacey buzzed her employees in. A quick glance at my watch told me it was nearing ten o'clock.

All three of them barged into her office without knocking. The first one stopped dead in his tracks and demanded, "What the hell is going on here?"

"Mark, could I get you and Sherman to take a seat in the lobby for ten minutes, I'd appreciate it."

"Look here, missy. You're in my seat and I need you to move your pretty ass."

“I’ll talk to you shortly, Mark. Go out and wait for me in the lobby.”

Instead of following directions, he took two steps closer to her. I growled in my not fucking around voice. “Mister, you can either go out to the lobby like Miss Livingstone asked or I can carry your ass out and sit down in a chair myself.”

“Who the hell are you?”

Lacey didn’t give me time to answer and said, “I know this is a confusing situation, Mark. But I need to talk to Harvey privately first. After that, you’ll be the first person I talk to.”

“I don’t know who you think you are, but while I’m out in the lobby, I’ll be calling your dad. He’ll be real interested to know you’re strutting around here like you own the place.”

“Hold off on calling him until after we talk. He’s not having a good day.”

Mark snorted a laugh and was already pulling out his cell phone as he walked back out the door. Sherman scurried out behind him.

Harvey shut the door and turned back to Lacey. “Is this what I think it is?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m taking over the business both legally and hands on moving forward. After having a look at the condition of the business it’s clear that some changes need to be made. I’d like for you to notarize a partnership agreement between Livingstone Electrical and Mr. Benjamin Ross. He’ll be working jobs right alongside you moving forward.”

“Your old man kept my notary seal in the bottom right desk drawer. He paid for me to become a notary and most all my notary work was for Livingstone Electrical.”

Lacey rattled around the drawer and found it. It didn't take long for us to show ID, sign off on the agreement and for him to affix his seal and signature. Lacey made a copy for me and handed Harvey his assignments for the day.

Harvey's eyes lit up. "Wow, we're back to business as usual. Mark hasn't given us a written work order in months."

She told him proudly, "I plan to run this office just like my mom did. If it was good enough for her, it's good enough for me."

Harvey's grin was genuine and filled with relief. "Glad to have you have back, ladybug."

I cranked my head around to see her blushing. "I'm not a little girl anymore, Harvey."

"Yeah, I know. But you'll always be our ladybug. Who do you want me to send in on my way out?"

She took a deep breath before responding, "Best send in Mark. I'm sure he's harassing the hell out of my parents."

"Your old man ain't in any condition to deal with his dumbass right now, ladybug."

"I know. Thanks for letting us know things were going sideways here, Harvey. We really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. I look forward to things getting back to normal."

With that he walked out and the next thing I knew, Mark was stalking in. "Did something happen to your parents? I can't get either of them on the phone."

Suddenly, Lacey was all business. “Have a seat Mark and I’ll tell you everything.”

He looked like he wasn’t going to comply and then thought better of it. Once he was seated, Lacey let him have it.

“My parents rely upon the revenue from their business to pay their living expenses and for my dad’s medical treatment.”

“I know business has been bad lately, but things will pick up,” Mark interjected in a confident tone. “They always do.”

Lacey shot back, “I don’t see how that would be possible with the amount of money you’ve been skimming from the business the last several months.”

Mark opened his mouth to deny it, but Lacey held up her hand. “Let me finish. I came back to Griffinsford on Friday evening and spent the better part of the weekend in the office. Livingstone Electrical, the business my father spent his entire life building up from nothing, is a few days away from having the power turned off and we owe both of the local building supply stores more than fifty thousand dollars each.”

“Like I said, times have been tough.”

“I want you to know that my parents have given me legal power of attorney over the business. I’m taking over the office and terminating your employment as of now.”

“You can’t do that, Lacey. Your father gave this business to me.”

“Do you have paperwork to back up that claim because I can’t see my dad giving away his business to a non-family member. That was never the plan.”

“You know your father didn’t put shit like that in writing. He conducted business his

whole life with gentlemen's agreements and handshakes."

"And look where that got him, Mark. He trusted you and you stole from the business and ran it into the ground. It only took you a matter of months to tear down everything he worked his whole life to build."

"Look, this is ridiculous. I'm gonna talk to your old man."

"No. You're not. My father is very ill. He's not competent to give you permission to remain in your position. If you start harassing him, so help me God, I'll hit you with a cease and desist so fast it will make your head spin. Stress makes him sicker and neither my mother nor I will tolerate you trying to manipulate him when he's doing good to remember his own family's faces."

"Lacey, you've got this situation all wrong. I'm sure he didn't agree to put you in charge of his whole business. I mean, sure he could have made you the office manager, but he didn't mean for you to replace me as the general manager of the actual business."

"What part of 'I caught you stealing from the business' don't you understand?"

His expression turned stubborn. "I don't know what you think you found, missy but it sure as hell wasn't me stealing and I won't have you smearing my good name by saying shit like that about me."

"I won't have to. I'm hiring an independent auditor to come and review our books. If they find evidence that you were cooking the books the way I think you were, I'm going to the police, and I'll also initiate a civil suit to force you to pay restitution. That money you stole is needed for my father's care."

Mark frowned. "Your old man owned a virtual gold mine for thirty years. Regardless

of what hard-luck story they're telling you, your parents are loaded. If a few bucks got misappropriated on my watch—and I'm not saying it did—it's nothing compared to the money they've got in different banks."

Lacey slid a piece of paper across the desk. "I've written you a letter of termination. You don't have to sign it if you don't want to. I have an eyewitness who can prove that I gave it to you."

"You can't do this, Lacey. You're just a kid. I've been working at this company for over a decade, waiting for my chance to be in charge."

"I can and I am. You've left me no choice, Mark. If it weren't for your gross mismanagement, I wouldn't have become involved at all. All you had to do was run the business like my father trusted you to do and everything would have been golden. My mother and I aren't going to let you destroy our family business."

"So what am I supposed to do now? Go home and sit around waiting for the police to come knocking at my door?"

"I don't know, Mark. And I don't have time to worry about the man who was stealing from my family hand over fist while my father was struggling to hang onto his sanity."

"Who in the hell do I appeal this decision to?" he said angrily, as he snatched the letter off the table.

"No one. California is an at-will state. I'm legally in charge of the business so I'm well within my rights to terminate whoever I want for whatever reason I want."

"Fuck you, Lacey. You're nothing but an overprivileged kid who thinks she can work miracles with this old company."

I spoke up. “Time to move along, Mr. Shepard.”

“Again,” he spat out. “Who the hell are you?”

Lacey answered, “This is Mr. Benjamin Ross, my new business partner.”

Mark chuckled. “So you can’t run the business by yourself after all. You had to hire a man who actually knows how to manage an electrical company.”

I took a step closer to him and lowered my voice. “I’m a master electrician and was hired to be electrical technician. I know fuck all about running a business. In fact I’m here to learn what I can on that front. That’s what I’m getting out of the partnership.”

“Lacey hired a master electrician? That’s a bit of an overkill for a backwoods town like Griffinsford, don’t ya think?”

I told him in no uncertain terms, “I think it’s about time you hit the road. Lacey has one more employee to talk to and then a full day of work ahead of her, unfucking all the shit you fucked up around here.”

“Fucking fine. I’m done talking to the two of you. From now on, I’ll do my talking through an attorney.”

He walked out the door and slammed it behind him. Lacey shot me a relieved look. “Well, that went better than I thought it would.”

Sympathy welled up in my chest for this young woman. Regardless of whatever axe I had to grind with her, she was holding up like a champ. “Talking to Mr. Shepard was always going to go off the rails. It’s just the kind of asshole he is. You did real good, ladybug. Trust me on that.

“Don’t you start with calling me ladybug too,” she said it with a hint of a smile, so I didn’t think she disliked it as much as she claimed.

The door cracked open, and Sherman stuck his head in the office. “Mark said you’re ready to talk to me now.”

Lacey motioned him in, “Come on in and have a seat, Sherman.”

When he was seated, she launched into his firing speech. “I’m sorry to say that we can’t keep you on any longer, Sherman. I had a look at our records over the weekend and it looks like your complaints tripled over the last twelve-month period, we’ve spent more time fixing your bad wiring than we made from the jobs, and we even lost customers because of quality control issues on the work you did for our company.”

Unlike Mark, Sherman looked like a deer caught in the headlights. “Isn’t there some way I could get retraining and keep my job?”

“I’m not sure this is a training issue,” Lacey told him flatly. “You were doing good quality work when my parents ran the business. The shoddy workmanship only started under Mark’s watch.”

“He kept pressuring us to get the jobs done quick. When you’re rushing, details get missed.”

Lacey sighed. “Yeah, I know that. The thing is, we’re not selling non-dairy creamers here. We’re responsible for wiring businesses and homes. Bad wiring can lead to electrocution and house fires. I can’t take a chance that you’re not going to cut corners when you think you have good reason.”

“Do I get severance pay or anything like that?” he asked hopefully.

“I’m afraid not. Right now the business is operating in the red. Until we fix all the jobs you messed up and somehow get back in the black, there isn’t going to be any money left over. The math doesn’t add up for severance pay.”

“Losing my job out of the clear blue sky is gonna make it hard to pay my bills, ya know?”

“I’m sorry, Sherman,” she said as she slid his termination letter across the desk to him. “I truly am.”

He took his letter and left with what I thought was quiet dignity. Then he slammed the office door behind him.

“That little pipsqueak didn’t have the guts to tell you off, so he stomps around like a toddler.”

Lacey dropped down into her seat. “That was way more difficult than I thought it was going to be.”

“You could have just sent them a registered letter,” I pointed out.

“No. Mark and Sherman have been with us for a long time. They deserved a face-to-face conversation and honesty about why we were letting them go. It’s just really hard to fire someone because it messes with their ability to support their families. I feel like I’m taking food off their table and punishing their innocent families for their wrongdoing.”

“Yeah, I can see how it might seem that way. But both of them got themselves in a situation where keeping them on would just be a cancer to your business.”

“I know what you’re saying is true. I just need to keep reminding myself that they did

this to themselves.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what happened in this case. Look, it’s just gone eleven thirty. You ready for an early lunch?”

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to eat but I’d be happy to go with you and get some coffee while you eat. Where were you thinking of going?”

“Bennigan’s. Once you start smelling good food that might trigger your hunger.”

It only took us about fifteen minutes to drive to Bennigan’s and be shown to our seats. Once we were face-to-face, Lacey seemed to be putting the unpleasantness of the morning behind her. If nothing else, she was resilient. I’d give her that. Seeing her operate in her own environment made her seem a lot less awkward. All that newfound confidence looked good on her.

Once we had given our orders and had our drinks, I asked, “Why is it that Harvey gets printed work orders, and I get electronic ones?”

She started to relax a little. “It’s because Harvey can’t even operate his cell phone half the time. He never quite entered the tech world. My mom found out long ago that printing out his work orders every morning was the key to helping him be successful.”

Shrugging with one shoulder, I responded, “That makes sense, I suppose.”

“You’re the opposite of Harvey. Remember in Storm’s office when I asked you to tell me a little about your work process? Even though you didn’t see fit to answer my question, I realized by the nature of your professional dilemma that you hate keeping

up with paperwork. You're the kind of guy who likes to check his phone, so electronic work orders were clearly the way to go for you."

"I have to say you sure do seem like you know how to manage people, even people like me who don't like the idea of being managed."

"The whole point of managing people is for them to not feel like you're overbearing, forcing them to do things a certain way, or harassing them about deadlines. That's micromanaging and I try to stay away from that at all costs."

As we ate and chatted back and forth this lunch almost started to feel like a first date for me. Then again, I couldn't remember the last time I actually went on a date, as club girls and one night stands were more my scene, so the fact was, I didn't know much about what a real date felt like. All I knew was that the more time I spent with Lacey, the more I was starting to like her as a person.

I particularly liked the way she kept her chin up and her wits about her when the situation got rocky and unpredictable. She still wasn't showing any interest in me as a man, which was fine. It was enough that she was polite, respectful, and partnering up with me to increase both our earning power.

When lunch was over, we went our separate ways, her to the office to cat-sit for me and answer my business line, and me to the job I already had scheduled for the afternoon. If this worked out for me, it would be a real step in the right direction in terms of taking care of my grandmother. That was my sole focus at the moment.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Lacey

After a month, I came to the conclusion that financially, partnering up with Benny was the best decision I could have made for the business. When it came to working, he was a beast. He was good at what he did and fast. He described himself as out-fucking-standing and now I could see that it was true. He also wasn't joking about working circles around Harvey. Between the two of them, I was hoping to keep all the balls in the air.

Unfortunately, he was also a bit of a fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants kind of guy. He never worked according to the schedule of jobs I gave him, electing instead to triage them on his own, doing the ones he thought shouldn't wait, regardless of when the client was expecting us. He would just call and rearrange the whole day's work schedule without asking. Since our customers seemed to love him, we hadn't had complaints or anything, but there had been some problems with him going to pick up materials that weren't ready because he decided to do the job in the morning instead of the late afternoon like it was scheduled. I was coping with his incessant need to control his own schedule because it hadn't caused customer service issues yet.

Our revenue was up, and our expenditure was certainly down since Mark wasn't here to skim off the top. He'd called for a while, trying to get his job back. When that didn't work, he got belligerent and threatening. Since he'd been kind enough to leave threatening voicemails and text messages, getting a no-contact order hadn't been difficult. The auditors were scheduled to come in next month and I'd frozen all our records from the time Mark was running the business. I couldn't wait to get the ball rolling on that. Companies that did that kind of work were usually booked solid. I was lucky to get the appointment I had made with them.

And then there was Katy Purry. At first, I was kind of standoffish, but the more she rubbed against my legs and tried to sit on my lap, the less wary I became of her and I kind of got used to having a cat in the office. When everyone was out, she was company. I wouldn't exactly say we were fast friends, but I did allow her to lounge in the windowsill behind my desk and we played laser light a couple of times a day. Benny had been as good as his word about cleaning the litter box every evening when he picked her up. Being his cat sitter had turned out to be much less problematic than I thought it would be.

Over lunch on our first day, Benny had confessed that he'd added the kitty clause to the contract as a way to wind me up. But he had genuinely been worried about leaving her all day. Apparently, the set up was only temporary, and the person who was supposed to be rehoming Katy Purry would be collecting her in a few weeks. I had to say, after getting to know her, I was kind of hoping that the person changed their mind. Either that, or I'd have to consider advertising for the permanent position of office cat.

When my phone rang disturbing the peace, I didn't answer it because it was the ringtone I'd assigned to my old boss. That fantasy of him begging me to come back to work for him kind of came true but it wasn't as great as I thought it would be. I think he just didn't want to have to train a new person.

This morning I was processing payroll. It didn't take long because there were so few of us who work for the company. Lost in my work, the whole day slipped by before I knew it.

When my phone pinged, I almost didn't check it because I thought it was my old boss texting me again. It was a good thing I decided to look, because it was Zoe inviting me for drinks at the Slayers' clubhouse. I texted her back that I would, and then I wrapped up my work.

By the time Benny came to pick up his cat I was ready to go. When he saw me in my jacket with my purse on my shoulder, he asked, “You’re pretty eager to get out of here. Got a hot date or something?”

“Nope, just drinks with Zoe at the clubhouse,” I told him. I could tell by the intense way he was looking at me that he was thinking about the last time we were at the clubhouse together.

“You’ll be in my neck of the woods then,” he commented while looking at me intently.

“Yeah, I don’t socialize with employees. Just thought I get that out in the open.”

He scooped up Katy and glared at me. “Is that what you think of me? As your goddamn employee?”

I was taken aback by his response. “That’s not what I meant,” I told him. Benny had a tendency to get offended too easily.

“I asked you a damn question. Do you think of me as your employee, someone who reports to you and you have control over?”

I took a step back and tried to reel him back in from whatever had sparked his anger. “Jesus, Benny. Calm the hell down. I wasn’t trying to set you off.”

“Why won’t you answer the question? Do you think you’re too good to socialize with me at the clubhouse because you see me a mere employee?”

“I do pay you for going on jobs.”

“If that’s how you feel, maybe I should start looking at you as my office help. You

keep my calendar, answer my business line, and sort out my invoices, right?”

“Look, we can call it being co-workers if you like. It’s not a good idea for co-workers to socialize together. It’s not professional.”

Curling his upper lip, he snarled. “I hate to say this but you’re a liar. Want me to tell you how I know?” Without waiting for me to answer, he told me. “It’s because Harvey told me that your folks always invited their employees to their house for cookouts and bowling with them. Correct me if I’m wrong but you said you’d be running this office just like your mother, who socialized with employees, but you think you’re too good to socialize casually with me on my club’s property. Where does that leave me? Should I run and hide every time you decide to come and hang out with my club president’s wife?”

“No, of course not. Why are you so upset? Explain it to me like I’m five because I just don’t get it,” I knew I probably should have phrased my original comment differently, but I really didn’t know why he was getting so angry.

Taking a step closer, his expression turned dark. “I’ll tell you exactly why I’m pissed. It’s because women like you enjoy coming to the clubhouse, hanging around the bad boys and soaking up the biker ambiance but you’d burn in hell before you socialize with us, right?”

Exasperated, I told him, “Turning this business around is the most important thing in my life right now. I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize our professional relationship. I’m just trying to set and maintain good boundaries.”

“Yeah, I’m hearing what you’re laying down. You’re the queen bee who sees me as one of your drones. I’m not a real person in your eyes, just a mechanism to make money for your business. You aren’t gonna let anything stand in the way of our lucrative partnership, right?”

“This partnership is working for you as well as it’s working for me. I just don’t want to complicate an already complex situation.”

“I’ll make it easy for you. Offering to show you around the basement at our clubhouse was the biggest mistake I ever made, and I’m fucking thrilled that you turned me down. Trust me when I say, you don’t have to worry about me approaching you for any reason at the clubhouse. I’ll pretend you’re not even there.”

I felt overwhelmed and bewildered by his reaction to our situation. “I’m sorry, Benny. I don’t know what you want from me.”

“For starters, you could stop calling me Benny. It’s Mr. Ross to you. Remember, all you care about is making money and being professional. Fuck the actual human beings, right?”

Before I could respond, he stalked out the door with his cat tucked under his arm. There had been several of these situations where he got a bug up his ass about something. I didn’t think I’d ever truly understand men, but it sounded like he either thought I was frigid and cold hearted and just interested in exploiting him for his labor—or that I liked to hang out at the Dark Slayers clubhouse, and drink their free booze with no intention of letting any of the men get close to me because I thought I was better than they were.

Since I wasn’t cold-hearted or frigid like Benny insinuated, I decided to prove it by embracing every new experience I’d been holding myself back from sampling. I decided to go home and put on something that matched my new outlook of trying everything once. I showered, put on lacy underthings, a short black skirt, thigh-high stockings, and spiked heels. I added a white silk button-up vest with nothing underneath and some light makeup and jewelry. After brushing out all my long brown

hair into soft waves, I felt sexier than I ever had in my life. Standing in front of my floor-length mirror, I decided that I could give those club girls a run for their money tonight if I wanted to.

On the drive over to the clubhouse, I decided not to mention the disagreement I'd just had with Benny to Zoe or Alison. Truthfully, I simply didn't want to rehash and analyze it. I preferred to have a nice, cold margarita and kick up my heels for the evening and put the whole thing out of my mind. Tonight I would have fun.

When I arrived, Zoe and Alison were already there sipping on refreshing drinks. Seeing them fitting in, happy and carefree, triggered something in me. I wasn't a cold-hearted stick in the mud no matter what Benny thought. I vowed to really let my hair down tonight. I was going to drink, not worry about driving home and I was going to socialize with every single brother in the damn building, I thought bravely.

That's when I noticed that there were no brothers in attendance tonight. I made a beeline for my friends and grabbed an empty chair at their table.

Alison teased me, "Hey didn't I just see you here like five weeks ago?"

"Yeah, I had a nice time and decided to come back for more."

"Well, you're dressed to kill. Every brother in the building is going to try and get with you if you're not careful."

"Oh, I plan to be everything but careful. Unlike last time, I'm going to leave this clubhouse saying I came, I saw, and I kicked all kinds of ass."

Zoe and Alison gave me twin expressions of confusion. Alison said, "Say what now? Explain."

“I’m tired of being the mousy little office manager who always counts her drinks, plays it safe, and never lets loose. Tonight I’m going to enjoy my drinks, flirt with every single brother I come across, shoot pool, dance, and maybe take a peek down in the basement. I’m going to do everything I was too scared to do before.”

Alison lifted up her drink in a salute. “You only live once, my friend. And life is meant to be enjoyed.”

Zoe, on the other hand, cautioned me, “Just remember if you want something to stop, you have to say it out loud. The men here can’t read your mind.”

Alison just stared at her sister. “I can’t believe any of the brothers would do something she didn’t want. They’re not like that.”

Turning to me she asked, “What’s driving this sudden need to be wild at a biker bar?”

Since I promised myself not to point fingers at Benny, I simply said, “Someone accused me of being cold and not caring about fellow human beings. I hate that I come across that way, so I decided to change it up.”

“And you’re intent on proving to yourself that you can open yourself up to exciting new experiences and engage with people, right?”

I nodded my head and just as I was about to reply, Rosie dropped off my margarita. I grinned up at her and said, “I plan to drink a million of these tonight.”

Rosie chuckled and responded cheerfully, “Along with the fifth or sixth drink I’ll be sure to include a barf bag.”

Glancing around again as Rosie walked off, I realized there were still no brothers, just a bunch of women hanging balloons and streamers. I gestured around the room. “I

can't really flirt or dance if there are no brothers. Are they all at a biker rally or something?"

"Nope. They're having church in the back meeting room," Zoe said, gesturing towards the back of the bar.

I guessed my confusion was apparent because she clarified, "Church is just what they call their club meetings."

Alison chimed in, "I'm surprised you didn't know they were having church this evening. Since Benny's getting patched in tonight."

"If he gets enough votes," Zoe clarified. After studying my stunned expression, Zoe guessed, "You didn't know, did you?"

I shook my head because I understood what a big deal it was for the prospects to finally be accepted by the brothers as a full-fledged member of the Dark Slayers MC. I just didn't realize it was Benny's turn to get voted in.

Alison's expression turned worried. She ran her finger around the rim of her margarita glass, scooping up some of the salt and brought it to her lips. Then she asked, "I wonder why he didn't tell you? I thought the two of you would be close, being partners for coming up on a month now."

I closed my eyes and came clean with my friends. "We're not close. He doesn't even like me."

Zoe gave me a knowing look. "Let me guess, he's the one who said you were closed off and cold-hearted, right?"

"Yeah, all I said was that we shouldn't socialize when I come to the clubhouse. He

lost his mind and accused me of thinking he was just a worker and not someone worthy of socializing with.”

Zoe tilted her head to the right as her expression turned perplexed. “Well, do you? Do you see the brothers as just a bunch of low-class bikers, bad boys from the wrong side of the tracks?”

“No! Of course not. How could ask me something like that?”

“For two reasons. First, Benny isn’t stupid. If he said that, it’s because that’s the impression he got from you. And second, because I was really confused the first time I met Storm. Much like you, I’d lived an upper-middle-class life growing up. I honestly didn’t know what to make of the Dark Slayers or of him. He was so different to anything I’d ever known. I had a hard time trusting him. Does any of that ring a bell?”

I thought it over for a few minutes, really digging down deep to see if I had any of that going on. After considering it for a few moments, I shook my head. “No. I think Benny is smart, capable, and even handsome. Unfortunately, he also has a really difficult personality. I often find myself in conflict with him and don’t even know how I got there. I don’t think he’s being difficult intentionally. It just happens. To be honest, my bright idea of keeping our relationship strictly professional was mostly because I don’t trust myself not to end up in some huge fight that blows up our professional relationship.”

Zoe squinted her eyes as though she was trying to remember something. “I think I know what you’re talking about. I had a sit down with him after the meeting Storm arranged for the two of you. He made some comment about how the club president’s wife had never sat down and talked with him before, and he sounded like he was accusing me of snooping into the situation with you. He was convinced you were going to take on the role of queen bee and make him a worker bee.”

I almost choked on my margarita in my haste to point out, “He said something like that to me today too, insinuating that I only value him for the money he makes for my family business.”

Alison threw in her two cents’ worth. “This is coming from a woman who’s had a lot of experience with therapy. It sounds like he has a chip on shoulder.”

I snorted a laugh. “Why would that handsome, competent bastard doubt himself? He’s like the whole package, even with whatever this chip is.”

Zoe’s mouth snapped shut, almost like she knew, but wasn’t going to say. “We shouldn’t be gossiping about a club brother with you, Lacey. If you want to know what makes Benny tick, you should spend time getting to know him.”

Alison immediately agreed with her sister. “Zoe’s right. The way I see it, trying to play it safe by being standoffish in order to preserve your professional relationship might end up doing just the opposite. Even if he has a difficult personality at times, Benny is still Slayer material.”

Zoe added, “Storm calls that having the right stuff. It means he’s honest, loyal, dependable, and always willing to go the extra mile for a friend or a brother. He would be a good person to have in your corner, and pissing him off constantly might not lead to a good outcome for you.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean, Zoe?” I asked, wondering if she was hinting that he’d be vindictive. I’d had enough of that with Mark, and I really didn’t need another disgruntled employee.

Zoe frowned at me. “It means that he might get fed up with being treated like he’s just a cog in the machine and quit. He’s not obligated to keep working with you, right?”

“Well no, but I’d sure like it if he did. He’s a good electrician and master electricians are hard to find.”

Alison took a drink of her margarita and lowered her voice. “I’m not saying you have to date him or be besties with him but maybe it would be better if you could treat him like a person rather than a valuable commodity for your business. Surely it wouldn’t kill you to have an occasional drink or conversation with him in passing when you’re both in the clubhouse.”

My mouth fell open, because when she put it that way, I could see where I went wrong. We didn’t work for a big corporation. My family business was a small, casual mom and pop operation where we treated our employees like family. So, why was I trying to keep Benny at arm’s length?

Just then there was a big commotion near the back of the room and a bunch of brothers came flooding out. Benny was among them. He had his shirt off and my mouth went dry at the sight of his ripped body. His shoulder-length hair was no longer tied back at the nape of his neck in a ponytail. Instead, it was messy, like he’d just roughhoused with one of the brothers. He was carrying a leather vest in one hand. He stopped to put it on, and I swear my heart skipped a beat.

It hit me hard and fast that this was indeed why I’d been trying to keep him at arm’s length. It wasn’t because he was a rough and ready biker, a master electrician, or because he was my business partner. It was because he was smoking hot, and I didn’t know what to do with my attraction. I turned my back to him and began gulping my margarita. Shit. Shit. Shit. How could I have been so stupid?

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Rebel

I knew Lacey was coming tonight but seeing her across the bar pissed me off. Tonight was supposed to be all about me getting patched into the club at long last. I wanted to relax and enjoy the nice party the old ladies planned for me, not have my business partner looking down her nose at me on what was supposed to be one of the most important nights of my life.

When it came to women, I'd never once been able to catch a break. That's why when the newest club girl, Tonya, came sniffing around, I took her to my side and kept her there. So what if Lacey didn't think I was good enough to socialize with? There were other women in the world. I didn't know why I was so hung up on this one anyway. It didn't make sense.

We went to shoot some pool while the food was being cooked. Getting off that grill was one of the best parts of being patched into the club. My club brother Forge started a grilling tradition when he was a prospect, but I didn't quite have his talent for cooking meat. Thank goodness, I wouldn't have to worry about being an utter disappointment on the grill moving forward.

Tonya hung all over me, wearing booty shorts and a tube top. Maybe it wasn't classy, like I preferred, but she was bright, bubbly, and eager for my touch. It soothed my ego a bit at not being able to get close to the woman who caught my eye the first time she walked into the clubhouse. Part of me realized I was tryin' to make Lacey jealous, but that was crazy thinking.

Being patched in got me Tonya's attention, but of course Lacey wouldn't care about

things like that. I shook Tonya off my arm long enough to play a game of pool with Forge. I wasn't going to let Lacey spoil my evening, so I just kept smiling, slamming shots back, and trying not to brood about it.

Something like excitement, possessiveness, and annoyance twisted together in my gut when I noticed her eyes following me as I moved around the clubhouse. There was something in her expression, an emotion that I couldn't quite identify. Shit, at one point I decided it looked like longing, but that was probably just my imagination. As the night wore on and Tonya continued to orbit around me, staking her claim for the night, I grew less and less interested in her. Maybe that was a shitty attitude to have but I couldn't help it. I used to love the fun-loving club girls, but the thought of another one-night stand just wasn't appealing.

By then the party in the bar had wound down and my club brothers were disappearing, some went outside, others to their rooms, and still more wandered off to touch grass. I'd dialed back on the shots when the food came out, but I was nowhere near sober enough to think clearly. We ended up going downstairs around midnight, when Tonya pulled me towards the steps leading to the basement bar and I let her.

Going down those steps I decided that I wasn't going to have sex with her. She was young, cute, and clearly motivated to get into my pants, but I wasn't feeling it with her. In fact I hadn't been feeling it with any women for the last couple of months.

My alcohol-addled brain couldn't seem to work out exactly why that was. I was just on autopilot, drifting along enjoying the night. I glanced over my shoulder as we walked down the stairs and I saw Lacey following us, almost like a shadow. Something about her keeping track of me was thrilling and made me want to shove Tonya away in favor of having Lacey at my side. I didn't though, because I remembered she didn't want me. She wanted to keep things professional, and I didn't understand what was so great about that.

The next twenty minutes were a blur, with Tonya pushing me down into a chair and doing some kind of sexy little lap dance for me. I glanced around the room, trying to figure out where Lacey was and if she was with anyone, but I couldn't see her. I was trying to figure out how to get rid of Tonya in a nice way. I was a full-fledged brother now and with that status came the privilege of doing what I liked—as long as it didn't break any club rules. Telling a club girl I didn't want to fuck, certainly didn't fall into the category of rule-breaking, though I knew I'd be getting ribbed by my club brothers for turning her away.

When Tonya brought me a beer from the bar then sat provocatively on the table in front of me with her legs spread wide, I didn't know exactly why but it was a big turn-off for me. She kept trying to run her hands up my legs, but I just moved them away each time. When she made a disgruntled sound, I took a sip of the cold beer and shook my head.

“Maybe tonight's just not your night, darlin'. How about I take a rain check, and you go find another brother to get frisky with?” I knew I sounded cold, but if I wasn't feeling it, I wasn't feeling it.

“You really don't want me?” The incredulous tone of her voice was guilt-inducing for me, but not enough to do things I had no interest in doing with her. I wondered about the guilt for a brief second before determining that it came from feeling like I'd led her on. If I'd been more sober, I would have cut her loose earlier. “Sorry, maybe another time,” I told her with some empathy in my voice.

When she ran for the stairs, I wished that I'd gone on a bike ride like some of my club brothers instead. I always did better when it was just me, the open road, and no women to offend.

Suddenly, I caught sight of a dark shadow and looked up to find Lacey standing in front of me. In that moment I wanted to reach for her, draw her into my lap and taste

her luscious lips more than I wanted air to breathe. I didn't reach for her though, because a little voice in the back of my head whispered, she doesn't want you .

When she took a step closer, everyone disappeared from my world except her. She was standing there, all hesitant and beautiful. She was wearing a short black skirt and a cute white button up vest. She looked sexy but classy and it pushed all my buttons.

I shoved the table aside, not wanting to be reminded of the woman who threw herself at me just now, sitting there with her legs spread wide. Beer from my glass sloshed all over the place but I couldn't bring myself to take my eyes off Lacey.

When she began to move, my eyes followed her. For some reason she walked around me in a complete circle before stepping closer.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"What does it matter?" she replied quietly. "The fact remains that you're here, looking for some action. Maybe I want a sample of what every other woman in this place is getting."

I snorted a laugh because my still-tipsy mind must have been playing tricks on me. It sounded like Little Miss Fancy Pants just propositioned me. That couldn't be right. She didn't socialize with co-workers, much less fuck them.

"I'm sure my ears are deceiving me, because you told me earlier today in no uncertain terms that co-workers shouldn't socialize."

She took a step closer, putting herself within grabbing distance of my greedy hands. And the temptation to reach out and bring her closer was almost irresistible. "I thought you were the expert on one night stands and here you are, trying to dissuade me from wanting one with you. What's that about?"

“You been drinking Lacey?” That would explain this recent about-turn on the issue of us hooking up. I frowned. Yeah, that was definitely it.

Her hands landed on her curvy hips, and she huffed out an exasperated breath. “I stopped drinking hours ago, but I can start again if drunk women are your kink.”

“Aren’t you gonna do a little dance for me like the other girl?”

“You should be ashamed of yourself for not even remembering her name. I’m beginning to think us women are all interchangeable for you.”

Dark glee sparked in my mind. “And that bothers you, doesn’t it? A man not thinking you’re a special, unique snowflake that should be cherished and protected?”

Her chin came up and her eyes glittered with annoyance, but also with hot interest. “Just because I like being the queen bee doesn’t mean I see all men as worker bees.”

“You don’t say?” Reaching out, I gave into the overwhelming need to have her all soft and compliant in my arms. I tugged her forward and she came without complaint, climbing right into my lap face first. I tangled one hand in her hair and pulled her head back until I could look into her eyes. “Maybe I’m one of those special worker bees that services the queen. Did you ever think of that?”

Instead of arguing with me, her expression turned needy. “This queen definitely needs servicing. The only real question is if you’re up for the job?”

I loved the challenge in her tone. It turned me on. In fact everything about Lacey excited me. Holding her head firmly in place I plundered her mouth like a man long starved of the sweetest affection to be had from a good woman. Lacey was made of all the things that thrilled the fuck out of me.

Unlike the club girls, Lacey didn't want me for my cut. I was beginning to think maybe she didn't even want to ride my cock to ensure I kept making money for her. If I was being honest, it had occurred to me that our lives could fit seamlessly together long-term both professionally and relationship wise.

I got lost in the fantasy of having her in life and in my bed forever, as my free hand slid up her inner thigh to find her panties soaked for me. As our tongues tangled, my thumb skimmed over her swollen clit, causing her to groan into our kiss. The last thing I wanted to do was stop, but I had to.

I gave her ass a playful slap, "Look, if you really want me, it's not gonna be tonight. Our first time should be special, not in sex club where other people can see."

Disappointment swamped her expression. "You don't want me?"

I grabbed her hand and pushed it onto my hard-on. Crude I know, but my cock was so hard it was practically bursting its way through the zipper on my jeans. "Hell the fuck yeah, I want you more than I've ever wanted a woman before."

"I don't understand," she murmured as she glanced down at my lips again.

"Here's what I'm offering. I can take you to my room upstairs. We'll fool around and I'll give you lots of orgasms, but the cock riding should be something special."

I watched her fight to keep the smile off her face. "I think sex with you would be special because it's with you."

"Fucking hell, do not do that to me, woman."

"Do what?" she said as she slowly licked her lips.

On one move I stood up and scooped her into my arms, grumbling under my breath, “Make a man feel special enough to start falling in love, why don’t ya.”

When she laughed, my tipsy brain reminded me that it was supposed to be an inside thought, not an outside thought. “You sure about this?” I asked.

“Totally,” she answered.

“Well then, who am I to disappoint a lady?” With that, I carried her up the stairs, through our regular bar, to the part of the clubhouse where our rooms are. As a prospect I’d had a room I stayed at on the weekends, it was basic but clean. I managed to get the door opened while still keeping a hold of Lacey, though once we were in the room I staggered and dropped her onto the bed.

“You sure you’re not too intoxicated to make a clear-headed decision about giving me orgasms, Mr. Ross?”

My head jerked down, and I found myself gaping at her softly spoken question. It was cute that she was trying to be funny by calling me by my last name like I demanded she do during our argument at the office.

“You can call me by my new club name from now on. It’s Rebel.”

Her expression lit up and I knew she was going to come off with a smart ass comment before the words even left her mouth. “I can see why you got tagged with that club name. Your personality is extremely rebellious at times.”

“Yeah, old habits die hard,” I muttered.

She raised an eyebrow, “There’s a story there, I think. But right now I want you to answer my question. Are you sober enough to not regret this in the morning?”

“I asked you to have sex with me stone-cold sober before. How can you even question if I still want to fool around with you?”

“I guess I shouldn’t question it. That would be like looking a gift horse in the mouth.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that, as no one had ever thought of me as a gift before. I made sure the door was shut, before heading back to the bed where she was still lying where I dropped her. “So, we’ve moved out of bee analogies and are onto horse ones. Fine by me, my pretty little filly.”

She shook her head pretty hard. “No horse metaphors.”

“Are metaphors analogies? Maybe all analogies are metaphors, but not all metaphors are analogies.” What the fuck was I going on about? I get the woman of my dreams alone, and I was taking shit.

She brought her hands to the front of her vest and began popping buttons as she spoke. “You’re looking at the girl who barely passed English in high school, so let’s not get wrangled up in the dynamics of grammar.”

I pulled off my vest and ran one hand over my bare chest. “Can grammar be dynamic?”

“You’re gonna need to stop, or the skirt is staying on.”

“Wanna bet?” I said as I crawled onto the bed with her.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Lacey

Hovering over me, Benny used one hand to balance himself. He used one finger on his free hand to pull the vest I'd unbuttoned off my shoulders. When he bent over and kissed my shoulder, this suddenly felt like a lot more than just the one-night stand I was expecting it to be. He was doing exactly what he grumbled under his breath about me doing, getting feelings involved.

I liked how he didn't immediately try to put his dick in my face or try to get me to touch him. I knew it wasn't due to lack of arousal because of the thick bulge in his pants. This was what an honorable man looked like in the wild and I was loving every second of it. Also, this man was clearly packing some serious heat behind that zipper.

He stroked the back of his finger down my neck, sending shivers down my spine and causing my nipples to get hard. For some reason, although I was here to get pleased by him, the fact that he could turn me on with so little effort embarrassed me. I couldn't help but wonder if something like that would make me seem easy in his eyes.

When his hand moved to flip back the other side of my vest, it slid down my arms. "You can change your mind about this anytime. Just tell me to stop. I'll stop no matter how far we've gone."

"That's real sweet of you," I stammered, trying to get my arousal under control.

Benny—or Rebel as I should probably start thinking of him as now—tilted my chin up to look into my eyes. "No. That's not me being sweet. That's the bare minimum

you should expect from any man you're allowing to see your beautiful naked body."

I jerked my chin out of his hand and frowned at him. "Yeah, of course I know that. I was just trying to be polite. Why do you always have to get weird?"

Rebel pushed up off the bed with both hands. "Well, that fucking went bad pretty damn fast." Stabbing one finger in my direction, he added, "And it wasn't my fault this time."

I grabbed his finger and pulled him back down. "Don't know where you think you're going. Your queen hasn't even been serviced once, and you made promises to her." Before he had a chance to argue, my hand dropped down to the front of his pants, and I tugged him closer.

When he landed back in position on one hand, he shook his head. "There's something strange going on with you. You're the one and only woman who's ever still wanted to fool around after I pissed them off."

"Socially awkward people like us, need a three-strikes and you're out rule. The way I see it, you've got two more strikes." I gave him my most brilliant smile to take the sting out of calling him socially awkward.

"Goddammit, I never thought I'd meet a woman who's too cute and fun to say no to, but here you are in the flesh."

"Yeah, I'm all kinds of fun in bed. Better not pass up your opportunity to have sex with me while you can," I joked.

"Nice try. We're not having sex. We're fooling around and I'm giving you tons of orgasms."

“I’m still game for that plan. You can’t blame a girl for trying.”

His hand reached round to slide the zipper on my skirt down. “Trust me, no woman leaves my bed without having her fill.”

Even though that did nothing to make me feel special, I soldiered on. Rebel was odd, quirky, and argumentative, but I was still all kinds of attracted to him and wanted this one-night stand to work out for us both. That’s why my whole body lit up when he slid my skirt off and gazed down at my black lace panties. When I moved my legs, I could tell that I was drenched purely from being kissed and touched by him.

It felt like some kind of rebound effect. I tried so hard to keep him at arm’s length and convince myself that I wasn’t seriously attracted to him, that I had tons of repressed sexual need. Now that I’d opened that door, my desire for him had doubled and then tripled seemingly all at once. I didn’t know what to make of this situation. For once in my life, I was winging it.

My head tipped back when I felt him kissing his way up my leg. It was like being worshiped in a way I couldn’t readily describe. I couldn’t imagine what he got out of rubbing his face against the wet crotch of my panties until I heard him murmur something about how good I smelled. It made me cringe a little because I didn’t believe that was true and it reminded me that he might not like the way I tasted. I didn’t know why I worried about that because within seconds he had pulled my panties off and his tongue was on me. I was so excited that it was becoming hard to keep my train of thought. He abruptly stopped and moved up my body.

“Love how wet you are. But I want to start at the top and work my way down. That way, I don’t miss anything important.”

When he dipped his head for a kiss, I could taste myself on his lips. That thought drifted away as our tongues tangled again. My hands went to slide up the bulging

muscles of his chest. Everything about Rebel was perfect. Although I couldn't say I loved his rebellious nature, I was growing accustomed to this personality quirk.

I reveled in his kisses, thrilled when he moved down to kiss my neck because under his lips, I learned that my neck had several spots that spiked my arousal when kissed and licked. Rebel knew exactly what he was doing. What seemed at first like playful exploration, became a quest to see how many places on my body could provoke a sexual response.

I was already about to explode by the time he made it to my breasts. My generous breasts almost seemed smaller in his big hands. He squeezed them just right, firmly but not so hard it hurt. When he teased my nipples with his mouth, my eyes practically rolled back in my head.

When one of his hands drifted down to stroke my clit while he sucked on one nipple and then the other, I moaned with pleasure.

He whispered proudly, "You like that, don't ya, beautiful?"

I nodded, breathless and on the edge of coming hard. When his hand moved away and he rolled over on his back, I was so frustrated that it turned into irritation. He slapped his chest and said, "Get your pretty ass up here. I want you on my face so I can lick your pussy properly."

All my irritation evaporated in an instant. I'd never sat on a man's face before. And it was one of the things on my bucket list, so needless to say, I eagerly crawled into place. It occurred to me to ask at the last minute, "Are you sure I'm not too much?"

"I'm fucking sure that if you don't stop worrying about shit like that, I'm going to turn you over my knee for the sexiest spanking of your life."

My nostrils flared with anger and indignation. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Wrapping both hands around my thighs, he said, “Try me,” before pulling me down so he could reach my pussy with his mouth. Then he went to town, like licking my pussy was the best thing in his world.

I was so overly aroused that I almost came when his tongue lightly moved over my clit the first time. I knew he wouldn’t like that, so I fought it and failed miserably. This man didn’t even have to look for my g-spot because I came hard after just a few minutes. He eased up, running his tongue through my slit and stopping to tongue my opening before going hard at my clit again. The sexy bastard made me come with his mouth three times before I made him stop.

Somewhere along the way, he’d unzipped his pants to set his python free. I know he’d said that we’d only be fooling around, but by that time all bets were off. Without missing a beat, I moved down and lowered myself over his thick, hard cock. When he was notched into place and my still convulsing pussy was ready to take his cockhead, I told him. “We can stop anytime. Just tell me no.”

“Fucking hell, ain’t no man saying no to the softest pussy in the world kissing his cock head. If you want me tonight, I’m yours.”

I felt my face light up because that was exactly what I was hoping he would say. “Get ready because I am not going to be gentle.”

He jerked his chin at me, “Come on then. Give it your best shot.”

Rebel was cocky, sure of himself, and didn’t tolerate my self-conscious bullshit for a hot second. I kind of liked that about him. I slowly sank down on his thick cock, feeling the stretch turn into a burn. He must have sensed it or saw a pained expression on my face because he grabbed my hips, gently chiding me.

“There’s a difference between not going easy on me and not going easy on yourself. There’s no place for pain in the pleasure we share. Think you can remember that?”

I stopped biting my bottom lip long enough to nod. “I’ll remember. When it comes to you, I’m just way too eager, that’s all.”

He slowly released me with a warning, “Go slow. You can take me. I know you can because I’m going to fucking die if I can’t have you tonight.”

Something about the desperate tone of his voice got me to relax. We were both on the same page. I didn’t need to hurry before he got frustrated with waiting. Going at my own pace, I rocked up and down on his cock until my hungry pussy had somehow managed to swallow it all.

“I feel so full of you.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s what they all say.”

I slapped his chest, frustrated that he was talking about other women again. “I don’t want to hear about all the women you’ve fucked. Not ever.”

A smug expression slipped onto his handsome face. “You’re getting a little possessive over the man you didn’t want anything to do with just this afternoon.”

I rose up and slammed back down on his cock, making him gasp.

“That was fucking naughty. You planning to tame my mouth by using the soft clench of your pussy on my cock?”

I smiled down at him, “It sounds real dirty when you put it like that.” I continued moving on him, setting up a pace that made us both pant.

He gritted out, “I gotta warn you, that sounds like a pretty fucking effective plan.”

Moving harder and faster with his hands clenched around my waist, I told him, “Bet I can make you come before me.”

“A sex bet? Count me in. What exactly are we betting again?”

Thinking it over, I told him, “If you lose, you give me a pedicure, the full works.” Truth be told, it was simply the most bizarre thing I could come up with on short notice.

Rebel chuffed out a strangled laugh, almost losing the bet before he made it. When he managed to get control of himself again, he muttered, “Okay, and if you lose, then you have to wear my property cut for a whole weekend.”

I’d seen the property cuts that Zoe and Alison wore, and for some reason the thought of being in Rebel’s property cut made me even more turned on. However, Mama didn’t raise no quitter, and I wasn’t about to lose, so I said, “You got it.”

Then I went to town on this hot biker, intent on winning this bet. At one point he was biting his bottom lip. Another, he was practically growling at me with one side of his top lip pulled back in a sexy snarl. My favorite was when his head was thrown back and he was staring at me, his eyelids mere slits. No matter how hard I went at it, this man refused to come.

What I hadn’t counted on was him bringing one hand down to stroke my clit. The second he made contact I was fighting it for all I was worth. Just like when he had his mouth on me, I lost bigtime, having an orgasm so strong it felt like the top of my head was going to explode.

He stilled deep inside me, his cock throbbing against my still-spasming walls. It felt

like having something filling up every inch of me with something that had a heartbeat of its own, which I supposed was kind of true.

I eventually collapsed on his chest, feeling limp and drained of energy. When I managed to catch my breath, I slapped his chest and said, “Not fair. You were supposed to just lay there and take it, not make me come by touching my clit.”

“Haven’t you heard that all’s fair in love and war?”

I propped my head up on my hands, which were still resting on his chest. “Remind me, which is this, love or war?”

Rebel gazed down at me with a mischievous expression on his face. “Haven’t figured that out yet, darlin’.”

“Well, I’m never doing that again.”

I barely got the words out before he deadpanned back, “Yeah, you are. You liked riding my cock too much to never do it again.”

“I meant making bets that involve your ability to hold out longer than me. I’ve never heard of a man with that kind of stamina.”

“You do not want to know what I had to do in order to win that fucking bet with you.”

“Now that you brought it up, you can’t not tell me. Come on, out with it,” I coaxed him.

“I was calculating power in watts for a circuit with one hundred and twenty volts and twenty amperes, then switching it around to work out amperes using power and

voltage with power.”

I tried and failed to hold in the laugh that burst out of me. “You thought about electronic calculations while we were fucking in order to win the bet?”

“Yeah, and it worked great. As long as I wasn’t thinking of the soft clench of your pussy around my cock, I was able to hold out like a champ.”

I laid my head down on his chest, still feeling his cock quietly throbbing inside me. “Doesn’t thinking of that detract from the enjoyment?”

He shrugged, “I want to see you in my property cut. Maybe next time I’ll hold off the math and focus on how your pussy milks my cock dry.”

“Sometimes, I don’t know whether to take you seriously,” I said.

Rebel responded, “I’m always serious, baby, on one level or another.”

“Umm, cryptic. Just what I need after mind blowing sex.”

That’s when he rubbed one hand down my back and back up again. “What you need after mind blowing sex is another round of the same.” Giving me a little jostle on his cock, he added, “What do you say? Are you up for another round?”

I really shouldn’t be, but I could already feel myself getting wet. I glanced up to find an endearingly hopeful expression on his face. I pushed myself into a sitting position, feeling his cock come to life again. “If I’m not mistaken you wanted to hold off on sex and now, you’re up for more.”

“Don’t worry, I’m still gonna arrange for us to have an amazing date night. We’ll just have blush and pretend it’s our first time together.”

Rebel was insatiable, but then again, so was I. We had sex four times before the sun came up, each time was just as amazing as the last, and by the time we both crashed with exhaustion I was already thinking about when we could do this again.

Rebel

Last night had been the best night of my life in more ways than one. For some reason, Lacey saw me as a potential romantic partner rather than a co-worker. I couldn't pinpoint exactly what changed on her end. Maybe it was seeing me get patched into the Slayers and being celebrated by my club brothers. Or it could have been seeing another woman hanging all over me. Maybe it was good old-fashioned jealousy?

I wished I knew, because right now, I was worried that it might have been the copious amounts of alcohol that we'd both drunk. I'd hate to think she was more tipsy than she seemed, and that was behind her decision to follow me into the basement and jumping into my lap.

Waking up to find her side of the bed cold only increased my anxiety. She wouldn't be the first beautiful woman to wake up and find herself in bed naked with a man who she might not have chosen sober. Since I'm the guy who never caught a break when it came to women, I was already primed for her to act like it never happened. In fact, that could be why she wanted to ride my cock so bad, because she never intended to give me more than one night.

Fuck.

I sat up in bed and ran my fingers through my hair, trying to figure out my next move. It was the weekend and since I wasn't a prospect anymore, I didn't have anything on my schedule. For the first time in almost a year, I was free as a bird.

Therefore, I jumped in the shower, got dressed and climbed on my bike. A ride out to our family homestead seemed like the perfect way to spend the morning. I stopped at a local florist and bought a bouquet of roses and box of chocolates. With images of my gran flickering through my head, I was soon pulling into the driveway in front of the two-story farmhouse. It had been in my family for generations, with each generation building onto it and ensuring it was kept in immaculate condition for the next generation.

I came up the steps and opened the front door. I could smell the scent of pancakes and maple syrup as I walked in. Making a beeline for the kitchen, I found my grandmother sitting at the table in her long velvet robe working on a word search puzzle while her caregiver scurried around plating up her breakfast.

Her caregiver, Beatrice, caught sight of me first and said, “Good morning, Mr. Ross.”

My gran eagerly looked up from her puzzle book and a brilliant smile lit up her face when she saw that I came bearing gifts. “It is my birthday again, so soon?”

I held out her flowers first and then her chocolates. “Even better. It’s your unbirthday. You only get one birthday a year but three hundred and sixty four unbirthdays.”

“You used to love Alice in Wonderland when you were a boy.”

I sat down beside her. Intent on spoiling her breakfast, I opened her box of chocolates and slid them near enough for her to help herself, before explaining, “It was never Alice that I liked. It was the Mad Hatter. He was mad, like me.”

My grandmother laughed before clutching at her chest for a second. “You’re going to be the death of me, Benny. But I’ll die laughing and that’s more than most folks can claim.”

I reached out and patted her small, thin hand. “You’re going to live to be a hundred and twenty. Just wait and see.”

Her expression darkened, “I’ve already lived too long, Benny.” Her bottom lip trembled but she didn’t say the rest. I already knew what she was thinking. She had said before that no parent should outlive their own child. She had even mentioned that at my mother’s eulogy. Her funeral had been packed with people who knew and loved her. Her death had left a gaping hole in both our lives.

My gran just sat there staring straight ahead, as if she were replaying it all in her head. The only indication that she was cognizant of what was going on around her and not totally lost to old memories was her hand reaching out to get a chocolate and bringing it to her lips. After a few seconds, she nibbled a small bite off the end and murmured, “This is good chocolate, Benny. You always get the good stuff.”

I told her a tall tale, “Well, you know all the other chocolate companies went out of business back in seventy-four. This is the only kind they make, so it’s good that it happens to be your favorite. Otherwise, you’d be out of luck.”

My grandmother gave me a withering look. “Benny, you were made in the spitting image of your grandfather, may he rest in peace. Along with his unruly hair, big hands, and ungainly gait, you inherited his love of joking. And just so you know, I do not approve of lying. Not at all.”

“Now Grandma,” I said soothingly. “You know it’s not lying if the lie is too big to be remotely believable. It’s a tall tale. A completely different animal altogether.”

Just then Beatrice put down a huge platter of pancakes and my grandmother said primly, “Let’s put all this business with tall tales aside for the moment and have some breakfast.”

“You know what they say about pancakes, right?”

By this point my gran was onto me. She stifled a smile and told me, “No, I don’t know what they say about pancakes and neither do you. You’re just angling to tell another tall tale. Eat, and then we’ll go for a walk and pick blackberries. You can take some to those starving boys you hang around with.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She’s only ever met Storm and Celt. To my gran’s credit, they really had been hungry that day. She had loaded them down with fruit and berries, marveling at how much they could eat at one sitting.

By the time our visit was over, my gran had managed to tell a tall tale or two herself. I ended up with a gallon bag of blackberries because her gardener forgot to cut back the bushes last year, so she got a bumper crop, some larger and healthier than others but all of them were edible. I barely managed to fit them in the compartment on the back of my bike.

On the way home, I thought about last night. I couldn’t seem to get Lacey out of my mind to save my life. When I was riding through town, I decided to call her to see if she would like some blackberries. She said she would, and I could drop them off at her parents’ house, where she was still staying.

Her parents lived in a two-story light colored brick house in a solidly upper class neighborhood. It was clear that Lacey had a very different upbringing from me. Other than our family homestead, our family had very little. It was the one thing we took genuine pride in.

She answered the door right away when I rang the bell, all smiles.

I held out the blackberries, “I come bearing gifts, ladybug.”

She grinned, “Berries instead of flowers. That’s a welcome change around these parts.”

Before I could think of something clever to say in response, her mother approached us. “Welcome, Mr. Ross. Lacey has told us so much about you. I’m glad to get the opportunity to put a face to the name.”

I shot Lacey a quick glance. She spoke up immediately, “I told them all about how you’ve helped turn Livingstone Electrical around by improving customer service and completing a record number of jobs each week.”

They ushered me into their living room where Lacey’s father was sitting in a recliner watching television. He clicked it off immediately. I walked over to shake his hand. “It’s good to meet you, sir.”

“You as well. Have a seat. Lacey has been telling us what a prolific worker you are. Do you mind if I ask where you got your training?”

“Not at all, sir. I had an electrical MOS in the Army. They have very strict standards. I managed to get in enough hours to qualify as a Master Electrician, so I sat the exam.”

“That’s the way to do it. You get paid to train rather than paying someone else to train you.”

“Yes, sir. That’s about the size of it.”

Lacey was still holding the hefty bag of blackberries. She held them up for everyone to see. “These are larger than anything I’ve seen before. Where did you get them?”

“I rode out to visit my grandmother this morning. She insisted upon picking blackberries, so that’s what we did. We had a great visit, and it gave her caregiver a bit of a break.”

Lacey spoke up, “You said she has some medical problems, right?”

I nodded, not particularly liking where this conversation was going. “Yes, she has cardiac problems, but other than that, her doctors say she’s in good condition for her age.”

Gesturing at the bag of berries, I asked, “What do you have in mind for your berry acquisition?”

She just shrugged, “Blackberry cobbler, blackberry cobbler, and then maybe some more blackberry cobbler if there are enough berries.”

I grinned, “So there’s no blackberry pancakes, muffins, jam, or pie. Just cobbler all day long and then some.”

Her mother’s expression lit up, “I love that expression and yes, we’re big cobbler fans. We usually do peach, so this will be a treat for us.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll send you some,” Lacey said with a smile.

“I wouldn’t turn down cobbler,” I told them. Worried I might have overstayed my welcome I stood up and said, “It was nice meeting you both. Hope you enjoy the berry bounty. I’m due at the clubhouse to do some wiring for our security cameras, so I’d better get going.”

Lacey and her mother came to their feet, but her father just reached for the remote control. He was a man after my own heart for not standing on ceremony. Lacey and

her mother talked to me all the way to the door. On the one hand it made me feel welcome but at the same time it was all kinds of awkward. I really wanted to ask Lacey why she'd left without telling me this morning, but I couldn't very well do that with her mom present. However, the fact that she seemed really happy to see me made me think that I hadn't scared her off.

The woman I hoped to make my own walked me out to my bike. I threw one leg over the seat, intending to talk to her for a bit. Once we were alone, I decided to broach her absence this morning, "You tore out of my bed pretty early. Hope the four rounds of sex didn't scare you off?"

She grinned at me. "Not one bit. I have to admit I was feeling it this morning and if we'd added a round of morning sex I might have been walking funny for the foreseeable future. You were totally out for the count and I didn't want to wake you, so I left a note on the nightstand. I only left early because I promised my mom that I would help her convince Dad to go to his medical appointment later in the week."

"Yeah, old men can be stubborn that way. Maybe he's just tired of the womenfolk fussing over him. Tell him that if he wants, I can get a sidecar for him and take him there myself. We can grab a beer afterwards."

She frowned, "He can't have beer with his meds."

"That's fine. I can get him a nonalcoholic beer. If your mom's worried, she can meet him at the doctor's office. If he's not interested, that's cool too."

Her mouth fell open for a brief moment. "No, I think he might really enjoy something like that. He's on a new treatment and has been more coherent lately. I think anything we can do to get him out in the community will help, doing normal things will be good for him."

I was glad she thought I could be helpful, I told her, “Let me know what he says. If he’s interested in the sidecar, I can bring an extra helmet. So he doesn’t have to worry about that.”

Lacey stepped close and slipped her arms around me. Giving me a tight squeeze, she whispered, “Thanks for offering to give him a nice new experience. He really needs that right now.”

“I’m happy to do it. Your old man seems like a cool guy. I like the stories you tell about him starting a bowling club for his employees and inviting them to family events. He’s my kind of guy, a role model for the next generation.”

She pulled back, looking a bit suspicious. Poking me in the ribs, she asked, “Who are you and where did my grumpy partner go?”

I frowned at her gentle teasing. Before I could respond, she jumped on her tiptoes to look me in the eyes. “Blink once if you’re still in there Benny, and twice if you need help.”

“You’re not funny. You know that, right?” Even though I was saying the words, I was fighting to keep an expression of amusement off my face.

“Yes, I am. If I weren’t, you wouldn’t be smiling.”

“Call or text me about your old man. I’ll see you at work on Monday.”

She nodded, still smiling away. “See you on Monday and thank you for taking an interest in my dad. I appreciate it more than you know.”

I put on my helmet and sped away, thinking that this woman I’d been hoping to impress might just be developing real feelings for me. Something constricting around

my heart loosened a notch.

Before heading to the clubhouse, I rode up and back down the coast and let myself enjoy the idea that Lacey might be my one —my chance at the kind of happiness that my club brothers seemed to be finding. Maybe it was finally my turn for some true happiness? Between getting patched into the club and Lacey coming to me all on her own and asking to be with me. Who would have thought all this goodness would come my way at the same time?

I was thrilled later that day when Lacey sent me a text letting me know that her dad was jazzed about riding in the sidecar. It was something he remembered from old black and white movies and had always wanted to do. She said her mom was so happy to finally get him to his follow-up appointment that she got tearful about it. These were nice, decent people, and it did my heart good to help them out in their time of need.

I had a couple of club brothers with sidecars and texted them both asking to borrow one. I knew my chances were good because they both regularly loaned them out.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Lacey

I showed up at work early as usual because I liked to get the office tidied up and ready for the day. Shortly after walking through the door, I realized that no amount of tidying up would make the office ready to open on time.

Someone had broken in and totally trashed the place. I pulled out my cell phone and called Rebel.

“Hey Lacey, what’s up?”

“How close are you to the office?”

“Just a few minutes. I was planning to drop in and flirt with the boss a little before heading out to see my first client of the day.” Katy Purry had gone to her new home last week, I missed her presence, but even though Rebel didn’t have a reason to come to the office since I sent him his daily work orders electronically, I had noticed that he still came in daily.

“I’ve got bad news.”

“I don’t like the sound of your voice. What happened?”

“It looks like someone broke in. Everything’s been destroyed except the filing cabinets and the safe. It looks like whoever did this spent considerable time trying to break into the safe with hand tools.”

“Okay, I’m pulling in now. Gimme a minute to park up and get through the door.”

While I was still standing in the middle of my office, trying to wrap my head around who would do something like this, Rebel rushed through the door.

“I need to clear the area.”

When I looked at him in puzzlement and asked, “What the hell does that mean?”

“For all we know, the intruder might still be here hiding in a bathroom or broom closet.”

I felt a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach, “I didn’t even think of that.”

“Stay here. I’ll clear this room first. While I’m checking the other rooms, call the cops and report the break-in.”

I nodded, feeling despondent like this was some sort of nightmare that I would soon wake up from. Rebel quickly walked into my tiny private bathroom and then the supply closet attached to my office. Finding nothing, he closed the door and went to check the other rooms.

I called the local police department, reported the break in and said that we were still checking to make sure the perpetrator wasn’t still in the building. They said they’d send a team over and that we should vacate the property and leave the securing of the building to the professionals. Yeah, I couldn’t see Rebel taking much notice of that. Just as I lowered my phone, Rebel walked back into the room.

“The rest of the office is clear, but I found muddy boot prints near the back door. I took photos of them with my cell phone in case Griffinsford’s finest don’t consider this break-in worthy of calling out the crime lab.”

Gesturing around, I asked, “How could they not consider this serious?”

He responded pointedly, “Can you tell if anything is missing?”

Getting up, I walked around my office looking to see if anything was missing. Dumbfounded, I turned to him. “Nothing that I can tell. I locked the files up in the filing cabinets. There doesn’t seem to be much effort made to breach them.” I gestured down at the safe.

Rebel squatted down and ran his fingers along a long, deep scar near the keypad. “See this deep trench in the metal. It looks like they used power tools to try and open it.”

“Why would someone break into an electrician’s office? It doesn’t make any sense. We don’t have any tools on the premises and it’s not like we even accept cash anymore.”

Rebel stood up and wrapped one arm around me. “Whoever did this might not have known anything at all about your business. There’s a great deal of damage to the building—pictures torn off the walls and destroyed, office supplies smashed and this,” he said pointing down at the safe.

“You mean like a former client who wasn’t happy with the work we did under Mark’s management?”

“That makes more sense than thinking a regular burglar did all this really aggressive damage.”

Harvey arrived right as the police were pulling up. “Oh my god, Lacey. What happened?”

I scrambled around in the mess of papers on the floor to find the schedule of clients for today while explaining, “I walked in and found the place a mess. It’s obviously a break-in. I hope the police can figure out who did this.”

Harvey took the paper I found, grumbling, “What in the hell is the world coming too?”

“I don’t know, Harvey. Try to put this out of your mind and deal with your customers. Once Benny’s finished talking with the police, he’ll head out and do his scheduled jobs for today.”

“Sure thing, boss. I’ll carry on, because the work still needs to get done.”

Patting him on the back encouragingly, I told him, “Yes it does, and I’ll get to the bottom of this if it’s the last thing I do.”

When I walked over to Rebel and the officer he was talking to, I realized they were having a disagreement.

The police officer was saying, “Like I said, there have been three break-ins in a five-block radius. This is likely the same group of people.”

Rebel shook his head vehemently. “Were all the other businesses totally trashed the way this office is?”

“Well, not quite this bad, but one of the buildings had graffiti sprayed on the walls. The MO isn’t always exactly the same. Sometimes there are slight deviations and escalations. The extremely aggressive way the perps destroyed almost everything they could get their hands on might represent an escalation. We need time to review the scene. I’m afraid you’re going to have to conduct business remotely for a while.”

Rebel took a step closer to the office, but I grabbed his arm and tugged him back. “We can do that. If I give you our security code can your officers be sure to lock up when they’re finished? We still have client records and a safe on site. We need that protected.”

“Absolutely,” he responded.

Glancing towards the front door, I stated, “I don’t know why the security alarm didn’t go off when the doors were breached.”

“That’s another thing our detective will look into,” the officer stated sternly.

“It’s because the security alarm is fucking ancient. When this is all over, we’re getting a modern, state of the art system,” Rebel insisted.

“You can do as you like after we process the crime scene. For right now, we need to take your written statements. Then you’re going to need to leave the premises until we give you the all-clear to return.”

Rebel and I settled down with a stack of blank paper and wrote out exactly what we saw when we entered the building. Since both Rebel and I had been keeping everything in electronic format, it meant he could get on with making service calls when we left the office.

Once we were outside and far from earshot of the officers, he asked, “So, what’s the plan? Are you gonna work from home?”

I nodded, feeling like the local law enforcement were barking up the wrong tree regarding our case. “Yeah, that’s the plan.”

Rebel told me, “We have a spare office at the clubhouse you can use if you like?”

I smiled up at him. “If I end up at your clubhouse, you and I are going to keep accidentally falling into bed together until neither of us can walk.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Maybe we could hook up on the weekends. I’ve been working a lot of extra hours over the weekend trying to figure out how to market the business and get things back on track.”

“That sounds like a lot of hard work. You’ll need me to relieve your stress on the weekends,” he said smugly. “Plus you lost our little bet, and you know what that means?”

I glanced down at his leather vest. “Yeah, I have to wear your cut for a full weekend.”

His lighthearted expression turned into a frown. “No, you misunderstood. I said you would wear my property cut.”

My eyes went wide. “You mean the cuts the old ladies wear that say ‘Property of’ whatever biker they’re with? No way! That sounds way too ownerish for me.”

His eyes narrowed on me. “It doesn’t matter whether you think it’s ownerish or not. We made a bet, and you lost, so you’ll wear my cut.”

“Are you being serious right now?” I asked. Rebel went from playful to serious in a heartbeat. This man was as mercurial as they came.

“Hell yes, I’m being serious. If there is one thing I can’t stand, it someone who welches on their bets. It’s dishonest and deceptive.”

“Alright, give the damn thing to me and I’ll wear it.”

“Look, just forget it. Every single woman in that clubhouse would consider wearing my cut a fucking privilege. Since you consider it ownerish, you don’t deserve to wear it.”

“Wait. I’m missing something here. Why is this such a big deal to you?”

He lifted his helmet to put it on, and just before shoving it down, he said, “It’s not. Don’t worry about it, darlin’.”

His helmet came down like a wall separating us. Then he started his bike and was gone before I could get my head around what just happened. Staring after him, I got the distinct feeling that mercurial or not, I’d just offended him.

I got into my car, pulled my phone out, and called Zoe.

“Hey Lacey. What ya up to on this glorious Monday morning?”

“My office was broken into and trashed. The police seem to be on the wrong track, thinking it’s part of some spree of break-ins. And of course I can’t work at my office until they release it from being a crime scene.”

“Oh wow, I’m glad you called. I didn’t realize there was a crime spree in your area. This seems like an interesting case for my vlog. Want to meet up for breakfast and talk about it?”

“I was hoping you would say that, because I want to talk to you about Rebel too.”

“Oh, that sounds ominous. I’ll do my best to help you out, but I don’t know how much help I’ll be.”

“Thanks Zoe. How about the diner on Seventeenth Avenue? Would that work for

you?”

“Yeah, of course. It’s one of my favorites. I can be there in thirty minutes.”

“Great, I’ll get there and save a table for us.”

As I drove to the diner, my mind kept drifting back to Rebel. I’d seen Zoe wearing her property cut and could never understand why a modern, independent woman like her would wear a piece of clothing identifying herself as some man’s property. It never made sense to me, nor did it seem polite to ask about it. Now, with the way Rebel was acting, my back was against the wall, and I needed to know more about this particular MC tradition.

I had already gotten us a table and was sipping on a cup of java when Zoe arrived. She looked refreshed and ready to solve another crime. I wished I could be more like Zoe, that is, I wished I had even half of her confidence. She wasn’t the type of person to continually get blindsided by guys like Rebel. She always stood up for herself and didn’t take any bullshit. Guys wouldn’t give up on a relationship with her quite so easily.

When she slid into the seat, we started talking about the break-in. I told her how they destroyed everything they could get their hands on and had clearly made quite an effort to break our company safe open. The server came and took our order.

After the server left, Zoe stated, “It sounds like your safe was the primary target. Do you remember what you keep in there?”

“Yeah, we keep all our important business documents in there. Things like our business license, copies of our business insurance agreement, our last fire marshal’s

inspection, just things like that. We do keep a nominal amount of cash on hand to tip delivery drivers when they drop off supplies. That about it.”

“That doesn’t seem like much of an incentive to pull off a break-in with this much destruction of property. So they didn’t take anything?”

I took a mouthful of coffee as I shook my head, “Nope. My desktop PC and printer were still there. Okay, they’d wouldn’t get much by reselling them, but if it was about money then you’d think they’d have taken those.”

Zoe looked thoughtful, “Sounds personal.”

“Rebel thinks it’s a former client from when Mark was managing our office, someone who was pissed that their work wasn’t done properly, and they wouldn’t make it right.”

“Did your company really have problems that rose to that level?”

“Yeah, unfortunately we did. I’m doing my best to make sure we don’t have that problem moving forward, but some of our former clients even approached Rebel to correct their botched jobs before he came to work for us. Things were a real mess. If Harvey hadn’t spoken up, Mark might have bankrupted Livingstone Electrical.”

The conversation was interrupted briefly when the server brought our food. After everything was sorted and we’d taken a few bites Zoe advised, “You need to make a list of every single person who complained and start working through them.”

“Yeah, that sounds like the way to go. The thing is, Rebel found boot prints near the back exit. He took photos of them with his phone and used a dollar bill for size reference. Those boots looked huge, and they weren’t his, and Harvey’s feet aren’t large.”

“If you want, you can bring all your information to my office. We can share a workspace, and I can start figuring out who broke into your office while you get some real work done.”

“That’s a great idea. Kill two birds with one stone, right?”

“Yeah, and it’ll be fun to spend more time together. Alison and I are really glad you moved back to Griffinsford.”

“Coming back was the best decision I ever made.” I glanced down at my plate, embarrassed to bring up the property cut issue with her. Finally I put on my big girl panties and just came out with it. “Rebel and I got into a tiff today about me wearing his property cut.”

She stopped with a forkful of French toast halfway to her mouth. “What? He’s trying to put you in his property cut already?”

I felt my cheeks getting hot with embarrassment as I explained—leaving out the sex bit, “We made a bet. If I won, he had to give me a pedicure. If he won, I was supposed to wear his property cut for a full weekend.”

Zoe’s face lit up with a huge smile. “That sexy bastard has the hots for you, my friend.”

Moving food around on my plate with my fork, I told her the rest. “I might have told him ‘no way’, because it was too ownerish.”

Zoe’s smile froze on her face. “Tell me you didn’t say that to him.”

Glancing around to make sure no one else was eavesdropping on our conversation, I admitted, “I’m afraid that I did. It says, ‘Property of’ right on the back of the vest,

and no offense, I don't understand how that is respectful to the woman wearing the cut."

Zoe put her fork down on her plate and looked me in the eye. "Wearing a property cut does not signify ownership. It's a polite way of extending the protection of the brother and his club to the woman. When I walk around Griffinsford in Storm's property cut I never have to worry about trouble of any sort coming my way, because no one in their right mind would piss off Storm by messing with his old lady."

"Yeah, but I usually don't have a lot of trouble with people, not enough to justify wearing a vest that identifies me as property."

"We women get cat-called, and hit on relentlessly, and a certain cross-section of men get downright pissy when they're turned down. Mechanics used to rip me off because they saw me as an easy target because I'm a woman. Cops would harass me because I vlogged about police corruption. With the exception of police harassment, don't tell me those things don't happen to you because I know they do."

I nodded, unwilling to lie to someone I respected so much. "Yeah, that's just all part of being a woman in a small town like Griffinsford."

"Since I've been wearing Storm's cut, I don't get any of that because everyone knows he won't tolerate people harassing me, cheating me out of my hard-earned money, or treating me like garbage because they don't like me calling them out on their small town corruption. His cut was meant to protect me when he's not there to do it himself and it functions exactly like it's supposed to. I don't give two hoots in hell that it says 'Property of Storm' because we both know I'm not his property. In fact, I consider it one of his greatest gifts to me."

Looking up at her, I sighed. "So, what you're saying is Rebel offered me his personal protection and I threw it back in his face?"

A short silence stretched between us, and when Zoe finally spoke, I listened carefully, hoping to glean a little wisdom from the woman married to the Dark Slayer's club president. "It's much worse than simply throwing it back in his face. He was offering you one of the most valuable things he has to offer as a member of the Dark Slayers, likely thinking if you wore his property cut for a few days, you'd immediately realize the value of being under his protection, now that he's a fully patched member of the Dark Slayers MC. That's one of the sweetest things I've ever heard of a brother doing for a woman he was falling hard for, and you not only rejected it, you made him feel like his property cut was some kind of personal insult."

My chest tightened and a small ache started throbbing there. "I didn't really understand how that worked."

Yeah, I messed this up in a very serious way, without meaning to.

Zoe told me sternly, "The thing is, you know Rebel, or you should know him well enough by now, to know he wouldn't do anything to publicly humiliate you. He's probably thinking the same thing I am, so why aren't you giving him the benefit of the doubt, or at least asking one of the old ladies to explain instead of having such a negative knee-jerk reaction to his offer?"

I fidgeted in my chair, nervous about messing things up with Rebel and embarrassing myself in front of Zoe. "I was too embarrassed to ask you about it, to be honest."

"Why? Did you think that I'm the kind of woman to let Storm publicly shame me? Or that Alison would ever allow Grit to do that to her? You've seen us in our property cuts. That should have been a clue, along with the fact that every single club girl is dying to get into a brother's property cut that something more was going on here."

"I get that MC culture is unique and different. There is a metric ton of things I don't know, and I need to slow down and start paying more attention to the details. I don't

suppose there's a class you offer to new girlfriends, is there?"

Zoe shot back, "No. Just so you know, I didn't know what was going on at first either, but I trusted Storm enough to let him teach me. What's going on between you and Rebel? Don't you have basic trust with him?"

"I didn't at first, and trust doesn't come easy to me, but I do now. I was in denial in the beginning about my feelings for him, so it feels like everything is happening too fast and that I'm losing myself the closer I get to him."

Zoe's disapproving expression faded away. "It's like that when you're with a strong man. When Storm took the lead, I wasn't used to following. What I found was that I wasn't losing myself, we were creating something better and stronger together. We worked it out though. I'm sure you and Rebel will as well."

"I get the point that a new relationship is stronger than sum of its parts. That makes perfect sense to me. Thanks for explaining all that to me. Maybe Rebel and I could get away for a weekend and spend some one-on-one time getting to know each other better. We seem to do better when it's just the two of us."

Zoe took a sip of her drink. "Maybe there's hope for you yet, my friend. Rebel can be exasperating at times, but I've only ever heard good things about him. The brothers wouldn't have voted him in if he was deficient in any way."

"That's reassuring, but my gut tells me he's honest and devoted to the things and people he cares about. He even volunteered to take my dad to his doctor's appointment in a sidecar because we were having a hard time getting him to agree to go."

Zoe's expression morphed into one of approval. "Did it work? Did your dad jump at the chance to ride in a sidecar?"

“Of course. It’s all he talked about all weekend. He has a big interest in World War II and has always wanted to ride in one, so the problem was solved when it came to getting him to his medical appointments.”

“Rebel really has a good heart,” Zoe commented before digging back into her lunch.

Yeah, he does, I thought to myself as I started eating. Even though we spent the rest of lunch circling back around to the break in at the office, my mind kept drifting back to the disagreement I had with Rebel, and I hoped that I hadn’t totally messed things up between us.

Rebel

For three days, I didn't talk to Lacey. The office was closed, so I picked my jobs off the online calendar and spent my free time working with Hacker to try and figure out who broke in. It had been slow going, but I was sure Lacey was expecting me to figure this out as her protector. Trying to rush her into my property cut, even temporarily, had been a gigantic mistake. I could see that now. She wasn't ready for a relationship with me. That meant I needed to slow things way the fuck down.

Today was Wednesday, the day of her father's appointment. I borrowed Mace's sidecar, the one he used to transport his gigantic wolfdog around in. Naturally, I took the time to clean it out thoroughly, so Mr. Livingstone wouldn't end up with pet hair all over his nice clothing and stinking of sweaty dog. He was waiting patiently on the front porch when I pulled up. I liked the way his eyes lit up, much like mine had the first time I'd ever ridden in a sidecar.

His wife was at his side when I walked up the front steps. Lacey stepped out of the front door when she heard the throaty roar of my motorcycle. Her expression was a bit anxious and unsure. "I didn't know if you were still up for taking my dad on a ride today."

"Of course. If I say I'm gonna do something, I always follow through. You should know that by now."

She nodded, her eyes moving from me to her father and back again. "You know where you're going, right?"

“Yes, I got your text.” Turning to his wife, I clarified, “You’re gonna meet us there, right?”

“Yes. I’m going to leave first, so I’ll be waiting when the two of you arrive.”

Bringing my wrist up, I looked at my watch, and said, “You’d best get going if we’re going to get there in time for his appointment.”

“Yes, of course,” she murmured and gave her husband a quick kiss.

After her mother had driven off, Lacey’s father walked out to examine the sidecar, leaving me and Lacey standing on the porch.

“You and I need to talk about the investigation into the office break-in,” I told her as we both watched her father walk around the sidecar looking appreciatively at it.

“Yeah, Zoe and I have come up with a whole theory about who did it and why.”

My head snapped around to look at her. “You and Zoe are doing your own investigation?”

“Well yeah. It’s my business. The police are useless. If I want justice, I have to get it for myself.”

“Did you forget I told you I would look into it?” I asked, trying my best to keep the irritation out of my voice.

“Yeah, but you haven’t been talking to me for days. So, I didn’t know what to think.”

Glancing away, I told her, “I thought you needed some space. And I’ve been spending all my time working and investigating the break-in.”

Her expression turned hopeful. “Maybe we could get together and compare notes?”

“Yeah, sure. That would be fine. Just let me know where and when. I gotta go, if I’m gonna get your old man to his appointment on time.”

When I walked up to my bike and helped her father into the sidecar, he grabbed the helmet enthusiastically. He didn’t waste any time putting it on correctly. He must have seen my look of surprise because he tapped the side of the helmet and said, “Just like I wore back in the day as a fighter pilot, only without the oxygen mask.”

My eyebrows flew up in surprise. “Didn’t know you were a veteran too.”

He started talking about being a fighter pilot, but his voice was muffled by the helmet, and by the time I started my engine his words were unintelligible. Since I was interested to hear his stories, I made a mental note to ask him about his military experience once his appointment was over and we went to the clubhouse for lunch. It was the only place I knew for certain I could get good food and a non-alcoholic beer. I had the prospects pick up a six-pack especially for our lunch today.

I hung around outside while Mr. Livingstone had his appointment. He and his wife walked out, all smiles. I liked seeing them happy. “Should I assume everything went well?”

She nodded, “Better than well. Dr. Simons scheduled him for a new experimental treatment at Mount Sinai in two weeks. It was difficult to get him into the program, so we’re both thrilled.”

“That is good news. Would you like to join us for lunch, ma’am?”

She shot her husband a quick glance, but he was already eyeing the sidecar again. “No, I think I’ll let you men have some guy time. If you need me, just give me a

quick call and I'll come right away."

Her husband turned to her and put his hands on her shoulders, "We're not going to need you, sweetheart. I keep telling you that I feel better than I have in a long time."

She beamed up at him, "I know that you are. I guess I'll see you back at the house after your lunch."

When she walked off to get into her car, we loaded up again. So far, her dad seemed pretty easygoing. I took him straight to the clubhouse, where all the brothers were wearing cuts and the prospects kept themselves on their toes to make sure lunch went off without a hitch. Since I didn't know how he would hold up outside with it being cold today, we sat in the bar area.

Rosie came over to take our drink order. "Will you look at this. Rebel's brought a handsome new friend to the clubhouse."

Mr. Livingstone perked up, "A handsome and married new friend, young lady."

Rosie laughed. "I'm married and let me tell you, I appreciate a man who's upfront about his marital status. Your wife would be real proud of you right now."

"I was blessed with a good wife. The last thing I want to do is mess up after thirty years and wind up growing old alone."

"I can't see her giving up a faithful husband, because trust me when I say the pickings are pretty slim these days when it comes to good men. They don't make 'em like you and my Thunder anymore."

I gestured to myself with one hand, "I'm sitting right here, single as can be."

Rosie just laughed. “What are you gentlemen having to drink, that fancy beer you bought?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind,” I told her, glad that she was joking around with us.

“I’ll bring it right over. The prospects are making Philly steak sandwiches and fries for lunch today. Will that be okay or do you want turkey club?”

“Philly is good for me,” I told her.

“Me too,” Mr. Livingstone chimed in.

When she dropped our non-alcoholic beer off, I don’t think he realized the difference, even after he took a long sip. “Good stuff,” he muttered.

“Yeah, it’s always been one of my favorites.” I steered the conversation in a direction I knew he’d like. “So what did you think of the sidecar?”

“It’s cramped and gives a pretty bumpy ride, just like I thought it would.” Giving me a rueful grin, he added, “In other words, I loved it. I’ve seen them in pictures but never thought I’d get the opportunity to test one out.”

“Several of the brothers here have them. The one we’re using is owned by a friend of mine to haul around his dog. Damn thing is half dog, half wolf.”

The old man’s eyes lit up. “I sure would like to have a gander at an animal like that up close before I meet my maker.”

“With any luck you’ll be around long enough to see a lot of cool things, now that you’re not working your ass off every day.”

“Yeah, about that. I hated it when the doctors signed me off work, but now that I’ve had some time off, I’m ready to live a little and enjoy what time I have left.”

I clinked the neck of my beer bottle against his. “I’ll drink to that. Know what I’ve always wanted to do?”

He grinned indulgently at me. “What’s that, Rebel?” he asked right after his eyes dropped down to the patch sporting my club name.

“I’ve always wanted to go fossil hunting. Not at one of those tourist attractions that pepper the ground with fake shit for you to find, but somewhere out of the way that might have natural fossils.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” Scratching his head, he appeared to be lost in thought. “I did that once when I was young. I can’t remember for the life of me where we went but I found a fossil with the imprint of a fern and donated it to a collection they were gathering at the local university. They put my name on the brass plate and everything.”

“Shit, you have been living your best life.”

Just then our food arrived and four bites in, he remembered where he found his fossil. “My family has property in the mountains. It’s locked in a family trust for me and my two brothers. Haven’t been there in years. We should go for a week or two before it gets too cold.”

“Maybe when the weather breaks. I’ve got too many jobs to catch up on right now to think about leaving for a week, much less two.”

He put down his sandwich and wiped his fingers on a napkin before speaking. “I’ve been meaning to thank you for helping Lacey get our business back on its feet. She’s

had nothing but good things to say about you.”

I swallowed the food in my mouth and washed it down with a drink of my beer. “Thank you, sir. It’s been a pleasure working with Lacey. I’m not too good at keeping up with the paperwork for my own business, so the partnership we worked out has saved my ass.”

He jolted forward in his seat. “Ladybug gave you a working partnership in our family business?”

“No,” I told him quickly. “Nothing like that. We just made a side deal where I would help her out by working jobs for a reasonable wage and she would answer my business line and take care of the paperwork for my business. It keeps her busy doing what she’s good at, and keeps me busy doing what I do best, which is working in the field. Trust me, your business still belongs one hundred percent to your family.”

Instead of looking happy, he seemed a little disappointed. “Oh, I was thinking that maybe our little ladybug was husband hunting. You’d be a good catch for her, because you’re easy going and good at wiring.”

I gave him a grin and pointed at him with the top of my nearly empty beer bottle. “You be sure to tell her that, Mr. Livingstone. Any man would be lucky to end up with your sweet daughter for a wife.” We both took a few bites of our food before I asked, “Wouldn’t you be worried about her settling down with a biker?”

“Probably, but you all aren’t just bikers. Storm made his rounds all over Griffinsford when he got out of the military talking about his support group for veterans. I didn’t need anything like that but one of my friends did. He told me all about how he was setting up an MC that weren’t outlaws. My Lacey could do worse for herself than veteran who’s a master electrician. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Then I have your permission to bring her flowers and take her on dates.”

His smile came back almost immediately. “Yeah, if she’ll have you. I want to see her settled down with her own family before I leave this world.”

“You ain’t going nowhere. Want to know how I know that for a fact?”

His expression turned knowing. “It’s because that wife of mine ain’t gonna stop making me go to the doctor until I’m cured, right.”

“Yeah, that was exactly what I was gonna say. She seems pretty damn persistent.”

“She is. I don’t know if any of this experimental stuff is going to work but it beats sitting at home flipping through old movies and infomercials, you know?”

“Yes sir, I do. You seem to be doing real good right now. If I were a betting man, I’d put my money on that wife of yours staying on top of all the doctors until she’s convinced that you’re in the clear.”

“I don’t care. If I could live long enough to see a grandbaby or two that would suit me just fine.”

I raised my hand and gestured to Rosie for two more near-beers as his words settled into my mind. I froze when I realized that I’d had four rounds of sex with Lacey without wearing a condom. At the time I thought for sure she was on birth control, but now I wasn’t so sure, and I mentally kicked myself for not asking.

We got on to the subject of his military service again, and he told me all about it three times in a row. It was my first indication that his Alzheimer’s was far from being in remission. Each time I listened like it was the first time, unsure how our prior conversation could have gone off without a hitch and then the conversation about his

time in the military so poorly. Maybe it was because those were older memories or ones associated with stress.

I knew sometimes with dementia patients the past was clear, and it was the present that caused problems, though I didn't know enough about his disease to get my head around the situation. One thing I did know was that I honestly liked him and that meant I'd have to educate myself, in order to know how to best support him.

When we finished eating and headed out to my bike, I asked, "Want me to bring my friend's wolfdog over for you to visit with one evening?"

"Heck yeah, I'd like to see something like that before I die." This was exactly the same thing he had said the first time I mentioned Mace's wolfdog, Nine. Something about the inflection of his voice made me think he didn't remember our earlier conversation.

As I drove him home, I felt all kinds of conflicted. I could easily see how something like this could be really hard on his family members. They were probably used to him being strong and competent and he still was in a way. Unfortunately, this was a disease that slowly robbed a person of their memories. These two women needed all the support they could get to cope with all the changes taking place in the man who had obviously once been the rock of their family.

I had stopped at a flower shop on the way home so we could pick up flowers for Lacey and her mom. When we walked in, I handed Lacey her flowers and he handed his wife the bunch he had picked out for her. Lacey and I stood together and watched as her mother's eyes teared up. She told him quietly, "It's been a long time since you bought me flowers."

He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead, "It's long overdue and you deserve flowers every single day."

We walked into the kitchen to give them some privacy when they started hugging.

Lacey put her flowers into a glass vase and filled it with water, then set out another vase for her mother to use once the hug fest was over. I sat down on a barstool at their counter and watched her fuss with the bright yellow blooms. I hadn't been sure what to get her, but when I saw the sunflowers, I knew they'd be perfect.

When she finally glanced up at me, her expression was filled with so many emotions that I couldn't decipher them all. "That was a really nice thing you did today for my parents, and I really appreciate it."

"To be honest, I had a nice time with your dad. He's quite a talker."

"Yeah, he's always been that way. I used to love listening to him tell stories about his life, especially the ones from before he and Mom had me."

"Yeah, he told me about the fossil he found and donated to a collection at the college."

"That's one of my favorite stories, because of how hard he looked and just when he thought he wasn't going to find anything, he found a huge fossil."

When she glanced away, I asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry about saying your property cut was ownerish. I regret that so much."

"Really?" I asked curiously. "What made you change your mind about that?"

"To be honest, I was talking to Zoe about it and she set me straight."

Disappointment settled in my gut. "So, if Zoe says property cuts are okay, that

changes everything but when I tried to explain you didn't want to know, right?"

"Yeah, that's why I'm so upset with myself. I'm not used to trusting men, but the thing is, I do trust you. I feel like I screwed up my chance to wear your property cut and maybe even any opportunity I had to get to know you better. I want you to know that I'm really sorry for my initial knee-jerk reaction about the whole thing."

Impressed by her ability to give a sincere apology and the fact that she still wanted to get to know me better, I gave her a lopsided grin. "Don't worry, your old man gave me permission to buy you flowers and court you, so it's all good."

Her mouth fell open, and she sputtered, "My father did what now?"

"He said I would be a good catch for you because I was laid back and could wire shit."

"Yeah, but you're not laid back at all. I don't know where he got that idea."

I just shrugged, "I can't imagine."

"My dad can't just give you the green light to date me. That's my decision alone."

"Then it's a good thing you just said you wanted to get to know me better. You're really cute when you're all self-righteous and indignant, by the way."

Catching on that I was just joking around with her, her expression softened into one of amusement. "I'm slowly figuring out your sense of humor."

Switching up the conversation from my weird personality quirks, I asked, "How do you like your flowers?"

She ran her palm over the blooms and smiled. “They’re really beautiful. I love yellow.”

“Yeah, that’s what your old man said. I was originally going to get red roses, but I decided to get the color you liked best instead.”

She came around the counter and gave me a brief kiss on the lips. “You made a good choice. We can save red roses for Valentine’s Day.”

Drawing her into the circle of my arms, I kissed her again. Having Lacey back in my arms was the best feeling in the whole world. “Would you like take a ride on the back of my bike? We can ride up the coast. The view is incredible.”

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Rebel

Before she could answer, my phone rang. It was Hacker. He sounded serious and somber when he spoke. "I have something that I think you might want to see."

"I'm with Lacey and her family right now."

"I don't think you'll want to hold off on this." There was a short pause before he said, "Seriously brother, get your ass to the clubhouse right away."

Standing there with my phone to my ear, warning signs were going off all over the place in my mind. "Sure thing, Hacker. Gimme twenty minutes and I'll be there."

"Trust me, you won't regret it, Rebel."

"I do trust you and I'll be there ASAP."

"The club officers will be waiting in Storm's office."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. As soon as the screen went black, I looked at Lacey. She asked curiously, "What was that all about?"

"Our IT guy just called me into a meeting with our club officers. He said to drop everything and get to the clubhouse. I don't know what's going on but I'm going to go see. Sorry I can't stay longer."

I had noticed that during my call, the smile had fallen off her face and her expression

had turned worried. “Alright, if that’s what you think is best, get to the clubhouse and find out what’s going on. We can take that nice long ride you mentioned anytime.”

“Great, I’ll call you later when I’ve taken care of whatever just popped off.”

I leaned down and gave her a quick kiss before rushing out and getting on my bike.

All the way to the clubhouse, I worried about what the big emergency was. Thoughts ran through my head wondering if a new club or gang was infringing on our territory, whether one of us had been jumped, or if we’d received negative attention from the law in some way. My worry motivated me to get there in record time. I parked up my bike and stalked back to Storm’s office, ready for anything.

Sure enough, all the club officers were there. There was Storm, Breaker, Grit, and Celt. I jerked my chin at Storm. “What’s up, boss? Do we have another gang trying to move into Griffinsford?”

“No, but that’s a good guess. We need to stay vigilant in that regard, especially with the break-ins. The reason we called you here is because Hacker dug up some information on Lacey that might be important.”

I dropped down in the free seat in front of his desk. “You got an idea who broke into the office? I’d love to get my hands on whatever punk did that.”

It was Hacker who spoke up, “Nope, but I found a couple of things, both pretty bad but one you’re gonna want to handle face-to-face.”

I gestured with one hand, “Lay it on me. I’m in a mood to kick some ass.”

“The first thing I discovered was some beef with Lacey’s mom. Her best friend is totally off her rocker. She’s been spreading vicious rumors and from the sound of it

she's got the hots for Lacey's old man."

I rubbed my chin as I turned his words over in my mind. "Is this the big emergency? I can't see an elderly lady breaking into her parents' office, much less engaging in that much destruction of property."

Hacker frowned at me. "She talks about her grandson making people sit up and pay attention when she talks. He's a petty criminal with delusions of grandeur and a history of fire starting."

I bolted forward in my chair. "Okay, I get it. What you're saying is she might have gotten him to do her dirty work for her and we need to suss out what's going on, before he decides to torch the place."

"Yeah, that's pretty much what I'm saying. The best friend seems like a nasty piece of work, who is way too used to getting her own way."

"You said there were two situations. What's the other one."

Storm spoke up. "This is the one you're gonna want to investigate immediately. And the one we're gonna have to hold you back from turning into a vegetable. Seems she's got an asshole ex."

I sighed, "Just tell it to me straight, Prez."

He glanced over at Hacker who said, "Take a look for yourself brother, just sending you the info now."

I pulled out my phone and scrolled through the stuff he sent me, getting angrier with everything that I saw. The piece of shit had been posting naked photos of her in a group chat and saying all kinds of crap. Granted this had happened a few years ago,

but the asshole's days were numbered.

Hacker explained, "After we found this shit, we started to get concerned that if he was capable of something like this, he might be pissed that she came back to Griffinsford and instead of looking him up, she's been seen around town with you. Also, from other aspects of his life this man seems like a grudge holder. It's a bad combination if you ask me."

By the time I got to the last page, I was vibrating with rage. "Who in the fuck does this little prick think he is?"

Hacker responded, "You know as well as I, that some people are just garbage."

"Well, this one is soon-to-be-dead garbage," I told him.

Storm snorted a laugh. "No way. He deserves to suck his food through a fucking straw and walk with a limp, but no fuckin' killing him."

I came to my feet. "The day's still young. We'll have to see."

Celt jumped up, "I say we pulverize the feckin' bastard."

Everybody knew the Irishman was overly protective of women because his old lady's ex was a domestic abuser. I jerked my chin in agreement, knowing if there was one man in this room that thought a dirt nap was a good idea, it was Celt.

Storm looked at his watch. "It's almost three now. Let's gear up and start with the ex-boyfriend. Then we'll have a little chat with the old lady and her asshole grandson, the pyromaniac."

Storm, Celt, Grit, and I set out together, following the GPS to Lacey's ex's apartment. I could not wait to get my hands around this prick's neck. And the worst part would be having to tell Lacey what he'd done. Fuck this asshole and all his asshole friends. I couldn't imagine how he could have done something like this behind her back while smiling and acting like the perfect fucking boyfriend to her face. Setting his ass straight was going to be a fucking honor.

We parked up behind his condo in the visitor spaces and went in two at a time, leaving Grit to look out for the cops and guard our bikes. As Celt and I walked through the parking lot, he muttered. "Our chances are good. The asshole's car was parked out front."

I shot him a feral smile.

He gave me a shove, "Don't smile at me like that. It looks weird on your face."

"Fuck off," I muttered under my breath, knowing he was just joking around.

We stood on either side of his door so he couldn't catch sight of us through the peephole and I rang the doorbell. After the fourth ring, he pulled the door open. "What the fuck? If someone doesn't answer by the third ring, it means they don't fucking want to be disturbed."

The asshole was standing there in his underwear and a t-shirt, eating a bowl of cereal. I slapped the bowl out of his hand and pushed him back through the doorway, following him in. "Too damn bad about not being in the mood for company. We're gonna have a little talk anyway."

"What the fuck? Get out of my house."

I shoved him back again, almost making him lose his footing. "This ain't a house. It's

an apartment.”

“Condos are considered houses, dude.”

I glanced over my shoulder as Storm slipped through the cracked door Celt held open with his boot.

“What’s this about?”

“You’re Rudy Mandel.”

“Maybe,” he replied.

“I’m not asking,” I told him in no uncertain terms.

He backed up a few paces, glancing suspiciously at each of us.

“I never had any contact with the Dark Slayers, I couldn’t have done anything to piss you off. Why did you force your way into my home?”

Although he was trying to sound calm, there was an element of fear in his voice. Rudy was a puny little fucker, his waist about the size of one of my biceps. I didn’t know whether we had caught him on a bad day, or he just had hygiene problems. Looking him up and down, I shook my head, unable to imagine what Lacey ever saw in this man.

Storm spoke up. “He wants to know why we’re here. Get on with it, brother, or I will.”

I took a menacing step forward. “To be honest, I came to mess you up because of what you did to Lacey Livingstone.”

He looked shocked at the mention of her name, “Lacey fucking Livingstone? Whatever that bitch told you, it’s not true.”

My hand came out and slapped him across the face hard enough to knock him to the ground. “Here’s how this is going to go down moving forward. Every time you say something shitty about my woman, I’m gonna break one of your fingers. Every time you lie about what you did to her, I’m gonna punch you in the face. Are we clear?”

He put the palm of his hand under his chin and wiggled his jaw back and forth.

I knelt down in front of him. “In general, stupid fuckers like you answer me back when I ask a fucking question.” There was a brief pause as we stared each other in the eye. I asked quietly, “Do you understand what’s going on here?”

He nodded. “Yeah, you think I did something to Lacey and you’re out for revenge.”

I deadpanned, “I don’t think you did something to her. I know you did. Best thing you could do is stop trying to lie about it.”

He frowned. “What do you want from me? What would it take to make all this stop? Do you want money? I’ve got lots of it.”

Tilting my head to the side, I looked at him with new eyes. “Is this what jackasses like you do when faced with the consequences of your own actions? You lie and then try to bribe your way out trouble.”

He nodded, “It’s human nature to avoid pain.”

“Not in my world. If I fuck up, I stand up and face the consequences like a man. You’ve got a scared little boy mentality, and it shows.”

“Just tell me what you want from me and let’s get this over with.”

I reached out, grabbed his shirt, and hauled him to his feet. “What in the fuck were you thinking by taking nude pictures of Lacey and sharing them with your shitty friends?”

“She told me it was okay, and her body was nothing to be ashamed of. Lacey was open that way.”

This fucker was not a good liar. Most of the photos looked like they’d been taken without her knowledge. I pulled my arm back and hit him in the face. I heard a sickening crunch as his hands flew to his nose. Storm picked up a pillow off his sofa and threw it at him. Glancing at me, he stated grimly, “Why do they always lie?”

“Because men who do shit like this have no integrity.”

I motioned for Rudy to get up. “Stand the fuck up. I’m not gonna keep picking you up all afternoon.”

He got to his feet wiping his bleeding nose on his arm.

“Try again, asshole. What made you think doing that was okay?”

“I was just proud of being with such a beautiful woman and I wanted to show her off. She never knew, so I didn’t see the harm.”

I punched him again and he staggered back several paces and fell against the wall.

“That’s for lying, yet again. You shared it in your stupid little group and said some pretty damn insulting things about her. She was nice enough to have sex with you because, for some reason, she cared about you, and you called her a whore who was

unfit to be marriage material.”

His expression grew weary. “I kind of remember saying something like that. I was young and dumb.”

I reached out and smacked him again, not putting as much effort into it.

Celt commented, “It’s smart to pace yourself, brother, ‘cause I don’t think this asshole is gonna stop trying to lie his way out of trouble with you.”

I glanced back at him. “That’s how it seems.”

Turning back to Rudy, I told him, “The reason I know that last statement you made was bullshit is because our IT guy found evidence that you’ve been doing shit like this with just about every woman you have dated. That tells me you’re a misogynistic asshole who likes to humiliate women for kicks. You think it makes you look cool to your asshole friends.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m flawed that way. The shit I said and the images I shared never left the group. Now that you’ve explained it so thoroughly, I see it was a shitty thing to do. What do you want me to do, apologize?”

“I don’t want you anywhere near my woman. I’m gonna get justice for Lacey by tuning you up today and you’re going to write her a letter admitting what you did and making the sincerest apology of your fucking lifetime.”

He held his hands up in a placating gesture. “Alright, man. Whatever you want, I’ll do it.”

Storm spoke up, “We also want to know where you were four days ago.”

My head snapped around to look at my club president. I was grateful that he brought up something that I had forgotten—the very reason for my visit.

He shoved the fingers of one hand through his messy hair. “I don’t know. Let me think for a minute.” A short silence spun out and then he looked up, clearly excited. “That was the twenty-second, right? I drove to Arizona the day before and spent the night gambling at an Indian casino. They had a real nice setup.”

Grit spoke up for the first time, “I’m sure they have security videos as well.”

Rudy’s trembling hand reached into the pocket of his shorts and came back out wrapped around his cell phone. “Fuck their security footage. I have lots of pictures of myself at the casino. My friends were all jealous that the place was so nice.”

Sure enough his images were dated for the night of the twenty-second. Rudy waited patiently for us to review his camera roll. Storm was smart, he went to his saved files and found a load of inappropriate images of women. Frowning, he handed me the phone. I saw the images he had saved of Lacey, tossed the phone back to Storm and let Rudy have it.

Celt pulled me off him. “If ye want him to be able to write a nice apology note to your lassie, stop beating on the stupid fecker before ye break his arms.”

He muscled me back and I watched Storm wipe all the images off Rudy’s phone, though not before sending them to Hacker, while Grit scrambled around to find for something for Rudy to write with. I hated that his nose was still bleeding, and he got blood on the note he wrote. I snatched it away the moment he signed the bottom of the note and tucked it inside my cut.

Rudy stammered, “What happens now? Is this the point where you knife me and leave me to bleed out on my own carpet?”

I opened my mouth to reply but this man was just strange. Finally, I told him, “Yeah, if I had any say on the matter. You deserve a dirt nap for all the shitty things you’ve done.”

“What... what do you mean?” he stammered.

Storm walked over and pushed him down into a chair. “Investigating you turned up a lifetime of you shitting on almost everyone in your life, pilfering money from your siblings’ college funds and committing work-related fraud. It seems like you don’t have many redeeming qualities as a human being.”

Grit spoke up again. “This is your come-to-Jesus, talk. Time to grow the fuck up and start acting like a decent human being instead of a woman-hating, degenerate asshole.”

Relief flooded his face. “You’re not going to kill me? I’m getting off with a warning?”

Storm walked up to where he was still sitting in the chair and looked down at him. “Not fucking likely.” He raised his boot and slammed the heel down on the side of Rudy’s knee. There was a pop. Whether he shattered Rudy’s knee, or just popped it out of its socket, it made Rudy scream out in pain.

I squatted down and covered his mouth with my hand. “Shut the fuck up, you little weasel.” When he managed to get himself under control, I took my hand away. “This is your one and only warning to stop all the lying, stealing, and shitting on innocent, unsuspecting women. We will be keeping an eye on you. If you keep it up, we’ll be back.”

Storm added, “And next time I won’t hold my friend back from giving you that dirt nap you fucking deserve.”

“I’ll try to turn over a new leaf,” Rudy said while holding his knee in his hands.

“Don’t try. Do it or else,” Storm barked. “Get yourself some therapy. Your life depends on it.”

We grabbed his laptop and his tablet and headed out the door. Hacker had asked for them in order to make sure he wasn’t harboring even more images. I stooped down and picked up his phone as well. Hacker could have a go at all three devices at the same time.

Walking out to our bikes, I didn’t know if we got through to the stupid fucker or not and I didn’t care. Worst-case scenario, Rudy would fuck up and I’d get to have another go at him at some point in the future. That was something to look forward to at least.

Lacey

When we met up for drinks the next evening, Rebel asked, “Want to come spend the night at my house? We can talk about the progress we made on investigating the office break-in and if you want to ride my glorious cock, I’ll probably let you.”

I rolled my eyes, I was getting used to his sense of humor by now. “You’re truly a generous man. How did I not notice that before?”

He just grinned. When I looked into his eyes, I saw something that hadn’t been there before. It looked like some kind of sadness or regret. It made me want to reach out to him and make him feel better. So, I reached my hand across the table to cover his. “Did something bad happen last night?”

Turning his hand to grasp mine, his expression turned serious. “There’s always something bad going on in the world. I don’t like it when the darkness touches the people I care about.”

“If you want to talk about it, I’m a good listener,” I told him.

“Maybe later tonight. It’s too early to spoil the evening.”

Sitting across from him, I was grateful that I hadn’t messed up so badly that he was done with me, so when he asked, I jumped at the chance to go home with him. I couldn’t be sure but being invited to his house, rather than the clubhouse, felt like a monumental step in the direction of establishing a real relationship.

I was shamelessly looking forward to riding his glorious cock for part of the evening as well. I mean, why wouldn't I? The last time we spent the night together was amazing. Of course, a girl would want a repeat of the best night of her life. I had rarely had orgasms with the couple of partners I'd had before Rebel, so four orgasms in one night was impressive.

One of the things I liked best about Rebel was his ability to forgive and move past issues. He didn't carry them around, or bring them up and throw them back in my face. Even though he had a quirky personality and a bit of an odd sense of humor, I was growing to like those things about him. I felt relaxed and safe with him.

I especially loved him for taking my dad out, giving him an interesting new experience, and bringing him back with a genuine smile of happiness on his face. My dad's happiness was at the top of my priority list and a rarity in our lives right now. Rebel had given our family something precious and probably didn't even realize how much it meant to my mom and me.

After packing a rucksack with my essentials, I climbed onto the back of Rebel's bike and let him ride off with me. Sitting on his bike, with my arms wrapped around his waist and the cool breeze whipping through my clothes was heaven on earth. It was moments like this that I understood why he loved riding his bike. It felt more freeing than driving a car. I clung to him as his tires ate up mile after mile of road, each moment taking us closer to his home, the place he laid his head to rest after a long, hard day. I couldn't wait to see where he lived.

He lived about fifteen miles from town. When he pulled into his driveway, motion sensor lights popped on all the way around his home. When I lifted my helmet off and handed it to him, shock filled every corner of my mind. I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting, but his house was sleek, modern, and jet black—and made of shipping containers.

My eyes ate up the sight before me. There were two long shipping containers, side by side and another placed at an angle across the top, giving it an asymmetrical feel. There were waist-high metal bars creating a balcony with a few pieces of outdoor furniture set close to the upper level walls.

There were multiple large windows and a long porch along the front with black porch furniture. As we stepped onto the porch his interior lights lit up, revealing sleek, modern chandeliers and color-coordinated furniture in black and dark gray.

As we walked through the door, I murmured, “Your house is amazing. Did you build it yourself?”

He nodded, seemingly thrilled at how impressed I was with his handiwork. “Yes. Mostly. I wanted something I could build in stages and use the building skills I learned in the military. A lot of the materials were salvaged and some of my club brothers helped me put it together. But I insulated, finished, and painted it myself.”

Closing the door behind him, he continued, “For the first couple of years after I was discharged from the military, all my time and resources went into building this home.”

“That must have been a ton of work. It’s really beautiful. It looks like you had an interior designer involved.”

“Maybe I’m wasted as an electrician?” he said with a grin. Gesturing towards his kitchen, he added, “I could talk for days about my house, but we’ve got bigger fish to fry tonight. I’m gonna make us some drinks and show you my office. It’s where I’ve been keeping track of the evidence on the break-in.”

“Alright, we’ll get right down to business if that’s what you want.”

“What I want is to be able to leave you in the office every morning without having to worry about some asshole breaking in and harming you.”

“Yeah, I want that too,” I told him.

“I’m grabbing a beer. I have wine, wine coolers, orange juice, or milk.”

“Maybe a wine cooler. It seems a waste to open a whole bottle of wine if it’s just me drinking it.”

He opened his fridge and pulled out our drinks, handing me an ice cold bottle and taking a beer for himself.

I followed him upstairs and into a small office. He had a bulletin board with all sorts of pieces of information pinned to it. Unlike the boards they showed police making on crime shows, his was chaotic and the clues didn’t point in any particular direction.

I sat down in a comfortable armchair as he dropped down on the corner of his desk. Taking a mouthful of my drink I listened as he started to explain. “I started with the clients who were disgruntled enough to come to me to get jobs your employees screwed up fixed. I figured they would be the most likely to be angry at not getting their money refunded by Livingstone Electrical.”

“That was a good call. Shepard refused refunds even when we were at fault.”

“Yeah, and the people I talked to were pissed. I ended up with a short list of nine clients with an axe to grind, and talked to every single one of them personally.” He snatched several sheets of paper off the bulletin board and handed the neatly stapled stack to me, “You can see for yourself what the results of those conversations were.”

I skimmed the list.

“One was an older man by the name of Orville Winthrop. He passed away a month and a half ago and his family had no idea what I was talking about, so I marked him off the list,” Rebel said.

“What about the next two? They have checks next to their names.”

Without even glancing at the list, he responded, “Yes. Ramon Fuentes and Todd Jones. Both of them were quite vocal about the work Sherman did for them. Ramon had an extension built, and Sherman was supposed to install wiring for overhead lights and put an electrical outlet on each wall. Sherman did the install, and I came out a few weeks later and did some troubleshooting, fixing the problem in under an hour. Same with Todd, only he built a new garage and wanted a garage door installed along with overhead lighting and one outlet for his power tools along the back wall. Sherman was good at half-assed installs. I fixed his mistakes in short order as well. They aren’t likely suspects because they both ended up getting me to correct the problem for a nominal charge. Neither of them were particularly irate, just annoyed.”

“Three out of nine leaves six,” I said, stating the obvious.

“The next one is marked out because he’s one of Harvey’s friends and although he got shafted on a security system installation, I fixed it in under two hours and rewired a bathroom light fixture that needed to be replaced due to water damage, for free. He was actually happy when I left.”

We went through all the rest of the clients on his list and most cases were similar to the ones from the top of the list. People were annoyed, but since some time had passed, they’d mostly gotten over it.

“Out of this whole list, I’ve got a file on two of them and will probably go ahead and refund the money they paid you to correct the work our employees did.”

He took a swig of his beer and told me, “You should refund every single one of them on the list. It’s the right thing to do.”

He wasn’t wrong about that. “Before you came along, I didn’t anticipate having the revenue to give refunds, but the business is close to being in the black. I’ll contact them and work out at least partial refunds.”

“So after exhausting that list, I looked through your reviews online and found three more people who were seriously angry but couldn’t afford to hire another electrician to correct the work. I went ahead and volunteered to make it right myself and tried to do a little extra, so they felt satisfied. Their names are on the second page.”

Flipping the page, I realized rather quickly that these jobs probably took longer than the others he’d reworked. “You should fill out an invoice for your work so I can pay you.”

“You didn’t send me on the job. I volunteered. If you move on to the third page, it’s a list Hacker, our IT guy, dug from creating a bot that crawled over several social media platforms looking for any negative chatter about you or your parents. You know, anything significant enough that it might provoke someone into tearing apart your family business. Hacker is thorough and found a couple of things that fall in the category of maybes.”

I quickly flipped to the last page and scanned through all the information.

“You’ll want to flip that page over,” he told me quietly.

One hand flew to my mouth as I saw that my ex had posted a naked image of me in some manosphere group and talked trash about what a terrible lay I was. I’d dated Rudy briefly before I left for Los Angeles, and I’d thought we’d parted on good terms. The things Rudy said about me online were humiliating, I had always thought

he was such a nice guy. I felt myself choking up.

My eyes flew up to Rebel. He reached out and plucked a sealed envelope off the bulletin board and handed it to me.

He said in a steely voice, “Don’t worry, I already dealt with him.”

Holding the envelope in my shaking hands, I asked, “What do you mean by dealt with?”

He shrugged one muscular shoulder. “Hacker is working on getting the images off the website. Fucker liked to hoard shit like that, so I got rid of everything he had on his phone, laptop, and tablet. We found no evidence that he used cloud storage. I also talked to him, and I might have tuned him up a little, and impressed upon him the importance of not doing shit like that again.”

“You beat him up?” I didn’t know why I was so shocked about that.

“He deserved it. Jackass did it to several women, not just you. Losing a few teeth is the least of his worries. I sent the information he shared with them and two of them are suing him.”

Flipping the letter in my hand, I asked, “So what’s this?”

“His very convincing letter of apology. Careful when you handle it. He had himself a little nosebleed when he wrote it.”

“Jesus, Rebel. I never would have thought he’d share naked photos of me with his friends.”

“I hope I’m not contributing to your difficulty in trusting men?”

I folded the envelope in half and crammed it in my pocket. “No. That’s ancient history.”

Of course, that was a bald-faced lie. At this moment, I was not okay, but I didn’t want Rebel to feel guilty for being honest with me. Picking up the page of things people had said online, I noticed something else that shocked me. “My mom’s best friend is talking about how she doesn’t deserve my father. Did you talk to Margaret too?”

“Yeah, of course I did,” he paused when he saw the look on my face. “Don’t worry, I didn’t touch her, but I might have put the fear of God in her.”

My eyes flew open. “Rebel, what did you do?”

“Not a lot. Threatened to make sure everyone in her life knew she had a crush on a happily married man.”

“Not a lot,” I admitted.

“She kept telling me how her grandson was going to beat my ass for talking to her disrespectfully. He’s a fucking pyromaniac. I didn’t want to take a chance that she’d get brave one day and move on from break-ins to having her grandson torch your office.”

My hands flew to my mouth. “Do you really think they’re capable of doing something like that?”

Rebel told it to me straight, “Who the fuck knows? But I decided to face the issue head-on by impressing upon them both the importance of keeping their mouths shut about your family, and staying away from you and the business.”

“How did they take that suggestion? I can’t imagine it went over very well, since she

comes and goes at my parents' house like she owns the place."

"I decided to beat her at her own game and threatened to make sure everyone in her life knew she had a crush on your father. I also told that grandson of hers that if I had to come back, I was going to let all the bikers I left outside come inside and take turns using him for a punching bag. Since his talent is starting fires and not fighting muscle bound bikers, he agreed to steer clear of your family and the office. I'm not sure I got through to Margaret though. Although we settled on a compromise, she was still acting the fool when I left."

"Oh my god. My mom is going to be furious."

"Don't worry, she's fucking off to Florida to do her snowbird thing early this year. I told her that either she shuts her fucking mouth about your mom, or I share all the other awful shit she says about people with everyone on her social media list."

Finally understanding, I said, "She's been talking about everyone behind their backs. That sounds about right. Margaret Pensay has always been a gossip. You know that you didn't need to get involved in that, right?"

"I had to make sure she wasn't involved in the break-in and since I was there anyway, I decided to deal with her mouth. Your mom's a nice lady. She doesn't deserve to have that bitch saying ugly shit about her behind her back like that."

"My money is on her staying in Florida. Do you mind if I take this with me?"

"No," he replied. "It's just a printout of what's on my computer."

If he objected to me sharing this with my mom, he didn't say. I wanted to share it with her because Margaret sometimes visited our house when my mom was out, and I didn't want her taking advantage of my dad one day when he was really

compromised.

“So, what’s the bottom line?” I asked.

“No one panned out to be a viable suspect,” he replied grimly. “That fire-setting grandson of hers took Margaret to the ER the night your office was broken into. They had proof, so they couldn’t have been involved.”

“I don’t know why, but I’m glad it wasn’t them. She’s been involved with our family for a long time.”

Rebel gave me a strange look and I responded, “Yeah, I know that’s weird. You don’t have to say it.”

Not commenting on my words, he asked, “What did you and Zoe come up with?”

“I sifted through every client that made a formal complaint to my office and Zoe decided that none of them seemed angry enough to break into our office and mess it up. Then we got to thinking. Maybe it was a former employee.”

“As in Sherman or Mark, right?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t pay to rule either of them out, but I think Mark is exponentially more likely to ransack our office and destroy it. He was super pissed at being let go, and he has a terrible temper and is a shitty human being in general.”

“Were either of them awarded unemployment?”

“They both applied and were denied. A former employee only qualifies for unemployment if they lost their job through no fault of their own. Both Mark and Sherman were fired for a reason.”

“Were either of them notified of the denial on the day of the break-in?”

“Yes. Mark was notified the afternoon before the break-in. I still think if it’s either of them, it’s him. He lost a well-paying management job and like I mentioned before he’s a truly despicable person.”

“Alright, that’s the direction we’ll go in next” he responded firmly. “We’re not giving up until we know who did this and they’re behind bars.”

“Mind if we get out of here? I was kind of hoping for a romantic evening, and looking at all that evidence is killing the mood.”

Rebel grinned and came to his feet. “Sure. You want to go downstairs or lounge in my bedroom? I have a little seating area in there and a minifridge with more drinks, so I’m not just steering you towards the bed. I often chill there in the evenings rather than the living room.”

“Your room sounds great. We can crash when we get tired of talking about the break-in.”

“Oh, I’ve almost had my limit of talking about that.” I could tell by his voice that he wasn’t even joking about that.

I was right there with him. Throwing everything I just learned into a little box in the back of my head and forgetting about it for just one night sounded pretty good, right about now. Everything over the last week or so had been not only difficult but overwhelming. And learning that my mom’s best friend had been backstabbing her, and that my ex had turned out to be an asshole who violated my privacy, was more than I could deal with tonight.

That’s why when Rebel handed me another wine cooler, I gratefully accepted it and

opened it right away. I tilted my head back and took a long drink. It was just what I needed to quench my thirst. When I glanced at Rebel, he was staring at me with concern etched over every square inch of his face.

“You realize that none of what happened was your fault, right?”

“Except the ex. I guess that I had poor judgment back then. I honestly thought he was a relatively nice guy. The only reason we broke up was because I went off to college.”

“Yeah, that was one of the things that caused him the most angst.”

“Well, that’s not exactly how it went. Initially we were both going to UCLA, but he didn’t get the grades. He tried to persuade me to stay in Griffinsford and attend the community college instead, but I wasn’t going to give up my opportunity.”

“You don’t have to justify to me why this asshole had it all wrong. The thing is, you had every right to break up with him for any reason or no reason. He’s now clear on the fact that you didn’t owe him shit. Please don’t give that fucker a second thought.”

“I don’t know how I could have had such poor judgment,” I told him. I was embarrassed to have been exploited by him. “He turned out to be worse than I could have imagined.”

Rebel shrugged. “Maybe he wasn’t like that in the beginning. It might be that when the two of you went your separate ways for college, his choices took him down the wrong path.”

“I guess that’s possible. I’m done talking about him, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. So what do you wanna talk about?” he said with an easy grin.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Lacey

“I don’t know, but do you know what would really make me feel better?” I said, raising my eyebrow.

“Let me guess. Snuggling up to a big scary biker who’s proven he’s willing to beat the shit out of men who take liberties without asking?”

Setting my empty bottle aside, I told him, “That’s one way of looking at it, I suppose. Another way is that I’d like to snuggle up to the man who’s been occupying all my thoughts lately, the one who is all kinds of handsome, has an amazing sense of humor, and gives the best orgasms I’ve ever had. What do you say to that?”

He tossed his bottle to the side, and I heard it land in the wastepaper basket. “I’d say that I’m all-in,” he told me in a low, seductive voice.

When he pulled me onto his lap, I was all-in as well. He pulled me closer, and I put my head on his chest. His hand automatically began rubbing up and down my back in a soothing motion.

“This feels really nice,” I murmured.

“Yeah, this is all I need to be a happy man.”

I smiled against his chest. “You also need your club and your gran.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “But you’re the one I’ve been thinking might slot nicely into my

life. We have a lot in common. You like orgasms. I like giving orgasms. It's a win-win situation if you think about it."

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped my lips. "You make having sex with me seem like your good deed for the night. I'm pretty sure you like having orgasms too. Your refractory period is too short for me to believe otherwise."

He chuckled, "Look at you using big words that your big dumb biker can't understand."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're far from being dumb. You've been in the military and ended up a master electrician who can build a kick ass house from shipping containers. I'm just a woman who did an accountancy degree and learned how to run an office from my parents. I'm a one-trick pony."

He lifted my chin and tilted my head back to look deeply into my eyes. "You're not just any one thing, Lacey. You're an amazing woman who can do all the things necessary to run a successful business. You're a loving daughter, you've got great friends who really care about you, and in the time we've known one another I can't imagine my life without you. I don't like hearing you talk down about yourself."

"You're right," I told him. "We're both pretty amazing people. There is no shame in admitting that to ourselves."

"That's my girl," he said warmly. "I learned a long time ago that if I didn't believe in myself, no one else would."

"Does admitting we're both pretty amazing earn me any kisses?"

A smile lit up his face. "You don't have to earn kisses from me. I'll give them to you gladly, because I love you."

When my eyes flew open at his admission of love, he added, “I know I’m probably a fool for falling for you so fast, so don’t feel like you have to say it back or anything.”

I slid both hands up to cup his face. “I don’t think it’s a big secret for anyone but you that I’m falling hard and fast for you.”

“Is that a fact?” he asked. When he opened his mouth again to add something flippant, like he always did, I put my hand over his mouth.

“Don’t say anything to spoil this moment. Sometimes I think you use bad jokes to cover the vulnerability of saying how you feel out loud.”

After a short thoughtful pause, he responded, “I think you might be right about that.”

He was being vulnerable and emotionally honest again. It made all the feeling blooming in my chest double and then triple. I told him softly, “You don’t need to do that. It’s okay to be vulnerable with someone you love and trust.”

“Well, to be honest, I’ve never had that before. Instead of meaningful relationships it was always women who liked to hook up with military men, and then club girls who probably saw me as a consolation prize as I wasn’t patched in.”

“Speaking of patching in, you owe me two whole days in your property cut.”

“I know you lost the bet, but I thought you didn’t believe in property cuts.”

I had a hard time keeping the smirk off my face. “You think I lost that bet?”

“You did,” he deadpanned back. “I remember that bet well.”

“I got to come all over your magnificent cock and my reward is getting to wear your

property cut. In my opinion, neither of those things make me a loser.”

His face lit up. “Keep saying sexy shit like that to me and I’ll superglue my fucking property cut to your body. I’ll make sure you don’t ever get out of it no matter how hard you squirm or how much you complain.”

I pulled him close, and right before our lips touched I murmured, “Who’s complaining? Certainly not me.”

I could tell all this talk about wearing his property cut was turning him on because his hand immediately started roaming all over my body and his kisses were brutally efficient at turning me on.

When I shoved him back, he didn’t want to go. His eyes followed me as I slid to the floor between his legs and reached for his zipper. His hands came to cover mine. “You planning to suck my magnificent cock, sweetness?”

I nodded and quipped, “I thought your pet name for me was fancy pants?”

“You earned an upgrade. Fancy pants was back when I thought you were trying to act like you were better than me. Now, you’re being all sweet and treating me like I really matter to you.”

I pulled one hand free and swatted his hands away. “You’ve always mattered to me. I was just in denial there for a minute.”

A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. “You can always make that up to me by sucking my magnificent cock.”

I got to work unbuttoning his jeans. “Just who told you that your cock was magnificent?”

He shot back, "Every woman I've had sex with."

"I'll be the judge of that."

One of his hands made a slight outward gesture, "I didn't hear any complaints the last time my cock was out."

"That's true but then again, I didn't exactly get a bird's eye view of your supposed magnificence, now did I?"

"No ma'am, you didn't. Best prepare yourself to be impressed and amazed."

"Are you always such a handful?" I asked, only because he seemed to have an answer for everything tonight.

Fighting back a smile he responded, "Sometimes I can be a mouthful or even a pussy full."

That's about the time I managed to extricate his dick from his jeans. It sprang up, long, thick, and proud. This man was in fact a sight to behold. He was cut. His cock had a pink head that was begging to be lavished with my tongue. He clearly manscaped and smelled fresh and clean. Rebel checked every single box I preferred. That meant there was no way I was letting this one get away.

"You sure you want to do this?" he asked in a strange tone.

I glanced up at his face, "Of course. Why would you ask something like that?"

"Because you're staring at me, instead of going down on me."

Playing him at his own game, I asked, "Can't a girl enjoy the view for a few

seconds?”

He raked his hand through this shoulder-length hair and glanced away. “Sure, if that’s in fact what you’re doing.”

“Stop talking. You’re distracting me from enjoying the world’s most magnificent cock.” With that, I bent over and gave his cockhead a big wet kiss. He sucked in a quick breath and his cock jerked in my hand.

“Never had any woman want to kiss my cock before.”

“Shush. You’re distracting me again.”

I used my tongue to glide over the tip, around the head, and then to trace the long veins popping out around the sides. The more I licked, the harder he got, until I was worried that he was literally going to explode before I got him in my mouth. Then I wrapped my lips around him and started sucking while using both hands to stroke him.

He didn’t say anything else, but his hands came up to gather my hair and hold it out of the way. I didn’t know if it was so it didn’t accidentally get into my mouth as I went about licking and sucking him, or because it blocked his view. Either way it was helpful for me, so I didn’t complain.

I slid one hand down to palm his balls, and he made a rough needy noise in the back of this throat. “Fuck, you’re good at this,” he said hoarsely.

I never thought of myself as someone who was particularly good at giving head. Until now I was never so motivated to do my best job ever. After all the pleasure Rebel gave me last time, I was damn sure I was going to make sure he got his fair share in return this time.

I gripped him tighter and sucked so hard my cheeks hollowed out. He pulled me off him gently.

“Go slower. I don’t want to come in your pretty mouth.”

“We’ll see,” I told him.

“When I come, it’s gonna be over your beautiful breasts because that’s sexy as hell.” With that he reached up and started to tug my shirt off. Next came my bra and he gently squeezed my nipples into hard peaks.

Even though I wanted to taste him, I knew that Rebel would end up having his way tonight. He was too ramped up and excited to let me do as I liked.

When he gathered my hair again, and guided my head back down, I worried for a second about him forcing my head down and gagging me on his cock. Then I remember who I was with. Rebel wouldn’t do something like that because he actually cared about me.

I went willingly where he led, and when my hands came out around his cock this time I was intent upon doing what he asked. I went slow and took my time giving him the pleasure he so richly deserved. Each sweep of my tongue against his heated flesh was a loving caress, meant not only to pleasure him, but to communicate how much I cared about making this night good for him. And my hot biker ate it up with a spoon loving how I worshipped his body.

When I felt his cock throbbing against my tongue, I knew he was about to come. Rebel did too. He pulled out and put his free hand over mine guiding his cock towards my chest. I felt the warm splashes of his seed marking my breasts and brought my hands up to rub it in before it could drip down my body. I was so turned on that I found myself squeezing and massaging my breasts as I rubbed his come into

my skin. He immediately dragged me up and claimed my mouth in a searing kiss. Between kisses he murmured, “That’s the sweetest blow job I’ve ever had.”

Before I could get my head around what was happening, he had got to his feet and was pulling my jeans and panties off in one fell swoop. My shoes were long gone, left by the front door. Instead he moved me to his bed and pulled my naked body to the edge like he did last time. Then he was standing over me naked.

Looking like the sexiest man alive, he was all sexy muscles and intricate tattoos. My hand went up to touch one tattoo that looked like someone shot a bullet through glass. I was surprised to find a piece of round scar tissue in the middle of the image. His hand came up to cover mine. Guiding my fingers from one tattoo to another, he explained, “This, this, and this, are all bullet holes from being shot in Afghanistan.”

He moved my hand to the crease of his elbow where there was a long thick scar. “That’s where I got hit with an axe by my cousin when I was twelve. Took twenty-three stitches to close.” A smile ghosted over his mouth. “Little dude was grounded for almost a year.”

He brought my hand to a scar on the right side of his neck. “This is where my father tried to slit my throat when I was fourteen. Thirty-seven stitches is what it took for my mother to finally throw him out.”

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m sorry that happened to you.” I cupped his face and pulled him down for a long, bittersweet kiss. A reward for him finally sharing personal things about himself that I was certain he rarely talked about with other people. This had clearly been a gesture of trust for him.

I murmured against his mouth. “All your secrets are safe with me.”

He pulled back and gazed down into my eyes. “I know. It’s been a long time since I

trusted another person like I trust you, Lacey. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. As long as we're together, I won't ever take you for granted. You know that, don't you?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I know. Same here. I won't ever betray your trust, take you for granted, or put you second to another living soul."

His lips drifted down to mine again and he poured all his tenderness and passion into a kiss that was meant to seal us together. After running his fingers through my slit, he murmured, "You're so wet for me."

"Wet and eager to be filled up by you," I whispered back boldly.

"Fuck, I love hearing that kind of shit from you," he said before reaching down to position the head of his cock where I needed it to be.

I brought my legs up around his waist and mentally prepared myself for all the orgasms that were sure to come. Instead of going full force in one thrust, Rebel was careful with my body. He rocked himself back and forth, slowly filling me with his thick cock. And boy did I feel every inch of him, along with an ever-so-slight ache of being stretched open by him. When he finally bottomed out, I exhaled a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding.

"You okay, sweetness?" Rebel's voice was deep and concerned.

I realized that my expression had been strained, so I forced myself to nod and smile. "Yeah, of course I am. You weren't joking when you said you can be a pussy full."

He choked out a stunned laugh. "You always manage to surprise me. You ready to have your first orgasm of the night?"

“I’m dying for it,” I told him, enjoying every moment of being with this big biker with a heart of gold.

When he pulled out and thrust back in, I almost came immediately, “Wow, that was a lot.”

“Yeah, and there’s plenty more where that came from.”

I relaxed back onto the bed, and he started out slow and before he really got going, my first orgasm caught me by surprise. It was weird that I didn’t feel it building to such an intensity.

Rebel slowed down to give me a minute to catch my breath and then sped up again. Only this time he bent down to kiss me, before teasing my nipples in turn with his mouth. The sucking, nipping, licking, and scraping the tip with the blunt edge of his teeth catapulted me forward to my second orgasm. It hit with enough force to take my breath away.

Rebel sputtered something about how no woman had ever clamped down so hard on his cock before. I sucked in enough air to breathe but was past being able to formulate a response to his roughly spoken words. He was totally in the zone, his eyes glazed over with lust. Little did he know but his cock wasn’t the only magnificent thing about him tonight.

As he was slowly edging me towards my third orgasm, my hands roamed over his body, needing the connection that touching him provided. He glanced down at one of my hands and his expression softened. He picked up his pace and stilled inside me as he came. Something about the throb of his cock was just enough to trigger my final orgasm. I came while he was still shooting inside me. Coming together felt intimate and loving.

When he rolled us over, I ended up sprawled over him with his cock still jerking slightly. We were both out of breath and covered in a soft sheen of sweat. I could hear the strong beat of his heart because my cheek was laid against his chest.

After a few moments I recovered my ability to make words. “That was amazing,” I said.

“Everything with you, always is amazing,” Rebel whispered as he slid his arm around my back to hold me closer.

Something about his softly spoken words hit me right in the feels because he sounded warm and earnest. In that moment, I knew for certain that he was my one.

Rebel

I woke up curled protectively around Lacey's lush form. Last night had been an amazing breakthrough for us. I honestly thought she was going to be pissed that I crawled all up in her former relationship and her parents' personal lives.

I had considered not telling her about her ex or her mom's friend, but I was glad I came clean about all that because her reaction told me one simple thing. She trusted me to make appropriate judgment calls when it came to looking out for her and her parents. Earning her trust had felt like winning the fucking lottery.

Nobody got me like Lacey did. She not only understood me, she also liked me as a person and if I wasn't mistaken, I think she saw us as having something long-term. Imagine a good, wholesome woman like Lacey seeing me as good enough. I mean, I knew deep down inside that I was, but getting overlooked by women who had their act together for my whole life was beginning to mess with my head. That little nagging voice in the back of my mind was starting to tell me that all the women in the world couldn't be wrong.

Truth be told, it was starting to give me an outright complex. I hadn't wanted to believe I wasn't good enough, but that was the logical explanation and the reason I had been such an ass when Lacey blew me off the first time, I approached her. Granted, it had been a ham-handed approach on my part, but at the time it seemed to support the idea that I wasn't enough for nice women to take an interest in me.

Now, by embracing me so quickly, Lacey had proven I was right all along. Fuck that little voice all to hell. The last thing in the world I needed was self-doubt plaguing my

every step. I worked hard, was there for my club brothers, and saw that my grandmother was taken care of. I had nothing to be ashamed of. Lacey saw through all my self-doubt and personality quirks. She saw the real me and I was so thankful for the chance to get close to her that I was never gonna take her for granted.

I must have fallen asleep again, because I was woken by my phone vibrating from my pants on the floor, so I leaned down to grab it out of the pocket. I would have preferred to ignore it in favor of staying close to Lacey, but there was too much going on in my life with my gran and the club to just ignore texts and calls. When I checked, it was a text from Storm letting me know that the cops had finally released the office from being an active crime scene. I sent him a ‘thank you’ and put the phone on my bedside table. I personally felt that they held off releasing the crime scene because Storm and I had been a bit of a pain in their asses about doing a proper investigation. Even our contact at the police department wasn’t about to speed things up, so we’d gotten our attorney involved to see if he could work his magic.

Lacey turned over and burrowed down closer to my side. I shoved my hard cock aside and twisted my hips to keep from seeming insistent the very second she opened her eyes. Because it’s not very gentlemanly to wake someone up with a raging boner pressed against their ass.

She yawned, “What time is it? It can’t be morning already.”

I pulled her close again and murmured, “It’s seven.”

“Too early,” she groaned.

Her behavior made me smile. “Most of the brothers get up early because Storm’s burned it into our minds that if we don’t get moving, we’re burning daylight.”

Her head tilted up to look at me. “What does that even mean?”

I lean down and kiss her on the forehead. “It means, ladybug, that we only get so many hours in a day and it’s a bad idea to waste any of them. I guess it stems from being in the military.”

“I need more sleep,” she muttered.

I gave her a quick kiss on the lips and told her, “Why don’t you sleep in? I’ll go down and get coffee and breakfast started.”

“Stay right where you are. You’re warm and snuggly.”

“Yeah, I am both of those things. However, unless I get a cold shower, we’re gonna end up going another round or two and I know you probably don’t want that because we went at it long and hard last night.”

She sighed, “Fine, if you’re getting up, so am I.”

“Cause you don’t want to waste time sleeping when you could be with me, right?”

She rolled over and stared up at the ceiling. “You got me on that one. Storm’s right. Wallowing in bed alone is no way to start the day.”

“Want to grab a shower with me?” I asked playfully. “We can fool around.”

That got her sitting up and rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Damn, this woman was too precious to ever think about giving up. She slid out of bed and just as she started stumbling towards the bathroom, I heard her say, “Last one to the shower ends up on their knees.”

I bolted out of bed, but my ensuite bathroom was close, and she had a head start. Truth be told, I wasn't trying too hard to be first because the thought of having my mouth on her this morning sounded like the perfect way to start my day. She might have made it there first, but I was right behind her. I had to admit that she looked stunning all naked and laughing with her mess of bed hair. I liked her like this, happy, contented with me, and carefree.

We fell into the shower, still laughing and joking with each other. Since the plan was to fool around, I set the temperature to warm instead of hot. Lacey immediately grabbed a squirt of body gel from my pump dispenser and began soaping up my body. Not being born yesterday, I knew exactly where this was going. By the time she got to my cock, I leaned back against the shower wall and let her stroke me to her heart's content. I'd showered with women before but never had a sexy shower, so this was yet another thrilling new experience to share with her. It didn't take me long to shoot my load all over her breasts again.

When she lifted her arms up and tilted her head back to wet her hair, I swear she looked like a finely chiseled Greek statue, only with arms. I immediately took the opportunity she so generously provided to return the favor of soaping up her body, beginning with her breasts.

After rinsing her off with the shower head, I dropped to my knees and continued to worship her body like she deserved. Hearing her moan and make sounds of pleasure made my chest swell with pride. When she came all over my tongue, I lapped it up. Everything about Lacey, from her company, to the way we were together, was amazing. I was falling hard and fast for her and being genuinely in love for the first time in my life was turning out to be better than I ever imagined it would be.

We got dressed and I made a quick breakfast of coffee and some muffins I had bought a day or two ago which were still okay. I made a mental note to go grocery shopping—if Lacey was gonna be staying over here regularly, then my typical

bachelor fare of ramen noodles, yesterday's take-out pizza, and whatever leftovers I'd snatched from the clubhouse grill just wouldn't cut it. Then we headed straight to the office to assess the damage and begin the cleanup. I remembered it as being a mess but between the detectives and the forensic team it was a total wreck.

Wandering around from room to room, Lacey looked like she was about to cry. "What in the world did the police do to our office? It's worse than after the break-in."

Putting my arm around her, I answered, "They had to look for clues, which involves looking through the desks, cabinets, and closets, as well as dusting for fingerprints."

"It's going to take days to set things right," she said with tears in her eyes. "My parents would lose their minds if they saw all this. My mom was always so particular about making sure everything was nice and clean."

It was frustrating that we went from having a truly wonderful day to Lacey seeing her family business trashed by people who should have known better. It honestly did feel a bit like the cops added insult to injury by the way they handled the investigation in general.

I tugged her closer. "It's not gonna take days. I'll get some prospects to clean the place up and you can take a little time to shop for replacements for the things that can't be salvaged. How does that sound?"

She slowly nodded, pulling her eyes from the mess surrounding us to look at me.

"That sounds like a really nice offer. Do you think they'd be willing to help us out?"

I snorted a laugh. "Trust me, they'll be fucking thrilled. Give me a minute to send out a text."

She pulled out the laptop that I'd insisted we bring from my place. "I'm going to try to clear off my desk and get to work ordering what I know we need at this point. What's the password for your laptop?"

I grinned at her, trying not to look roguish. "The password is laceyisaperfect10."

She frowned, "You're joking, right?"

"No. I'm not. You've been on my heart and mind for a while now."

She moved closer and used her free hand to pull me down for a kiss. I enjoyed every second of it. She pulled back with a mischievous little smile turning up the corners of her mouth. "I'll be changing that password to lacey'ssmokinghotbikerreallyrocks. Assuming that isn't too many characters." Gesturing with one hand, she added, "And assuming that it'll let me use an apostrophe."

Giving her an indulgent smile, I responded, "I think the limit for computer passwords is usually a hundred and twenty seven characters and you can use special characters, even an air comma should be okay."

"Two things. Firstly, I'm impressed you know all that. And secondly, what's with calling an apostrophe an air comma?"

I shrugged with one shoulder and glanced away. "It what I used to call an apostrophe when I was a kid."

She chuckled, and shook her head, "I like it when you share things about yourself with me and that was an adorable share." Pulling her thumb back over her shoulder towards her office, she told me, "I'm gonna be in my office if you need me."

I started to tell her that I wouldn't need her, but that sounded rude in my own mind.

Instead I said, “I’ll always need you, so it’s good to know where to look.”

She launched herself at me, gave me a hard kiss and then turned around and headed towards her office.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and toed a piece of debris on the floor out of the way as I thought about what just happened. This was really happening. I was opening up—almost effortlessly—to the one woman who truly seemed to care about me and wanted to know about me. And she seemed to like me all the more for it.

It was with a sappy smile on my face that I pulled out my phone and got to work pulling prospects in to help out. I started by calling Storm.

“Good morning, Rebel. I assume you got my message?” Storm was the kind of man who liked to get straight to the point. I respected and admired him for being a straight shooter.

“Yeah, Prez. I got your message. We’re at the office now and the place is a real mess.”

“The intruders trashed the place, right?”

I remembered telling him all about that. “Yeah, and the cops tossed the entire place during their investigation. I was wondering if we could spare some prospects to help me clear up?”

“Sure thing, brother.”

“Great. Who were you thinking of sending?”

“Rodney, James, and Eric. Is that enough or do you think you’ll need more?”

“Nah, that will be fine. We’ve got a large dumpster out back that several offices use. It’s normally pretty empty because offices don’t generate the kind of refuse that restaurants and retailers do.”

“I’ll send them with a pile of trash bags and cleaning supplies.”

“Thanks, Prez. We’re gonna need all the help we can get to get this place back in shape.”

“Whatever you need, we’ll get. Give them an hour or so to gather up supplies, load up, and get to your place, okay?”

Grateful for the club’s support, I responded, “Will do. And thanks again.”

There was a slight pause and then Storm asked, “Did you run down the particulars on the information Hacker found?”

“Yeah, all of it turned out to be unrelated. Zoe and Lacey like at least one of her former employees for the break in. That’s where I’m gonna look next.”

“Let me know when you’re ready to pay them a little visit. I’ll get Grit and Celt to come along for the ride.”

“I’d be a pretty shitty brother if I couldn’t handle a couple of former employees with no history of violence by myself.”

“True, but why take a chance? One of them could pull a weapon, you never know how people will act when they’re accused.”

“I get that. You’re giving good advice right now and I will let you know when I can free myself up from this mess to get back to solving this crime, since Griffinsford’s

finest are apparently too incompetent to get things done.”

“Ain’t that the damn truth, brother. I gotta run. Zoe’s calling me.”

“Catch you later, Prez.”

When the call ended, I got busy clearing up. I found some trash bags in the front closet along with the vacuum cleaner and started filling bags and carrying them out to the dumpster. I was on my fifth bag when the prospects came strolling through the front door with their arms full of cleaning supplies.

“Where do you want this stuff, Rebel?” Eric asked.

“You can dump it here, near the closet for now.”

James made a sound of surprise, “Storm wasn’t joking when he said the office was trashed. It looks like a tornado tore through this place.”

“Just regular assholes,” I responded. Though whether those assholes were cops or the fucker who broke in was debatable.

Rodney asked grimly, “Where do you want us to start?”

I pulled out another trash bag and tossed the roll to him. “I think the best thing to do would get rid of all the debris first and then concentrate on cleaning. That fingerprint powder is a bastard to get rid of, I once dropped a toner cartridge for the copier machine in my office and spent months trying to get it out of the fucking carpet.” My eyes went to Eric who had been trying to wipe it off with his sleeve and now the entire bench was smeared in black. I heaved out a sigh, it was gonna be a long, long day. “Lacey’s ordering some replacement items, so we’ll need to collect those later too.”

Rodney tore off a trash bag from the roll and tossed it to Eric. “I’m on it, Rebel.”

The other two sounded their agreement. I was grateful for their help and volunteered, “If we can clear out a place to eat, I’ll order us some lunch here in a few hours.”

They perked up at the mention of food and we all got back to work. By the time noon rolled around, we’d cleared up and everything was looking way better. I walked into Lacey’s office and asked, “What are we doing for lunch?”

She glanced up from her computer, appearing far happier than when she first arrived. “How about pizza?”

I nodded, “Sounds good to me. If you call it in, I’ll pick it up and grab some beer for the prospects, you know, it’s the least I can do for them pitching in to clean up this mess.”

“Absolutely. This isn’t a formal workday and even if it was, they’re not employees. If having a nice cold beer lifts their spirits, I say let’s go for it.”

That’s my Lacey, always such a straight arrow. Good thing too. I considered it one of her finer qualities. “Great.” I walked up to her desk and looked down at her. “You seem to be in a really good mood. Don’t get me wrong, it’s great that you’re not as distraught as you were when we arrived and all.”

I didn’t even have to finish my thought because she volunteered, “I’m in a great mood because my folks just left to take my dad to that experimental treatment program. We’re both thrilled that he didn’t kick up a fuss and are hopeful that something good will come of it.”

I walked around and gave her a big bear hug. “That’s great news. I’m keeping my fingers crossed. If there’s anything I can do to support him better, just let me know.”

“Aww, you’re so sweet. You’ve been wonderful and my dad adores you.” Her expression fell for an instant, but she recovered quickly. “Most of his friends dropped him when his Alzheimer’s got bad. He talks about you like you’re his new best friend.”

I couldn’t help the smile that took over my face. Squatting down beside her chair, I reached out and cupped the side of her face. “I’m really glad to hear that. I’ve told you I honestly enjoy spending time with your old man. He’s pretty amazing.”

“I couldn’t love you any harder right now if my life depended on it.”

My face would not stop smiling for anything. Hearing her say she loved me was never gonna get old. It filled the small hole in my heart that had been empty my whole life.

I deadpanned back, “Yeah, we’ve had a good run of it the last few days.”

She nodded enthusiastically, “I just wish the rest of our lives could be just like this.” Glancing around at her now clean office she amended, “You know, except the whole breaking in thing. I could do without any more of that.”

I cupped her face in my hands and assured her, “The rest of our life can be whatever we decide to make it. And once we catch whoever broke into the office, I’ll make sure he’s in no condition to do it a second time.”

Her eyebrows flew up and she shook my hands away. I let my hands to drop. She leaned forward slightly, “Or we could just have them arrested.”

My expression went blank as I tried to sound casual. “Yeah, or that. I mean, anything’s possible, right?”

She frowned, alerting me that my response had not been quite as smooth as I had hoped. “You’re not a very good liar.”

“Yeah,” I agreed gamely. “My poker face sucks.”

Her hand came up to caress my cheek and then she yanked my ear slightly harder than I thought was necessary under the circumstances. “Lucky for you, I like that you’re a terrible liar. It means you haven’t had much experience with deception.”

I jerked my head to the side to make her let go of my ear. “Damn woman, no ear pulling. You ain’t my momma.”

“Lucky for you. If I were, you might end up getting spanked for trying to lie.” She had a naughty little smirk on her face, so I was pretty sure she was making a sexually suggestive comment to the man who had just given her four orgasms in the last twenty-four hours.

I jerked back and stared at her for a minute. “Did you have a no flirting in the workplace rule at one time? I guess a couple of turns on my glorious cock can be life altering but I didn’t know it would get you to violate your own rules.”

She swatted my shoulder. “I’m never gonna be able to win with you, am I?” Before I could answer, she gestured towards the door. “Amscray. I’ve got work to do. I’ll call in the pizza order to our usual place and it should be ready by the time you get there.”

“Tetchy when I mention how much you like my cock, aren’t you?”

Truth be told, I knew I was being annoying and that I should stop while I was ahead, so I got to my feet. “Sorry about slipping back into bad habits. Don’t know what got into me.”

Her expression turned from annoyed to indulgent again. “I’ll be the first to admit that old habits are hard to break.”

I leaned down with one hand on each arm of her chair and told her, “You’re worth changing for, you know that, don’t you?”

She shot back, “Maybe I don’t want you to change? It could be that I love you just the way you are, with all your quirks and idiosyncrasies.”

“Doubtful, but a man can hope.” I gave her a quick kiss and then headed for the door. “I’ll be back with food shortly.”

“I’ll bring in some chairs and we can all eat in my office,” she called out as I was walking out the door.

I made short work of picking up pizza, chips, and drinks. When I got back, Eric was waiting for me at the curb and helped me carry in the ridiculous bounty I’d procured. I’d had my eye on Eric for a while. He was the one prospect who always went the extra mile. I made a mental note to talk to Storm about patching him in. It was time that all his hard work paid off for him.

I found that Lacey was as good as her word. She had pulled in enough chairs for everyone and arranged around her desk. The two less-motivated prospects were sitting around, shooting the breeze with her. That was fine. I was sure she’d invited them because it seemed unlikely that the prospects would have both invited themselves. She opened the pizza boxes and handed out the paper plates and napkins the pizza place had sent with the pizza. I made sure everyone had a cold beer and even Lacey popped one open. Everyone was in good spirits, and we all got back to work afterward.

Lacey and I talked for a while longer and I invited her to spend the night with me again. I was gratified at how quickly she agreed. My life was getting better by the second and I felt like she was as into me as I was her.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Lacey

After another night in Rebel's bed, I was all-in with building this relationship with him. So was he. I could tell because this morning he talked me into staying at his place while my parents were gone. I agreed almost before he got the words out of his mouth because not only was I shamelessly eager to spend more time with him, I wasn't wild about spending so much time all alone in their huge house. It made me feel lonely, to tell the truth.

Since I hadn't picked up a change of clothing after work yesterday, we went to my parents' house to pack an overnight bag. On the way there in my car, he told me, "I was thinking that maybe you should just pack a suitcase or two rather than continue trying to stuff everything into an overnight bag."

"My folks are only supposed to be gone for three or four days."

"Well, they don't need to be gone for you to want to spend some time with me."

Without taking my hands off the wheel, I shot him a side glance. "And sleeping together is a great way to get to know each other better, right?"

"Don't be like that. You know I'm not with you for the fringe benefits. I just like being with you and I'd be a fool not to at least offer you the opportunity to stay with me. I won't get mad if you say no."

Feeling guilty for being snarky with him, I immediately tried to make it right. "I'll pack a suitcase. If I'm staying a few days, it makes sense not to have to worry about

what I'm going to wear every day."

"That's my girl," he said warmly, making me smile again.

I didn't know why but when we pulled into my parents' driveway, I started to feel really unsettled. Apparently, Rebel could tell something was up just by looking at my expression.

"What's wrong, Lacey? You look like you just saw a ghost."

We climbed out of the car and stood looking at the front of my parents' house. It looked like it always did. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something was off. My Spidey senses were going off wildly, cautioning me to stay away.

"I don't know. My gut instinct is telling me something is wrong."

His hand went for the holster he wore at the small of his back, "Look carefully, Lacey. Is anything out of place?"

The closer I looked, the more I realized what my unconscious brain had been picking up. "The blinds are closed. My parents normally keep them open and close the curtains instead when they're not at home."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, the chair near the door is turned at an angle. My mom likes to have the back flat against the house."

"Alright, that's enough. I'm going inside. If I don't come out within fifteen minutes or if you hear gunfire, call the police."

“Let’s just call the police right now. I don’t want you to risk your life when that’s what law enforcement gets paid to do.”

“Nah, I’m fine. Just remember what I told you and do it.”

“Okay,” I told him, not knowing what else to do. Watching him walk up the front sidewalk gave me chills. I told myself that I was being absurd but still couldn’t shake the bad feeling.

I knew something was terribly wrong when he reached out and shoved the door open. Jesus, the door was not only unlocked, it was ajar. He walked in with his gun held high. As the seconds ticked by, I didn’t hear gunshots or any noise that indicated there was an intruder. Eventually, he came to the front door again and motioned for me to come close. The look of stone-cold fury on his face played in my mind as I headed up the driveway and stepped into the house.

What I saw inside was a sickening reenactment of what went down at my office. Someone had broken into my parents’ house, only instead of totally trashing the place, they just made a huge mess when they ransacked the house. The thought occurred to me that whoever did this had more ground to cover and therefore didn’t really have time to commit the kind of destruction of property that took place at the office. Then I realized that if I hadn’t been staying with Rebel, I might have been home when they broke in.

I dropped down onto the sofa while Rebel called it in. My brain was working overtime trying to figure out who did this and what they could possibly want from me and my family. If I was being honest, this didn’t seem like something our former employees would do. Zoe and I had turned our attention in their direction for lack of better options. And Rebel had been incredibly thorough in eliminating almost everyone else who might have harbored a grudge against me or my parents.

I was working so hard at trying to unravel the mystery in my mind that I didn't realize he had called his club president rather than the police. I only figured it out when he used Storm's name. I looked up at him, confused.

When his call ended, he announced, "My club brothers will be here shortly. They're bringing our police contact from Griffinsford PD."

"Why not call the police directly?" I asked.

Rebel shrugged, "You saw what a mess they made of your office and the half-assed investigation. Our contact is a good man. Having him be eyes on first at least gives us a chance of a proper investigation happening."

It only took a second for my shock and disbelief at what had happened to give way to white hot fury. "I don't know who in the hell is targeting my family, but I plan to get to the bottom of it."

Rebel sat beside me. "I'll be real honest with you, sweetness. That anger you're feeling will be a lot more useful than that lost kitten, deer-in-the-headlights thing you do."

I wanted to argue that I didn't do that, but that would be a lie. My first response to trouble usually wasn't all that helpful in terms of dealing with a crisis. In my own defense, I've never been through anything remotely this horrible before. Instead of admitting to that, I turned my head away.

When he put his arm around me again, I let him. I was angry at whoever did this, not at Rebel for pointing out the obvious. I didn't want to misplace my anger, so I just let him hold me and tell me all about how everything was going to be okay. Inside, I was still simmering though.

Thankfully, it didn't take Storm and their police friend very long to arrive. When they rang the bell, Rebel went to the door to let them in. Instead of coming in, the officer immediately wanted everyone outside. I walked to the door and followed them out.

Once on the porch, the officer explained. "I don't know what went down with the investigation at your office. I'm the first officer on the scene here. That puts me in charge of the case. I'm going to control the scene because we don't want to risk it being contaminated with extra fingerprints and DNA."

Storm cut in. "Gimme a break. Our local police department ain't gonna swab and process DNA evidence from a damn break-in."

The officer shot him a dark look. "We have no idea what we're dealing with. It could be a simple burglary, or we could find the occupants dead in the basement."

"What?" My heart almost stopped at that. In the shock of finding the house trashed, it hadn't even crossed my mind that my parents might have been home. Even as I reached for my phone, I realized that was unlikely because their car was missing.

I held my breath as the phone rang three times before my mom picked up. Hearing her voice made me release that last lingering doubt that foul play had robbed me of their company forever.

"Hello, Lacey, I wasn't expecting to hear from you."

"Hi, Mom. How is Dad doing?"

"He's responding well to the treatment. How is everything going with you?"

I wasn't looking forward to this bit. "I've got bad news. Someone broke into your house. The police are here."

“What?” My mom’s voice was strained. “First the office and now our home. I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Neither can I, Mom. They didn’t want me in the house until they dusted for prints, so I can’t tell you what’s missing yet.”

“I’m just glad you weren’t hurt,” she said in a shaky voice.

“To be honest, I wasn’t home last night. I stayed at Rebel’s.”

“Thank God,” she responded, sounding all kinds of relieved.

Watching the officer turn to look at me and motion me over, I told her, “Look, I’ve gotta go. The officer wants to speak with me. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Call me later, Lacey.”

“I’ll keep you posted. If anything bad happens with Dad, please let me know immediately.”

“Will do,” she promised.

I approached the officer, and he asked for my statement. I told him that I didn’t suspect anything until I arrived and saw the blinds were shut and the chair was askew. I explained that we came so I could pack some clothing to stay with Rebel and had found that the house had been broken into. I added that we hadn’t touched anything inside the house, just sat together on the sofa until he arrived. He asked a few more questions, and I realized that he’d already taken Rebel’s statement. We were warned not to leave town. The process was eerily similar to what we went through when the office was broken into.

After the police had finished with us and the house was secured, we decided to go to the clubhouse to talk and unwind. My anger had ebbed away again, replaced by feelings of being overwhelmed. When Rebel held me close at the bar, I didn't even feel embarrassed. I needed the comfort he provided. The conversation whirled around me, as Rebel talked to his club brothers about this latest break-in. It wasn't even noon yet, and I was mentally and physically exhausted. I'd never felt more useless in my entire life and didn't know where I would be if Rebel wasn't in my life, supporting and comforting me.

Eventually, Zoe and Alison showed up. I wondered if it was to sit with me while the men went out to track down my former employees. I knew that's what they were going to do because they talked about it as we sat at the table. Something about that didn't sit right with me.

Rebel gave me a kiss before he left and told me to try not to worry. I nodded and tried to rein in my emotions. Hearing the throaty roar of their bikes fading in the distance and the concerned twin expressions worn by my childhood friends brought tears to my eyes.

Zoe spoke first, reaching out to take my hand. "I'm not going to sugarcoat this situation or tell you not to worry, but I will say that whatever's going on here is not your fault, and Storm, Grit, and Rebel are not going to rest until they find out who's doing this and they're behind bars."

Alison chimed in, "Zoe's right. This is a shitty situation. One you didn't ask for and don't deserve to be in. We're both here for you though."

When I didn't respond, Alison motioned for Rosie to bring a round of drinks. "Just a little something to take the edge off," she murmured.

Zoe looked into my eyes and encouraged me, “You need to open up and talk about what you’re feeling. Get it off your chest, ya know?”

I nodded, and she let go of my hand. “There’s something about having my family home broken into that felt more of a violation than the office break-in. I don’t know how to explain it exactly.”

Alison spoke up, “I had my car broken into once when I was in college. It was weird that I got into the car and then saw that my glove box had been pried open and what wasn’t taken was scattered all over the place. It hit me right in the pit of my stomach that some lowlife dirtbag had been inside my vehicle, pilfering through my personal stuff. You do feel violated.”

“Yeah, that’s what it was like,” I told her. “That’s exactly how I felt when the office was broken into. Multiply that feeling by a thousand, and you’ll understand how I felt having our home broken into. I’m just grateful that Rebel had invited me to his house for the night because this could have been so much worse if I had actually been home. The intruder might have raped or killed me to shut me up.”

I brought up one hand and rubbed my right temple. It did nothing to ease the headache building there.

Zoe smiled at Rosie when she brought our drinks to the table. She gave my shoulder a squeeze and whispered, “I gave your margarita a double shot. Thunder told me what happened. I hope that they catch this bastard so you can sleep easy at night.”

Something about the vehemence in her voice hit me in the feels. I gave her a wan smile. “I hope they catch this bastard too. It would be great not to have to look over my shoulder all the time, wondering if and when whoever it is will strike again.”

When Rosie turned to leave, I took a sip of the drink she’d crafted for me. It curled

my toes. When she said it was strong, she wasn't kidding—she definitely made it extra strong and extra delicious. Part of me felt all kinds of wrong drinking this early in the day, but then I rationalized it with myself—it wasn't every day you had to deal with a second break-in within a few weeks. Zoe and Alison both got tipsy fast, and their conversations were hilarious. I just sipped my drink and lost myself in the easy chat. I needed this opportunity to relax.

Rebel

It took no time at all to track down Sherman Stayer, the irresponsible asshole who did all those piss-poor jobs that I had to go in and fix. We'd decided that we'd only ask him about the first break-in, at least for starters. Depending on his answers I might have to beat more info out of him. We found him at home, which was a rundown shack on the wrong side of the tracks. He was sitting on his front porch rolling a cigarette. At first, I thought it was marijuana but when we got closer, I could smell the scent of strong tobacco.

When he saw me get off my bike and start walking towards him, he frowned. Although I remembered his face from the day Lacey fired him, he looked a bit rougher. Clearly being fired had not sat well with him. Sherman looked grubby, had a scruffy beard, and was wearing denim overalls with no shirt. And he was barefoot to boot.

Before I could properly greet him, he demanded, "What the hell do you want? You already took my job. Do you want to take my house too?"

"Stop being an asshole. We've come to talk to you about the break in at Livingstone Electrical."

His expression turned confused, but he tried to cover by bringing the cigarette he just rolled to his mouth. His chin trembled slightly as he stuck out his tongue and slid it down the edge of the paper to get it to stick together. His hands were shaking more than I would have expected from a man his age.

When he finished, he stuck the end in his mouth and lit it. After inhaling a couple of times, he asked, “Is Lacey okay? I know things fell apart there towards the end, but I never had any hard feelings towards her or wanted anything bad to happen to her.”

“Lacey is fine,” I told him. “The break in was during the night. She was fast asleep at home when it happened.”

He nodded. “I’m glad she’s okay.” He flicked his ashes off the end of the porch and took another drag from his cigarette.

I gave him a few seconds to suck down some nicotine before asking, “Where were you on the twenty-second of last month?”

He took another puff and stared into my eyes. “What the hell kind of question is that. I can’t even remember what I had for lunch yesterday, much less what I was doing weeks ago.”

“Did you break into Livingstone Electrical, Sherman?” I asked the question even though I was getting the distinct feeling this man was seriously out of the loop when it came to the goings-on around town.

“Do I look stupid to you?” Without giving me a chance to reply, he added, “I’m not about to wind up in jail over some office trinkets.”

“Someone tried to get into the safe,” I shot back.

“Whoop-de-do,” he responded flippantly. “They probably keep their business license, and tax documents, along with a bunch of shit that ain’t of interest to anybody but them.”

“Maybe you thought there was money in there?” I suggested.

He gave me a withering look. “I worked there for years and never saw them accept cash from a client. Everything with Livingstone was electronic. Livingstone always kept a hundred bucks in his desk drawer for emergencies, but everything was either checks, bank transfers, or card payments.”

“Weren’t you angry that you got fired? Revenge is a powerful motivator to get even.”

“Yeah, I was angry. But people get fired every day. Getting fired doesn’t automatically make me a criminal. I don’t have it in me to hold onto grudges. It’s too fucking exhausting.”

Nothing about this man made me think he had something to do with the break ins—either at the office or last night. Finally, I asked, “Do you know of anyone who might have a motive for breaking into the office?”

He hesitated for a moment before responding. “Well there’s Mark. He lost a management job that paid well.”

“So, you think he broke in?”

“Now, did I say that?” he asked sourly. Not waiting for me to answer, he continued, “No, I didn’t say anything of the sort. Don’t try to put words in my mouth. You asked who might have a motive. Mark might have a motive but that doesn’t mean he did anything illegal.” After pausing to rub his cigarette out on the cracked concrete porch floor, he stated, “Mark has always been all talk. He thinks too much of himself to do stupid shit that might land him in jail. His style is more bitching to anyone who’ll listen at the bar.”

I shot Storm and Celt a dark look. Before I could speak, Sherman did. “Are you guys spoiling for a fight? If you are, I’ll damn sure give you one.”

This wily fucker was out of his damn mind to provoke us. I snapped my head around to glare at him. “I should beat your ass for all those shoddy jobs you did. You hurt the company and caused no end of trouble for Lacey and her parents at a point in their lives when they really needed a stable income to care for her father.”

“Yeah, I feel bad about that, but I already got my punishment,” he said as he looked off into the distance. “My punishment was losing the only good job I ever had.”

A short silence spun out as I thought over his words. Finally, Storm muttered, “This isn’t getting us any closer to finding the person responsible for these break-ins.”

“Break-ins?” Sherman repeated.

“Yeah, someone trashed Lacey’s parents’ home last night too,” I said, figuring it wouldn’t hurt to tell him.

“Shit! Are Mr. and Mrs. Livingstone, okay?”

“No one was home,” I responded.

Celt added, “We need to have a little chat with Mark Shepard, just to make sure that he really is all talk and no action.” Turning to look at Sherman, he asked, “Do ye know where we can find the fecker?”

Sherman grimaced before responding. I watched him go back and forth in his mind about ratting his friend out.

Trying to tip the scales in our favor, I quickly assured him, “We just wanna talk to him, like we did with you. If it turns out he had anything to do with it, we’ll call the cops.”

Sighing, he told us, “He’s normally drinking at the Boar’s Head about now.”

After a few more exchanges, we said our goodbyes and I stalked over to my bike. The others followed suit. “Let’s run down this last lead,” I told them. “If this doesn’t pan out, I don’t know what I’m supposed to tell Lacey.”

Storm strapped his helmet in place and muttered, “Let’s cross one bridge at a time here. Rome wasn’t built in a damn day, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. The thing is, I’m getting sick and tired of all our leads turning out to be dead ends.”

While we were talking, Celt found the address for the Boar’s Head. We set out with grim determination to find the bar and finally get some answers. It was located on the other side of the county line in Spartanburg. Usually, we had to hunt all over town to find someone. Sherman had been easy to find by comparison. With any luck tracking down Mark would be the same.

When we walked into the Boar’s Head, we found Mark sitting front and center at the bar. He was eating pork barbeque and drinking a huge mug of cold beer. I recognized him too from the day Lacey fired the two of them. He’d been arrogant and condescending and told her to move because she was in his seat. He’d been shocked when Lacey fired him. She’d since told me that her mother wouldn’t put her father on the phone, so Mark had never gotten the opportunity to make his final appeal to her father.

I slid onto an empty chair on one side of him and Celt sat on the other, hemming him in. He went into a full-blown panic when he casually looked up to find me staring at him.

“What the hell do you want?” he asked belligerently.

The way Mark responded to me immediately got my hackles up. This man was a weird mixture of scrawny and just plain mean. His hair was neatly combed back and looked slick like he still wore old-fashioned hair oil or something. His angry blue eyes were ice cold. I couldn't help but notice that one ear was noticeably bigger than the other.

I decided to give him the same energy back. “Why the fuck is your default cursing at me? Did I do something to piss you off in another life?”

He pointed at me with one finger, still holding his bun full of pork barbeque. Some of the filling spilled out onto the counter. “You sassed me when that bitch fired me and took my job.”

My eyebrows flew up as I tried to parse what he just said. “I sassed you? What the fuck does that mean?”

Throwing his bun down onto his plate, he clarified, “It means you didn't show me respect and threatened to throw me out if I didn't leave on my own.”

“In other words, I enforced the boundaries your boss was laying down, back when you thought you could do an end run around her and get your way by talking to her old man. Is that about the size of it?”

He shook his head as he wiped his hands on a napkin. “They did me dirty and you were part of it, so don't sit here and pretend you don't understand why I'm pissed at your sorry ass.”

“Point taken, I guess. Exactly how pissed are you about this situation?” My question was of course designed to gauge if he was furious enough to seek revenge.

“I was a lot more pissed before I found another job that pays better and is whole fucking lot less stressful.”

“What kind of job is that? I’d sure like one of those myself.” My words were meant to calm him down and dial down the tension.

Mark wasn’t having it though. He snapped back harshly, “It ain’t none of your business, shithead.”

“Here’s the problem, the reason for our visit. Someone broke into the office and tore the place apart.”

He snorted a laugh, picked up his beer, and took a huge drink before responding. “I heard all about that. It’s a real shame and couldn’t have happened to a nicer family.”

My eyes narrowed on this arrogant asshole who took joy in another family’s hardship. “Now, you wouldn’t know anything about that would you?”

Going back to looking angry, he growled, “I’ll tell you what I know about that break-in. If the Livingstones didn’t treat people like garbage, folks wouldn’t be dying to mess their shit up.”

I glared at him. “Forgive me if I don’t believe you. Do you mind if I ask where you were on the twenty-second of last month?”

“That was a Friday, right?” When I nodded, he said, “The same place I am every fucking Friday night. Having pizza with my family. They always want to go to that fucking kids’ place with the animatronics. God, I hate that place. Don’t get me wrong, I love my kids, but the place is always stuffed to gills with kids and most of them act like feral animals.”

My eyes shifted from him to Celt and back again, because this fucker had an answer for everything. “You expect me to believe all that?”

He gave me the biggest smirk ever. “I don’t particularly give a shit if you believe me or not. You’re not a lawman or anyone I’m obligated to answer to. The pizza place has security cameras. If you want to play detective, go check it out. Just leave me the hell alone.”

I leaned over and lowered my voice. “I will definitely check it out. Here’s the thing, if I find that you’re lying to me, our next conversation will involve less talking and more me beating your ass.”

“Are ye listenin’, sonny boy?” Celt said darkly.

He glanced at Celt to the right and rolled his eyes. “You’re gonna need more than one Irishman to back you up if you plan to kick my ass.”

When I lunged at him, Storm was behind me and jerked me straight back and off the barstool. “Leave it. We can kick his ass anytime. We need to verify what he’s telling us. I’m almost hungry enough to actually eat their pizza.”

Celt chuckled, “Let’s get finished as soon as possible. I want to get back to the clubhouse and feckin’ decompress.”

“I’ll second that,” I told him. The idea of spending time with Lacey was compelling, so hopefully our business at the pizza place wouldn’t take long.

None of us had to look up the address of Chummy Cheese Pizza and Puppets, as it was a long-standing local favorite. Every kid who grew up in and around Griffinsford

knew exactly where it was located. I'd never been before, firstly because I didn't have kids, and secondly, because puppets freak me the hell out. As do clowns—and if that joker at the door came any closer, then I was not gonna be responsible for my actions.

When we walked in, one of the servers immediately came up to Celt with a smile on her face. “Didn’t think I’d see you back here again what with Dusty going off to college and all.” She started leading us to a table.

Celt responded, “Yeah, Jean, my Dusty really did love this place. How long have ye been working here, lassie? I’ll bet ye know every kid in this town by name.”

She grinned up at him. “I’ll have been here seventeen years come December. And I do know most every kid in Griffinsford. It might be a small and insignificant claim to fame, but it’s the only one I’ve got.”

We sat down, and Celt kept talking to Jean. “Do ye perchance know the Shepard family?”

She rolled her eyes, “Yeah, we all know them. Let’s just say we flip a coin to see who has to serve them.”

“Troublemakers, are they?”

“The kids? No, they’re fine. It’s the parents that are a pain in the ass. All they do is argue and yell at the kids. They complain about the food, hardly ever leave a tip, and are just exhausting to deal with.” Glancing around, she added, “I probably shouldn’t talk about a customer that way. If my manager heard me, I’d be in serious trouble.”

Celt told her, “Yer taking to friends, lassie. We’re not gonna rat ye out, especially not for being honest.”

When her worried expression faded away and she took our order, Celt said, “Just one more thing if ye don’t mind.”

“Sure, what do you need?”

“I was wondering, when was the last time ye saw the Shepard family?”

“They come in every single Friday, rain or shine. The mother, Marlene, told me the kids get to come as a reward for not getting into trouble during the week and also because it gives her the day off from cooking.”

“Do you happen to remember if they were here on the twenty-second of last month? It was a Friday,” I asked.

A wary expression crossed her face. “What’s this about?”

“We’re just trying to figure out where Mark was on that day.”

She looked pensive for a moment and then admitted, “I didn’t work that day. But I can probably put you in contact with the server who covered my shift.”

“It would be great if you could do that,” I said.

She agreed, “Alright, I’ll bring you my colleague’s contact information shortly.” She started to turn around but stopped herself. “I don’t think you understand how dedicated they are to spending Fridays here. I’ve never known them to miss a day, except if they go out of state for vacation.”

“That’s great news, lassie. We just need to be one hundred percent sure,” Celt said with a friendly smile.

All her hesitation evaporated, and she nodded. “Alright, I’ll get you the other server’s contact information. And in case I forget to tell you, please let Gracie know that we’ve been missing her since Dusty went off to college. Tell her we’ve got a new dessert menu.”

Celt teased her, “I can’t do that, Jean. My Gracie will want to come here every night.”

The middle-aged server grinned, “That’s what I’m counting on.”

Storm spoke up, “Jean, what we’d really like is a copy of the security footage from that night. Do you think it’s still available?”

She shrugged, “I know it gets recorded over every month, but the footage from that night might still be there. I can pull the recording and let you check it while you wait for your order. But I’ve gotta have it right back, okay?”

Celt nodded, “Of course. We’ll have it back to ye within an hour.”

When she finally walked off to put our order in, I told them both, “That was a real clusterfuck. I can’t believe we are dangling carrots in front of desperate women to get intel on the break-in. How are we gonna check that disk?”

Storm frowned at me. “Quit bitching. My cousin has an ally willing to do us a solid. I don’t see the problem. As for the security footage, I’ve texted one of the prospects and asked them to bring my laptop here.”

And so we drank coffee and ate crappy pizza that the kids of this town coveted so much—and I managed to keep my clown phobia under control. It was all worth it because, in the end, we got the security footage and confirmed that Mark Shepard and his family were here on the date of the break in. They were also here last Friday when Lacey’s parents’ home got broken into as well. Which was good for him, but for me?

Well, I was up shit creek without a paddle, now that I'd pretty much exhausted all the potential culprits.

Lacey

At some point I realized that I needed to go to the restroom badly. I couldn't remember exactly how many drinks I'd had or how many times Rosie had decided to make me doubles. I just knew I was about to burst, and I was also more than a little bit tipsy.

While I was in one of the stalls, I heard footsteps as two women entered. They were giggling and talking about which single brother had the best ass. I smiled to myself because they were happy and clearly just as drunk as me. I didn't think much about what they were saying until I heard them say Rebel's name.

"Of course Rebel's ass fills out a pair of jeans nicely too."

The other woman's voice became disapproving, "Tonya, you can't talk about him anymore. He's got an old lady now."

The one she called Tonya chided her. "God girl, when did you turn into such a stick in the mud?"

"I'm not," the second girl said defensively. "Benny was my favorite prospect for a long time. He's a demon in the sack and buys the best gifts, but we can't keep acting like he's single when he's not."

"Yeah, but it's hard not to because the club girls talk about it all the time. They say he gives the best orgasms," Tonya said wistfully.

“I can attest to that part being totally true.”

“Damn it, girl, I knew it! The worst part is, I thought we were going to be a thing the night he got patched in, but he sent me away in favor of some dog-faced bitch from the outside. That girl was nothing to write home about.”

Her friend responded, “He might have been too overwhelmed by your beauty.”

Tonya snorted a laugh, “Yeah, lots of men are. I just wanted a little sample of that man because I heard he was a real sweetheart and gave outstanding sex.”

“Not only that,” her friend commented. “He gives nice gifts too. I’m wearing the gold bracelet he bought me. I’ll let you see it when we’re finished,” she said from the other stall.

“I’ll bet it’s really pretty. If so, I’m gonna be jealous. He gave Jenny expensive perfume once and Brea a new cell phone. I just joined a few days before he was patched in and really missed out.”

“Well Tonya, he’s off the market now. We don’t wanna be caught talking about him like he’s single when he’s not.”

I froze, taking in their conversation from both sides, since I was in the middle stall, and they were on either side of me.

Tonya, who’d talked about his fine ass and all the amazing gifts he’s given the other club girls replied cheerfully. “He’s not taken yet.”

Her friend gasped. “He is, and you’re playing with fire to claim he isn’t.”

Tonya’s voice turned smirky. Maybe voices couldn’t be smirky but hers sure sounded

that way to me. “Do you see a property cut on that bitch? Because I sure as hell don’t.”

After a brief pause her girlfriend admitted, “You’re right about her not wearing his property cut. I don’t know what to think about that. He’s not put her in his cut, and he allows her to hang all over him, but he also doesn’t sleep with any of us anymore. It’s a weird situation.”

“True. I remember all the girls saying he was insatiable.”

“Yeah, he was. Those were the good old days.”

“I think if he had the hots for this Lucy bitch, he’d put her in his cut. The other girls say Rebel always played the field and was an equal opportunity bed partner when he was a prospect.”

It pissed me off that she couldn’t even get my name right but had a buttload of insults she felt comfortable spewing.

“Yeah,” her friend said in a wistful voice. “I remember the times when he’d carry one of us under each arm to show how strong he was and then cart us off to bed.”

“Yeah, I remember the others talking about that too,” Tonya lamented. “Damn, if I’d only come a month or two earlier, I could have gotten a piece of that action.”

“You would have liked him and he for sure would have loved having you in his bed. You’re beautiful and open minded. That was the magical combination for Rebel, if I remember correctly.”

Tonya’s voice turned snarky, “I bet she only does missionary, and I don’t see how one woman could really satisfy a man like Rebel. He’s too much. Once I heard about

his voracious sexual appetite, I thought he'd just settle down with a couple of us club girls eventually and forgo marriage altogether. I was planning to be one of those girls too."

Damn, were these two ever going to leave their stalls? I was getting sick of hearing them talk about Rebel that way.

"That would have been wild," her friend responded. "I could actually see him laying claim to two women in my mind's eye."

My heart hurt to hear them talking about how he used to fuck all of them stupid. I clutched my clothing to keep my jeans from dropping to the floor.

The first club girl said morosely, "I don't think he's all that enamored with her. He likes her because she's Zoe and Alison's friend and it means he's rubbing elbows with the club officers when he's with her. It's a huge status upgrade from a prospect, to running with club officers."

By this time both of them finally decided to leave their stalls and were washing their hands while moving on to talking about which prospect they thought was going to get patched in next.

I took care of my personal business and stepped out of the stall to wash my hands. As the warm water flowed and I pumped soap into my hands, I thought about their words. A memory floated through my mind of him talking about getting in the shower to keep from having several rounds of morning sex after a full night of sex. Those two club girls were right, I wasn't a sex machine. If he had the kind of sex drive they talked about, there was no way he could find being only with me satisfying. Knowing that cut deep.

I dried my hands and went back to sit with my friends, the mellowness that I'd had

when I'd gone into the restroom had evaporated and I felt stone-cold sober. Although I plastered a smile on my face, I was anything but happy. Still, being with Zoe and Alison made me feel temporarily better about my situation. I should have talked to them about the things the club girls were saying but I was too humiliated to bring it up, especially about Rebel using me to get in with the club officers.

I couldn't seem to shake off the idea that maybe, for all his sincerity and how he seemed to be falling in love with me, Rebel might have ulterior motives for taking a liking to me. Maybe he liked me and was leveraging his relationship with me to propel himself to a higher status in the club. Anything was possible, but I wasn't stupid.

I knew most of the club girls were objectively beautiful in a way that I wasn't. I had never had particularly low self-esteem when it came to looks because I'd always been described as cute in an innocent kind of way, pretty and attractive. Men didn't exactly flock to me, and I'd had my heart broken more than once, but I'd never had a hard time getting dates. But Rebel had been feasting on beautiful women, sometimes taking a couple to his bed at the same time. How could I possibly compare to that? The cold hard truth was that I couldn't compete with beautiful women throwing themselves at him every night. The only thing I had to offer that he really wanted was my contacts with Zoe and Alison, which he could use to fast-track himself to the officers of the club he loved and so desperately wanted to fit in with.

Ugh, thinking about this made my head hurt. Zoe and Alison were arguing about whether the old ladies should start their own companion club. When they turned to look for my input, I just shrugged. "There doesn't seem to be enough old ladies interested in riding their own motorcycles to make something like that viable.

Zoe gestured to me, but spoke to her sister, "See, that's what I've been trying to tell you."

Before Alison could continue the debate, I told them, “I’ve got a splitting headache. I think I’m going to head to Rebel’s room and grab some sleep.” It was a good ruse because I was pretty sure they wouldn’t want me leaving the clubhouse drunk.

Alison’s eyes shot over to her sister and then back to me, “I hope our debate didn’t contribute to your headache?”

I shook my head. “Of course not. It’s a tension headache that’s been slowly building all day. I just need some rest and I’ll probably be all better in the morning.”

Zoe leaned over and asked, “Do you need me to get you some pain killers?”

Holding up my purse, I shook it, “I’ve got a bottle of ibuprofen since I was pretty sure I’d need it at some point.”

“Alright, we’ll let you rest and one of us will check on you in the morning.”

“Thanks for understanding,” I told them. After I walked off, I glanced over my shoulder to see Zoe watching me leave. When she saw me looking, she smiled and waved and then started debating with her sister again. I could tell because she was waving one hand in the air as if she was trying to accentuate some point she was trying to make.

I was really tired of stressing about all the crazy shit going on in my life right now. I needed to hunker down somewhere I felt safe and try to get some sleep. I’d told Zoe I was going to Rebel’s room, but to be honest I didn’t want to have to talk to him when he got back. Hearing what those club girls said had really shaken my confidence. Once Zoe’s attention was no longer on me, I went straight to the prospect that was the most involved in the cleanup at my office. Eric saw me coming and began looking around behind me for Rebel.

When I approached him, he jerked his chin at me. “What do you need, Miss Lacey?” It was cute how his tone of voice was gruff and all business.

“I was hoping to get a ride home.” I didn’t really need to explain more because he immediately realized why I was asking for a ride. The police had finished with my parents’ house, it was still a mess, but it was no longer a crime scene, and I didn’t think it was likely that whoever had trashed the place would return.

“Ah, I see. You’ve been drinking it up with the girls and don’t want to drive intoxicated.”

“Yeah, that’s about the size of it,” I told him. Anxiety was twisting in my gut, making my palms sweat and my body a little shaky.

He immediately agreed. “I’ll take you but I’m going to take one of our vans. I don’t want Rebel on my ass for putting his old lady on the back of my bike. The brothers are possessive over their women, and I don’t wanna do anything to mess up my chances of getting patched into the Dark Slayers one day.”

I fidgeted with my purse, wishing he would get a move on. “That’s perfectly fine by me,” I murmured as I followed him out to the back patio. I already knew that was where they kept their vehicles.

He opened the passenger door and helped me into the van, clearly worried that I might be more intoxicated than I appeared. It was cold outside, making me wish I’d brought a coat instead of a light sweater. Eric got in, started the van up, and then flipped on the heater. He rubbed his hands together near one of the vents. I preferred to wrap my arms around my stomach and tuck my fingers under my arms because that vent was still blowing cold air.

He glanced up at me and asked, “I’m sorry about your home getting broken into. I

can't imagine what it must be like to have your office vandalized and then your home. Are you okay?"

"I'm really not. I'm stressed out, overwhelmed, and I really just want to crash out in my own bed."

He froze for a second before saying, "The police released your home from being a crime scene real quick."

I shrugged and told him, "I guess homes getting broken into are much more common than a place of business." I was still a bit worried about having to go back home, and leading Eric to believe everything was okay was a shitty thing to do, but I couldn't face up to Rebel coming back to the clubhouse and wanting us to do what we usually do at night after everything those club girls said. I needed time to think about the situation and decide what I was going to do about this. I wasn't about to leave Rebel over this, but I might slow down our relationship a bit until I could be certain that his recent personality switch was genuine and not some form of love bombing. I mean, I didn't think it was, but I couldn't seem to stop second-guessing myself on this issue.

I suddenly realized that Eric had pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road. When I turned to him, he mumbled, "You seemed so deep in thought I was beginning to think you might have fallen asleep."

"No. I've just got a lot on my mind," I told him.

"I know you didn't ask for my opinion, but Rebel is a really good listener. I used to go to him when I first became a prospect to find out his opinion on situations I found weird. He would always make the time to talk to me and explain things in a way even a newbie could understand. Go to him and trust that he'll do right by you, Miss Lacey."

I gave him a tired smile. “Thanks for that bit of honesty, Eric. I really appreciate it.”

“Are you sure you’re okay about going home?”

I reluctantly admitted that I wasn’t. “No, but I want to rest my head on my own pillow and chill out. I know Rebel and your club officers think the two break-ins are related, but I think maybe our house was just a random event, not related to the office. I’m scared, but I doubt anyone is going to break in twice when they didn’t bother to take anything the first time.”

Eric looked concerned. “Look, I’m not gonna tell you how to live your life. However, if you feel comfortable going home, I’ll stay outside and make sure whoever broke in doesn’t show back up and catch you by surprise.”

I sighed. “You Slayers have a protective streak a mile wide.”

“It’s who we are, ma’am.”

“Well, I hate for you to waste an entire night out in the cold. How about you crash out on the sofa downstairs, and if it looks like it’s going to be a clear night, you can shove off whenever you like?”

“That’s a mighty nice offer, but I can protect you better when I’m guarding the perimeter of your home from the outside. Plus, I don’t think Rebel would like the idea of me being in your home.”

By then, he was pulling into my parents’ driveway. “If you get cold and change your mind, we leave our spare key under the welcome mat.”

His expression turned shocked. “You shouldn’t do that. It’s not a wise move from a safety perspective.”

“We’ve been doing it for years, Eric.”

“Yeah, I get that. You know I’m gonna have to report this to Rebel, right?”

I shrugged and opened my door. “Do what you got to do there, Eric. I know you guys have your own code, and I don’t want you to get into trouble.”

He looked at me for a minute before giving me a genuine smile. “You’re a real nice lady. I see why Rebel is so taken with you.”

“Goodnight, Eric. Try to stay warm.”

“Will do, Miss Lacey. Rest easy knowing you will always be protected by our club.”

“Thanks for that,” I told him before heading into my house. It was still early evening, but my plan was to take a shower and drift off into a dreamless sleep as soon as humanly possible.

I took off my shoes at the door and padded my way up the stairs, choosing to ignore the mess I didn’t have time to clean up. I yawned as I opened my door. Some kind of safety-conscious instinct prompted me to lock the bedroom door behind me. I didn’t think too much of it and got in my shower. Being back in my childhood home was where I needed to be right now. When I stepped into the shower and felt the warm water flowing over my body, it warmed me from the inside out, and I finally felt myself relax.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:54 am

Rebel

Just as we were heading back to the clubhouse, someone's phone rang. It was a call for Storm. When he pulled out his phone, he jerked his chin at us to hold up. "It's our contact from the Griffinsford PD."

They talked back and forth, but their conversation was cryptic, and I couldn't understand much of it. When it was over, he dropped us a clue.

"Our contact wants to meet right away at the usual place. He says it's important."

"Any idea what this is about?" I asked, growing more curious by the second.

As he shoved his phone back into his pocket, he replied, "I hope he's got intel on these break-ins because this case with your woman is running us in circles. He just said he has news for us and wants to deliver it in person."

"That sounds fucking promising. We could use a break about now." I felt excitement thrumming in my chest. I was way past ready to track down whatever asshole did this and make him pay so Lacey and I could put this behind us for good.

Storm said, "Yeah, I agree. I'm getting good and tired of dealing with these assholes."

Celt pushed past me to get his bike and added, "How the hell did yer sweet lassie deal with those two dickheads?"

I grinned at him. “She didn’t deal with them. Lacey fired them both first thing in the morning on day one of being in charge. Let’s just say they didn’t take it very well, but Mark was such an asshole to her that I thought about cracking his head open like an egg.”

Storm chuckled as we climbed onto our bikes. “You always did have a way with words, Rebel. I’ll give you that.”

Celt, who was Storm’s cousin, teased him. “Don’t sit there and act like you’ve never cracked a skull or two, ‘cause I know better.”

Storm didn’t miss a beat. He flung back, “I can guarantee that every single skull I cracked thoroughly deserved it.”

I loved their useless banter. It felt carefree, more like brothers than cousins. I’d mostly avoided the club officers and hung around with other prospects during my time with the Slayers. The officers were turning into real friends in my mind instead of just authority figures. I never thought I’d warm up to Storm and Celt. They were both pretty rough and ready for just about anything. Neither of them were slackers. If there was work to do, they pitched in. Storm was always leading the way, like a good club president should.

We jumped on our bikes and headed to the police department. It was weird that our contact liked meeting up near his workplace when he’d never want to be seen associating with bikers. It felt like this was his way of living life dangerously or something or maybe thumbing his nose at the boss. I didn’t know what was going on with this dude. I just wanted to know if he had any intel on this case we were working on. He’d called earlier to say that Lacey’s parents’ house had been cleared as a crime scene. While I was pleased it hadn’t taken days like with the office, the fact that they cleared it in only a matter of hours made me wonder how thorough a job they had done.

I already knew from talking to Storm on a prior occasion that he usually met his contact in the back parking lot of the movie theater across the street. He drove a van, and we kind of dove into the back where no one could see.

The moment we were in the van, he tossed a file at Storm. “We got an ID for the Livingstone break-in perp. His name is Richard Livingstone. He’s Mr. Livingstone’s nephew.”

Shock filled every corner of my mind. Family should have been at the top of our list of people to investigate. “Is this for the office break in or the home?” I asked.

“The home. We got clear prints from the safe. Once we got a fingerprint match, I contacted his parents. Well, his stepfather. His father died when he was a kid, and his mother remarried. She died some years back, but I spoke to his stepfather. He reluctantly admitted that his stepson is addicted to drugs and had burned his bridges with every single member of their family, including himself.”

“That sounds about right,” I told him.

“He explained that he has a history of stealing both money and big-ticket items from them which he pawned to feed his drug habit.”

“That actually makes more sense than former employees and ex-boyfriends,” I mused aloud.

“This stepfather believes Richard might have hit rock bottom and is just trying his luck. Being excommunicated from your entire family when you’re jonesing for a fix would be rage-inducing enough to explain the massive amount of property damage to the office.”

Storm looked up from scanning the file. “So, we’re just going to assume that because

his fingerprints were found in the home, that he also committed the break in at the office?”

“Yeah, it’s looking likely. We won’t know for certain until we pick him up. I put out a warrant for his arrest already.”

I grumbled, still upset about the deplorable job his co-workers did on investigating the office break-in. “If your colleagues hadn’t totally botched the investigation, we’d have prints to match there too.”

“Look, offices are difficult. You’ve got so many people coming and going. Just because no viable prints were found other than yours, Ms. Livingstone’s, and the other employees, doesn’t mean we missed anything,” our contact shot back. “We’ll have him in custody soon enough and by the time I’m finished with him, he’ll be confessing to every damn shitty thing he did since grade school.”

“That’s usually how it goes with these addicts,” Storm commented.

We chatted about the case a bit more and then parted ways. I felt better about the situation, but knew myself well enough to realize I wouldn’t be able to let the situation go until he was in custody and they had a confession. I’d love to be a fly on the wall when they interrogated him.

When we got to our bikes, Storm glanced at me. “Should I assume that you’re not about to go home and rest easy when we’re one step away from catching this bastard?”

“You can all go home if you like. I’m seeing this through because I’ve got to put Lacey’s safety first. No hard feelings if you need to leave. You’ve all been real good sports about helping me out today.”

Storm snorted a laugh. “There ain’t no way I’m letting you hunt down that asshole on your own.”

“Then we keep pushing forward,” I told him, thrilled that he wanted to help.

It didn’t take long for Hacker to get an address, and soon we were all heading in the right direction.

I turned the situation over in my head during the entire ride to this nephew’s place. No matter how I looked at it, the conclusion looked solid. Maybe the asshole nephew targeted the office first because it was lower risk than breaking into a residence where people lived. When he came up empty handed at the office, he waited until the occupants of the house were gone and went straight for the safe. Unable to get it open, he panicked and ransacked the place for anything he could sell.

I had to admit that in my lifetime, I’d never seen a situation that was wrapped up quite as nicely as this one. There was lots of logic, and very little in the way of loose ends or contradictory information. Hopefully, this would be what Lacey needed to put this whole mess behind her. She might not rest easy until he’d been picked up, but just knowing who was to blame would be a huge relief for her and her parents.

I knew there was an active warrant out for his arrest, but given what Richard had put Lacey through, I didn’t think it was fair to just let the police pick him up and put him in jail. He deserved to suffer. Then he could go and spend some time in jail contemplating his life choices. That would be my idea of true justice.

It turned out, Richard was nearly impossible to find. First, we visited his stepfather. We knew he wasn’t likely to be there since they’d gone no-contact, but we did get a picture of him and a list of possible hangouts, courtesy of the stepfather. It was clear

there was no love lost between them. Most of his hangouts were in the next county, so it looked like we'd be doing a bit of riding this evening.

I swear, we ended up scouting every whorehouse and crack den in the area. Granted there weren't all that many, but it was exhausting. I saw places I never imagined could exist in the US. Unlike Nevada where prostitution was legal and carefully regulated, the two brothels we visited were dirty, the women were worn down and we suspected they were being trafficked. After making sure Richard wasn't hiding anywhere on the premises, we made an anonymous report on both of them to the local police.

We didn't catch up with Richard until almost midnight. We finally found him sleeping on a filthy mattress in a crack house right in the center of town. It was slum area with public housing and people drifting around like ghosts in the middle of the night. I almost tripped over a homeless person trying to get into the building. I'd always heard about areas like this, but seeing it in the flesh was a wake-up call. I suspected some of these folks were not going to survive the winter.

Our small team split up and searched around until we found him. When Storm texted that he'd found him in the basement, we all rushed down to see if it was him. When he held up the picture his stepfather gave us, it was a dead ringer for the nearly unconscious man. I gestured towards a pile of his belongings on the floor. It was mostly drug paraphernalia and his wallet. "What are we going to do with this shit? If we take it, he'll just wake up and start using again. If we leave it someone might OD on it."

Storm grumbled, "Either way, it's a no-win situation. Give it to me and I'll get rid of it properly."

I handed Storm the drug paraphernalia and stuffed Richard's wallet into his pants pocket as we hauled his ass up.

His glassy eyes opened slightly, and he mumbled, “What are you doing? Leave me alone. Chico said I could stay.”

“We’re takin’ ye outta here,” Celt told him. “This is no place for a bright young laddie like yerself.”

“I got no place else to go,” he groaned faintly before passing out.

We’d just gotten him out the front door when several police vehicles pulled up all at once. They had their lights on, sirens blaring, and the fully kitted out officers pulled their weapons immediately upon exiting the armored wagons.

“Fucking hell,” Storm cursed under his breath. “It’s a damn raid.”

Storm and Celt tried to talk to the cops while I did my best to make sure Richard stayed alert. It didn’t go over quite as well as we’d hoped. In short order more police cars showed up from different law enforcement detachments, along with a couple of ambulances. We managed to get Richard into the ambulance before Storm was patted down. Once the officers found Richard’s drug paraphernalia, Storm was cuffed, and so were we right behind him. They threw us in the back of an older model police van and impounded our motorcycles. We just sat there in the van, looking at each other like idiots as we tried to brainstorm our way out of this mess.

Storm directed us, “When you get your one phone call, contact our club’s attorney, and let him know what went down. Tell him I’m not letting my brothers rot in jail for days while these rural police officers sort through what happened and how I came to have drug paraphernalia in my possession. Tell him to spring all of you and circle back around for me.”

Celt shook his head. “And just who do you expect is going to be willing to tell Zoe that we all left you incarcerated and fucked off back home without you? I don’t see

any of the brothers signing up for that job.”

I fought back a laugh despite the seriousness of our situation. “Yeah, because she’s definitely gonna claw that fool’s eyes out.”

I saw the hint of pride that ghosted across his face, because he knew his woman would burn the world down to get him back and kneecap anyone who left him behind.

Celt jerked his chin in my direction. “Rebel’s right about that. No, thank you. I ain’t abandoning my cousin in a foreign jail.”

Storm made a gesture with his hand like he wanted us to look away. “We’re not in foreign lands.”

Celt glared at him. “Ye know what I mean, ye stupid fecker.”

Just then the back door of the van flew open, and an officer threw another addict into the back with us. He stopped long enough to shout, “Shut the fuck up and calm down.” And then slammed the door closed again.

The man they just threw in wiped a trickle of blood off his brow before asking, “So are we breaking out or what?”

“You can do what you like. We’re not going to risk getting more charges thrown at us for anything,” I said.

The young man scrambled to the back door and began fiddling with the locked handle before realizing that he couldn’t escape. Turning to us he stammered, “I don’t know why they keep arresting me,” he said in a panicked voice. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

Storm smiled at him. “Tell that to the judge, son.”

The younger man flung himself back against the wall of the van and kept sitting on the floor instead of the long bench seats.

We quickly turned our attention away from the new guy and back onto our current situation. “Do you think Richard is gonna be okay?”

Celt replied, “Of course he’s not gonna be okay, are ye a feckin’ eejit? He almost overdosed and he’ll be facing time inside.”

Storm sighed, “I think there’s more going on with that boy than meets the eye. Once we get free of our legal entanglements, we’ll circle back around and figure out why.”

Lacey

I woke up to someone ringing my doorbell aggressively, which quickly turned into a frenzied hammering. As I stumbled downstairs, I could hear Eric, the prospect who drove me home, yelling for me to open the door. After landing badly on the last step, I took a minute to catch my breath and shake myself awake before walking across the living room and pulling the door open.

Eric was standing there looking all kinds of upset. “What’s wrong? Did someone try to break in again?”

He made a slashing motion with one hand. “No. It’s nothing like that. Storm, Celt, and Rebel were arrested last night.”

“What? Rebel was arrested?” Shoving the door open wider, I told him, “Come on in and I’ll make us some coffee. I want you to tell me everything.”

I padded to the kitchen with Eric right behind me. When I gestured at the long snack bar separating the kitchen from the living room, he climbed onto a stool. I started to make coffee but told him, “Tell me what happened now—I’m too nervous to wait until the coffee’s done.”

He leaned onto the bar with both arms and launched into an explanation. “I got a call from Hacker just now. He said that Storm, Celt, and Rebel were out looking for your cousin, Richard. I don’t know if Rebel told you? But the cops found his fingerprints here, so they had an arrest warrant out for him.”

My eyes shot wide open, my cousin Richie was a strange one. When we were kids we were close, but we drifted apart. It always seemed as though he had a dark side, and it got worse after my uncle died. “Richie’s a longtime drug addict, I can’t believe he’d do something like that to my mom and dad. But I guess if he needed money...” I paused as I thought over what I knew of the break-ins. “But nothing was taken from here or the office, it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Anyway, Hacker says they found him at a crack house. He appeared to be overdosing, so Storm stuffed the guy’s drug paraphernalia into his jacket pocket, and they were carrying him to get medical treatment. Then they got caught up in a multi-task force police raid that had been planned for a while.”

My hands flew to my mouth, “They got arrested because of me,” I whispered, feeling a tremendous amount of guilt. Rebel had tried to help me, and this is what happened.

Eric’s expression turned sympathetic. “No, they got arrested because of your cousin and their own decision to go lookin’ for him.”

“They were trying to help me,” I said more assertively. “That makes it my fault.”

He frowned at me. “If I dropped my wallet and you accidentally got hit by a car picking it up for me, would that make your injuries my fault?”

Without even thinking about it, I said, “No. Of course not.”

He responded confidently, “I rest my case. You are in no way responsible for their arrest.”

Yeah, he got me on that one. “We’re going to bail them out, right?”

“Yeah, whenever the judge sets a bail hearing. We’ve got our club attorney looking

into it.”

“What can we do in the meantime?” I was desperate to do something.

Eric thought it over for a minute before responding, “Maybe we could visit your cousin at the hospital and talk to him about the break-ins?”

“Was he not arrested too?” I asked.

“Yeah, but he’s receiving medical treatment before they officially charge him,” Eric said as he munched on some dry cereal from an open packet. I was going to tell him to get a bowl, but figured given the situation I needed to sort out my priorities.

“Are we allowed to interfere with a police case that way?”

“We wouldn’t be interfering with anything. You’re just visiting a family member. If the topic of the outstanding warrant for his arrest comes up, just act like you know nothin’ about it.”

“I see where you’re going with this. Since your club brothers sacrificed so much to solve this case, we should step up while they can’t.”

Eric shot me a pleased grin. “They did the dirty, dangerous work of finding the guy. The least we can do is visit him in the hospital and try to get him to talk. Maybe if you get to him before the cops, you might figure out why he targeted your family business?”

I poured the coffee and handed a mug to Eric. Blowing on mine, I thought the situation over for a few seconds. I took a tiny sip before telling him, “I agree. If you can find out what hospital he’s at while I get dressed, we might even be able to get there before the police get to him.”

He pulled out his cell phone and I headed upstairs with my coffee. I hadn't drunk enough to be hungover, but my mouth did feel exceptionally dry. By the time I'd showered and gotten dressed, my coffee cup was empty, and Eric was waiting for me in the living room.

When Eric pulled up the location of the hospital on his GPS, he said, "It looks like the hospital is about an hour away across the county line."

"What about the jail where Rebel and the others are being held?" I asked. Although I was still feeling some type of way about the stuff I heard the club girls talking about last night, I wanted to stop by and show my support. I told Eric, "I'm thinking about dropping off a change of clothing for him, if that's allowed."

"They've not been arraigned yet. I doubt the cops will let you visit, the only person who has a chance of getting in is our attorney."

I just shook my head. "I have to let him know I'll be here for him."

"If you want, we can stop by after we talk to your cousin, see if the cops will let you have a word with him," Eric offered.

"That sounds great," I told him, knowing the priority should be dealing with Richie, but right now all I wanted was to see Rebel. Last night I might have been thinking all sorts of bad stuff about him, but it was funny how a true crisis made you rethink everything. My car was still parked at the clubhouse, so Eric insisted on driving us to the hospital in the van he drove me home in last night. I didn't fight him on that because I understood the tight time frame.

The ride to the hospital seemed endless in the Dark Slayer's van. I stared out the

window as buildings, vehicles, and trees blurred into a long line of images I could no longer distinguish.

Eric spoke from behind the wheel, “How are you holding up?”

I sighed. “Okay, I guess. Although, as you pointed out, Rebel getting arrested isn’t my fault, but I still feel guilty for getting him involved in the first place.”

Eric snorted a laugh, sneaking a quick, respectful glance in my direction. “My club brothers got themselves involved, just like they always do. They’re always looking out for the women in their lives, stray kids who don’t have anyone else to rely on, and our local community because they don’t want to live in a cesspool of crime and corruption. It’s what they do. They’ve landed their asses in jail more than once and unless I miss my guess, they’ll be out in no time.”

“I sure hope so,” I murmured as I continued looking out the window. It occurred to me that Eric might be a good person to ask about the club girls in general and what they were saying about Rebel.

Reorienting my body to face him, I tugged the safety belt into a more comfortable position. “Do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Not at all. If I can give you answers that ease your mind, I’d be happy to tell you anything.”

Looking down, I twisted my fingers together, worried that he might think my question was immature. Snatching up all my courage, I blurted it out, “Last night, I overheard a couple of the club girls talking in the restroom at the clubhouse.”

His hands tightened on the steering wheel. “Is that why you went flying out of there like a bat out of hell?”

I nodded. “They were talking about Rebel, saying stuff about how he acted with the club girls, buying them gifts, and how he was insatiable. They thought if he ever settled down, he’d need two women to keep him satisfied. They didn’t know why he was with me and said some nasty stuff.” I glanced away, feeling small and unworthy of Rebel.

“The fuck?” he exclaimed, clearly angry on my behalf. “Who the hell said that? I want to know right goddamn now!”

My eyes flew up to his and I stammered, “I... I don’t want to say.”

“Then why the fuck bring it up?” he demanded.

I shrugged, “Well, he was a prospect until recently and you know him. I just wanted to check if the things they said were true.”

“Hell the fuck no! Almost nothing they said had a grain of truth to it.”

“Explain the ‘almost’ part.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to know, but I knew for sure that I couldn’t not know.

Eric merged onto the highway. “Well, almost all the club brothers like to fuck, it’s not a secret.”

“That includes, Rebel, right?”

“Yeah, he’s a man who likes to drink and have sex. The last time I checked that’s not a crime.”

“I’m guessing the two at a time thing must be true as well,” I said glumly.

“Yeah, he did that a couple of times. A lot of times brothers do things for show because we’re pretty competitive. Carting off two club girls was not standard operating procedure for Rebel. Hell, since the day he met you, he hasn’t laid eyes on any of them.”

“Tonya was all over him the night he was patched in,” I reminded Eric.

“Yeah, but he somehow ended up leaving with you, right?”

I turned my head to look at him. He was right. That should have made me feel better, but it didn’t somehow. “What about buying expensive jewelry and cell phones? He must have liked them enough to spend that kind of money on them.”

“I don’t know who told you that bullshit, but it’s not true. Rebel spends all his money on his grandmother. Everyone knows that. And if there’s one mistake we never make, it’s favoring one club girl over another. That includes hooking up with them on the regular or buying them expensive shit. That way lies a whole bunch of trouble, so we wouldn’t treat them like a potential old lady unless that’s what we intend to do with them.”

“But... but they were pretty clear that’s what was going on.”

He asked point-blank, “Want to know why not many club girls end up in a property cut?”

“Because they’ve slept around with all the brothers?” It was my best guess.

“Absolutely not. If any of us wanted a woman, that wouldn’t stand in our way. It’s because most of them are catty, backstab each other, and lie to make it seem like they’re closer to us than they actually are. It’s how they get status in their world and it’s a real turn off for the brothers.”

As I thought over his words, he pulled onto a secondary road.

“Trust me, they were just bullshitting each other. Rebel only has eyes for you, darlin’. Any fool can see that.”

I leaned back into my seat, unsure why I had let those club girls get in my head, and turn around my thinking. When I thought of Rebel, words like trust, respect, and honor came to mind along with the adoring expression that came over his face when he looked at me. I could see now that they were jealous and likely lying to themselves as much as they lied to each other. A surge of guilt welled up in my chest for doubting him, even for a moment. Rebel didn’t deserve that, least of all from me.

I mumbled, “Thanks for clearing that up, Eric. You seem like a good solid prospect and will make an outstanding brother one day.”

“From your lips to God’s ear, ma’am,” he replied warmly.

We drove in silence after that, and I pulled out my phone and went to the website for the jail where he and his club brothers were being held. I checked to see if there were any regulations regarding visitors or what could be brought in. They allowed snacks as long as they were sealed by the manufacturer and the visitor presented a receipt showing they’d been purchased locally within thirty minutes before arrival.

I guessed that was to limit the opportunity for people to tamper with the packaging of the food items. I thought about buying a change of clothing, books, a deck of cards and snacks for each of the three of them. I worried that would be overstepping, so I texted Zoe as Eric drove.

Me: Zoe, are you awake?

Zoe: Yeah. You heard about Storm, Celt, and Rebel, right?

Me: Eric told me this morning. We're on our way to see my cousin in the hospital. I want to know why he broke into my parents' home and the office.

Zoe: I think everyone wants to verify that it was him.

Me: After I've seen my cousin, I'm gonna stop by the jail, drop off a change of clothing for Rebel and some snacks. Do you want me to do the same for the others?

Zoe: Not necessary. Grace and I are on our way to see Storm and Celt. It's been a long night. I didn't even think about Rebel, sorry.

Me: Don't worry about him. I've got my guy covered.

Zoe: That's great. He'll be thrilled to see you, I'm sure.

Me: Same here. I might see you there.

Zoe: Want to do lunch afterwards?

Me: Yeah, I haven't eaten yet today, so that sounds good.

When we got to the hospital, we fast-walked to Richie's room because it was the start of visiting hours. I was praying we'd find him awake and it turned out we were lucky.

He was watching television and frowned when he saw me walk in. "You shouldn't be here, Lacey."

"Oh yeah?" I asked. "Why is that?"

“Your parents said they were finished with me and didn’t want me to see you anymore.”

I pulled up a chair and sat down beside his bed, while Eric hung back on the other side of the room like my shadow. “Can you really blame them?”

He used his remote control to turn the television off. “I guess not,” he responded.

“We used to be close when we were little.”

“That was when we were like five,” he replied flatly.

“Yeah, I really loved spending time with you and then things went wrong. What happened Richie?”

He glanced away. “It doesn’t matter. I’m a bad seed. My stepdad said so and he’s probably right.” The tone of his voice held more than just a note of sadness. He sounded almost tragic.

I decided right then and there that I wasn’t going to stop digging until I got to the truth.

“I call bullshit on that. Your stepdad has always been an ass. You were fine right up until you were about ten or eleven years old. Something happened around that time, and I want to know what.”

His head snapped around to look at me. Something dark in his expression hit me, telling me to dig deeper. So, that’s what I did. “You used to trust me, Richie. Trust me now.”

He laughed. “What do you take me for, some kind of fool? I know the only reason

you came to see me is because they found my prints in your parents' home. You want me to confess, fine. I broke into your parents' house and ransacked the place. Let them lock me up and throw away the key. I'm a bad apple that didn't fall far from the tree, right?"

At some point during his confession, my hands began to grip the armrests of my chair. I leaned forward, trying to read his cagey expression. When I opened my mouth to speak, he cut in quietly, "Just leave it alone, Lacey. This is one can of worms you don't want to open. Trust me on that, it totally fucked me up."

I pushed myself up from the chair and sat on the bed beside him. "No, I don't think I'm going to leave this alone."

"I loved you like a sister back then, Lacey. That's why I'm telling you to look away. You don't want to know all the details of life. It's an ugly story, best not told."

I reached out to grab his arm. "You're gonna tell me what happened all those years ago that put you on the wrong path or I'm gonna follow you wherever you go and keep asking until you tell me, damn it!" Giving his arm a shake, I asked, "Do you want me to make my friend leave the room? Is it something really personal?"

He began to tear up, so I pulled him into a hug. I should have hated him for what he'd done, but seeing him in the hospital bed, all I saw was my cousin —a scared young man. His father, my dad's youngest brother, had died when he was five and his mom remarried. I had a horrible thought, he'd never gotten along with his stepfather, and I hoped there hadn't been abuse, "It was something bad wasn't it, Richie? Please just tell me."

He whispered into my ear, "I had a sister, and they fucking took her away."

This was the first I'd heard of him having a sister. I pulled back and looked him in the

eyes, only to see a world of pain staring back at me. “What do you mean you had a sister? Who took her away? When did this happen?”

“My mother gave birth when I was seven. The baby had problems at birth, she was born without an arm and had a club foot. They said she wasn’t smart, and that doctors needed to take care of her in a special home.”

“No one has ever said anything about you having a sister.”

“It’s why they stopped bringing me to visit you. They were worried I’d tell you and they didn’t want anyone in the family to know they locked her up in a home.”

I gaped at him, trying to process the implications of this hidden family secret. “Were you upset because you never got to see her? Is that what made you start acting out? Or were you afraid they were going to send you away too?”

“No, it was none of that. For a few years we went to see her every Sunday after church. My parents spent their time there talking to her doctors and nurses, while I played with Debbie. His bottom lip quivered when he talking about his half-sister.

I grasped his hands in mine and gave them a reassuring squeeze. “What’s she like?”

A faint smile curved up the corners of his mouth and for an instant I had my childhood cousin back. “She’s really pretty.” Gesturing to his head, he continued, “She has long, pale blonde hair like my mom had, and gray-blue eyes like me.”

I smiled at him, “She sounds lovely.”

He chuckled, clearly happy to finally be able to talk about her with someone. “She was also small for her age and delicate, I guess she got that from her father’s side.”

“I know it’s not polite to ask, but did she have learning disabilities, like your parents said?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe she had some problems, but as a kid I didn’t really notice. She was smarter than me in a lot of ways.”

I quietly asked, “What happened around the time you were eleven or twelve, Richie?”

“They said she had an accident and passed away. But I knew that was a lie because there was no funeral, no gravesite, and I overheard my stepfather arguing with someone on the phone that there was no use visiting because she was never going to amount to anything anyway. He said she was deformed, and my mom couldn’t handle seeing her anymore.”

“Did you tell him that you wanted to continue visiting her?”

“Yeah, I told him that I heard the conversation he had with her doctor, and he called me a liar, and said I was weak for getting attached to cripple, a girl one step away from being a vegetable.”

“Holy shit! Wasn’t that the summer your mom ended up in a psychiatric hospital? I’d forgotten about that.”

“Yeah, when nothing I said changed his mind, I tore the house apart in a fit of rage. I broke anything I could get my hands on. My stepfather tried everything to get me to stop. He grounded me to my room, but I trashed it too. Every time he let me out to eat or go to the bathroom, I kept raging. He tried bribing me, begging me, and finally guiltling me by saying that I had driven my mom crazy.”

“Do you know where she is?” I asked with bated breath. “If you do, we can go get her.”

“They moved her. I went there half a dozen times as a kid, until they finally showed me her empty room. I begged them to tell me where she was, but they said they weren’t allowed. After that, I just lost interest in living for a while. As a teen, I drank too much, took drugs, did anything to make me forget I had a sister that I loved, and that my parents made her disappear.”

“Jesus, Richie. I’m so sorry.

“So am I. My mother died thinking I was a bad apple, a drug addict, and that I didn’t love her anymore.

He looked down and picked at a scab on his arm. “Anyway, that’s why I broke into your house. A long time ago, I got word from one of our cousins, Sarah, that my mom had left a letter for me with your parents. It was supposed to be delivered to me if anything happened to her, only that never happened because by then most of the family had disowned me.”

“This makes a lot of sense. I thought it was weird that you broke in but didn’t steal anything. Why did you wait so long to look for it? Come to think of it, why didn’t you just ask my mom for the letter? She probably would have given it to you.”

“My poor little innocent Lacey. You still have such a good view of the world. Me? I didn’t ask because I didn’t think she’d give it to me, since she’s been holding onto it for like eight years.”

“Why go looking for it now?” came a gruff voice from the far side of the room. It was Eric and he’d laser-focused on our conversation.

Richie turned to gaze out the window. “It started to feel like I was growing closer and closer to dying and I wanted to die knowing that I did everything I could to find Debbie.”

I suggested soothingly, “Maybe she got adopted by a nice family and has been living a good life?”

“I’d like to think that’s true, but every time I visited her in the facility, the place smelled like urine and her room looked like no one was cleaning it or taking proper care of her. The part that’s been driving me mad is worrying that she’s all alone with no one to care for her in another shitty care home or someplace worse.”

Turning to look at me, he said, “The situation makes me so damn mad, and I feel powerless to do anything about it. I think my stepfather talked crap to everyone in our family so no one would want anything to do with me or believe a word I had to say about my sister.”

I patted his hand, feeling unable to do anything else.

Eric stepped forward. “Come on, dude. We’re gonna take a nice walk.”

“What? No way. They said I couldn’t leave. I have to wait for the cops to take my statement.”

“Did you ever wonder why they left you here all alone, and you’re not cuffed to the bed?” Without giving my cousin time to respond, he answered his own question. “It’s because in California if you OD, and require emergency medical treatment to survive, they can’t arrest you on any drug charges. It’s a new law meant to encourage people to come to the hospital instead of just dying wherever they happen to drop.”

I got up and grabbed his clothing and started putting it on him. “Yeah, let’s do like Eric said and go for a little walk.”

Richie glanced from one to the other of us, “You two are breaking me outta here, right?”

“Are you stable enough to leave?” I asked.

“Hell yeah,” he whispered as he pulled on his pants.

When we came out of the room with him the nurse frowned. “If you’re taking him for a smoke, he can only smoke in the designated smoking area five hundred feet from the front door.”

“Okay,” I said. Eric started guiding us forward with one hand on each of our backs. We walked right past that smoking area and got into the Dark Slayers’ van. I let Richie sit in the passenger seat and I sat on the jump seat right behind the driver’s seat.

“Thanks for getting me outta there, man. You can drop me anywhere near town.”

Eric growled, “No can do. We’re not fucking dropping you anywhere. You’re coming back to the clubhouse with me. We’re getting you into a treatment program and then you and I are gonna find that sister of yours.”

Richie froze in his seat and then his head slowly turned around to stare at Eric. “Are you being serious right now?”

I spoke up for the prospect. “Of course he’s being serious. He’s prospecting with the Dark Slayers MC and they’re never anything but serious.”

Richie spoke in a trembling voice. “I’ll do anything and everything it takes to find my sister.”

“That include gettin’ clean?” Eric asked.

“Anything,” Richie replied.

“After I get finished seeing to Rebel, we’ll head back to Griffinsford. I’ll do my best to find that letter from your mom, but no more breaking into our house and business, okay?”

Richie turned to look back over his shoulder at me. “I agree to all that, but just so you know, I never broke into the business.”

I’d been through too much to argue with him, so I sealed my lips.

Eric said from behind the wheel. “You want to go to a men’s clothing store for some clothing and then somewhere close to the jail to pick up snacks, right?”

“Yes. Please, and thank you for helping my family out, Eric. I won’t forget how good you were to us in our time of need.”

“Don’t thank me until we find the girl.”

I tilted my head as I stared at Eric’s reflection in the rear view mirror. “She’d be a full-grown woman by now.”

He made a grunting sound, like it didn’t matter as long as we found her. This whole situation was doing my head in, so I zoned out planning my shopping and visit with Rebel. I couldn’t wait to see his handsome face.

Rebel

I guessed word must have gotten back to Lacey that I'd landed myself in jail, because as soon as visiting hours started, she showed up bearing gifts. This local lock-up out in the middle of butt-fuck nowhere was much more lenient than anything I'd heard of here in California. I learned real quick when breakfast arrived at the crack of dawn that the food here was inedible. So I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thrilled to see that she'd brought some food and drinks for me.

I accepted it all in the jail's visitor's room with the gratitude of a starving man. Although the grub and extra change of clothing were much appreciated, it was getting to see the woman I loved that made my day.

She was wearing leggings and a sweater that hugged her delicious curves and had her hair thrown up in a messy bun that really suited her. Of course, we weren't allowed to hug, hold hands, or touch in any kind of way, but just sitting across the table from her reminded me that I had a wonderful life waiting for me on the outside.

"Our club attorney assured me that they can only hold me for up to seventy-two hours without charging me. Other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time, I haven't done anything to be arrested for."

"I don't see the point of keeping you here if they can't think of anything to charge you with," she replied, sounding exasperated.

I opened the bottle of soda and took a big swig. I really needed something cold to drink and it went down smoothly.

“Our attorney says there’s some new hotshot prosecuting attorney looking to make a name for herself. I guess three out-of-town bikers are too good of an opportunity to resist. Grey says they need time to process the crack house and interrogate the other people they arrested. If she can find something legitimate to charge us with, she’s gonna do it.”

“Well, if you want, I’ll come and visit you every day,” she promised.

“That’s really not necessary. I hate for you to see me locked up in a place like this when I’m supposed to be out there trying to figure out who is breaking into your home and business. It’s unfortunate that your cousin was in no condition to talk by the time we got to him.”

Her expression turned excited. “Don’t worry about that. I talked to Richie myself this morning.”

“I hope he wasn’t belligerent towards you?” I asked her.

“No. It was quite the opposite,” she said, looking pleasantly surprised. “He admitted to breaking into my parents’ house. I strong-armed him into telling me why he did that, and how he ended up on such a bad path, and the story he told me and Eric was heart-wrenching.”

“I know you have a kind heart, ladybug. But you can’t take that shit at face value after he committed crimes against you and your family. Junkies always lie, it’s in their nature.”

She leaned over the table and lowered her voice. “Once you hear his story, I think you’ll understand where he’s coming from, I believe him.”

I frowned, “Unless you’ve got to be somewhere, we’ve got an hour of visitation. Why

don't you give me a brief rundown on what he said."

"Well, believe it not, Richie and I were very close at one time, when we were kids."

I listened carefully as she told me all about his shitty stepfather, depressed mother who ended up in a psychiatric hospital, and his disabled sister who may or may not be dead. Truthfully, I felt like we had ended up with more questions than answers but since Eric had taken an interest in the guy, I was willing to give him some grace. To my mind, nothing I heard from my sweet Lacey was justification for him to be sneaking around and breaking into people's homes. But I could bide my time until I got released, and deal with him myself.

I then gave her the rundown on how we found her cousin and tried to impress upon her how close he came to dying when he overdosed. I wouldn't have made the choice to take him out of the hospital even though he was stable, simply because he was at high risk of using drugs again and sitting on him twenty-four-seven would keep me from doing other important things I needed to do, like earning a living so I could support my grandmother.

Our hour flew by, and it took every ounce of self-restraint I had to refrain from taking her into my arms and kissing those gorgeous lips of hers. Seeing her walk out the door was a sharp reminder that I was no longer free to come and go as I pleased. Feeling like I was being pent up in a cage had always been a trigger for me. So, instead of pacing and getting myself worked up, I tried to calm the fuck down and read the book she had bought for me.

At the time of our arrest, I had been expecting them to cut us loose relatively fast. But, because of the aforementioned hotshot prosecuting attorney, it didn't work out quite like we expected. Like I had told Lacey, the opportunity to send several bikers

to the pen on drug charges had proven too irresistible for her to pass up. Prosecutor Victoria Anderson came up with a long list of charges that sounded fairly impressive. Unfortunately, by that time I'd already been in what passed for their local jail for three days, the maximum time they could hold a person without adjudicating them, and none of this was funny anymore. Truth be told, I was super pissed about being held when there was zero proof that I had done anything to warrant being arrested.

Thankfully, the judge saw right through her and ended up cutting us all loose. Storm was the only one successfully adjudicated and his bail was set at fifty thousand dollars. The club had scrounged up money for his bail and he didn't even have to go through a bail bondsman.

Walking out of that jail and getting to see my freshly unimpounded ride was the best sight I could have hoped to see. In the grand scheme of things, three days was no time at all. I couldn't wait to get on the road to see my Lacey. I'd been daydreaming about having her in my arms again the whole time I spent in the slammer.

When we pulled into the clubhouse compound, the women came running out to meet us like they sometimes do. I'd always envied my club brothers with beautiful wives and old ladies who wanted them badly enough to come outside the building when they pulled into the parking lot. So seeing my Lacey running behind Zoe and Grace filled my heart with joy and my chest with pride.

I was barely off my bike when she flung herself into my arms. "I can't believe you're finally here! It feels like it's been more than three days."

"Yeah, I hated being in lockup. I've been looking forward to finally having you all to myself again," I told her with a smile as I pulled her into my arms. "Tonight it's just gonna be me and you."

She gazed up at me, "The old ladies have prepared a welcome home party. I'm sure

you don't want to miss that."

I leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Fuck the welcome home party. The only thing I'm interested in is spending some time with my woman. Once I get my Lacey fix, I might come back down and party. We'll just have to see."

"I'm down for one-on-one time, she said breathlessly. "We can always go to your room here. It's just like you left it."

"Good, there should be a property cut in there for you. I want to see you in it, that's if you don't still think wearing my property cut is ownerish."

Her hands flew up to cover her mouth, and she playfully responded. "Perish the thought. That was the old me." Removing her hands, she gestured down her body. "This is the new and improved me."

"You don't say?" I eyed her curves with the eyes of a man who was good at visualizing his woman without clothing. Lacey's naked form was all I wanted to feast my eyes on forever and ever.

She nodded, "I know I'm supposed to say something clever right about now, but my brain is too frazzled after finally getting you back to think of witty responses."

I wrapped my arm around her as we walked into the clubhouse. I told her, "I don't care about whether you can come up with cool shit to say. You're a loyal woman with a good heart, and that's more than enough for me."

She glanced up at me with a smile still tugging at the corners of her mouth. "I guess I can forget about making myself all pretty for you, right?"

"What do you mean by that? You're beautiful and I would advise you not to mess

with perfection.”

“Alright, you asked for it. No more shaving my legs, weekly facials, or following the latest fashion trends. From here on out, it’s just going to be plain old Lacey.”

I stopped dead in my tracks. “You think I care about any of that shit?”

“I’m one hundred percent sure you want a nice looking old lady,” she responded brightly.

I narrowed my eyes as I looked down into her lovely face. “It’s almost like you don’t know me at all.” Picking her up, I tossed her gently over my shoulder, “I’d still want you if you were as hairy as a cat and wore pajamas all the time. That would be fine by me.”

That comment got a snort of laughter from her.

I slapped her on the ass playfully and asked, “Why aren’t you kicking and screaming for me to put you down? I didn’t think you liked primitive dominance displays, particularly where everyone could see.”

“If that’s what you thought, you don’t know me very well either,” she told me, with a grin. “All I want is you and I’ll take you any way I can get you.”

Giving her a tight squeeze, I asked, “Are you ready for us to have our own little celebration?”

“I’d love that,” she said enthusiastically. “We both deserve to kick back and relax after everything we’ve been through, especially you after spending three days straight in jail.”

Zoe had slipped off with Storm, and Celt had carried Grace upstairs to his old room. It seemed like I wasn't the only man who preferred his woman over the party brewing in the club's bar. It made me smile, that I had so much in common with the brothers I was growing closer to over the last few days. The Dark Slayers didn't stand on ceremony. We were all equal here. That meant close friendships were forged between brothers with things in common, rather than us being meatheads always trying to cozy up with the club officers. Storm would never tolerate that kind of brown nosing. Besides, he was hard man to get used to. Zoe once called him an acquired taste, and that made him laugh.

Taking my Lacey to the room we had shared before my arrest felt like coming home. The only thing better than this would have been taking her to my place where I wouldn't have to worry about anyone knocking on my door, or anything popping off.

I tossed her onto the bed, and she looked up at me with adoring eyes and said, "I really missed you, babe."

I began getting undressed, eager to get a shower and have my fill of her. "Same here. You were all I thought about, night and day for three whole fucking days."

She got off the bed and helped me out of my clothes. "You know what they say about missing what you don't have?"

"Yeah, until now I never believed all that absence makes the heart grow fonder crap."

"But now, you're a born again believer, right?"

Fisting my hand in her hair, I pulled her head back and looked into her eyes. "You better well believe it, doing without you, made a hard and fast believer out of me." Before she could speak, I kissed her like I had the right.

My beautiful Lacey looped her arms around my neck and held on, kissing me like her life depended on it. That freed up my hand to begin ripping her clothing off. Not literally ripping but getting pretty damn close. Lacey didn't seem to notice, much less complain. Not even when I scooped her off her feet and carried her to the shower.

The minute we were inside, I was kissing her again. A surge of pure lust coursed through my body when her soapy hands landed on my cock. It was just what I needed to feel close to her again. Something about tangling tongues with Lacey left me breathless and loving on her hard.

I came all over her beautiful body and carefully washed her off before we tumbled into bed, happy to be together once again. Everything about being with Lacey was such a joy. That was probably why I couldn't keep my lips, hands, or mouth off her to save my life. By the time I'd finished kissing her, trailing kisses down her breasts, and sucking her nipples, she was practically begging for my cock.

And I was dying to give it to her. Finally sinking home after being in the lockup for days. She was tight and warm and welcoming. Unfortunately, I needed something a little fiercer than missionary, so I flipped her over and shoved her front against the headboard. "Hold on," I murmured before I held up one of her legs and thrust deep inside her welcoming heat.

Her little sounds of pleasure as I fucked her were all I needed to keep my libido going for hours. Unfortunately, my Lacey wasn't as good at holding out as I was. She came screaming my name and hung onto the headboard as I railed her over and over again, forcing her to come again all over my cock. When she slumped back against my chest, I knew it was time to go easy on her.

I turned her over, laying her down so her head was at the foot of the bed and positioned myself over her. "How are you holding up?" I whispered in her ear.

She moaned in response.

Running one hand down between her legs, I told her, “You’re still drenched for me. Do you want more of my cock or do you need to rest?”

Her head came up and she said, “No. I don’t want to rest, I can take more.”

Cupping her chin with one hand I turned her head to look at me. “I don’t care if you can take me. What I want to know is if you actively still want my cock. It’s no fun for me if you’re not enjoying it too.”

She shook her chin from my hand and gave me annoyed look. “I want more sex with you. Don’t stop.”

I grinned down at her, “That was clear enough, baby. When you’ve had enough, just tell me to fuck off in no uncertain terms. I promise, I won’t get mad.”

“Less talking and more sex,” she murmured.

If she was up for more of my cock, I was gonna go for broke and make sure it was such a pleasurable experience that she never regretted it. Since I was already out of bed, I scooped her up and took her against the door of the room and then the wall. Every time she cried out my name, I fantasized that she was laying claim to me in her own way. It felt great, so much so, that she had to tell me when she’d had enough. I eased up and cupped her face in my hands so I could fawn all over her.

“You are the most precious thing in my world, and I hope you never forget that, even for a second.”

Her face lit up, “God, you say the nicest things. It makes me feel wanted and loved.”

“You are wanted and loved. I can’t imagine being with anyone other than you, Lacey. You’ve quickly become my everything. I love you.”

“I love you too Rebel,” she said, her eyes glistening in the dim light of my room.

Eventually, after three hours of mind-blowing sex, we finally decided to take a break and head down to the party.

I decided that this was the perfect time to pull out the property cut, because it was no longer a sexy game I wanted to play with the woman I was falling hard and fast for. Lacey had passed the threshold of being my one a while back. The property cut was now a way of putting all my club brothers on notice that she was officially mine and a way of alerting everyone who saw her in the community, that she was under the protection of me and my club.

I held it up for her to see after we got out of the shower and she was drying off. The sight of it made her face light up.

“Finally,” she said with a smile. “I feel like you’ve been teasing me with your property cut for ages.”

“Sorry about that,” I told her. “I can promise you that I’m dead serious about you wearing my cut right now. I want everybody in the whole damn world to know you’re mine.”

With a proud look on her face, she snagged it out of my hand and wrapped it around her naked chest. Lifting her breasts into place, she snapped the front closed. Seeing her stark naked in my cut, fired up my lust all over again. My eyes lifted to hers and I told her straight, “You better guard that pussy if you don’t want me face-down on it

again.”

She laughed and grabbed her panties. “We need to at least put in an appearance downstairs, especially after all the old ladies went to so much trouble to make your homecoming special.”

I watched her pull on her jeans after those pretty pink panties, totally enamored with everything from her curves, to the lilting laughter in her voice, to the way she looked at me. Her eyes ate up my body as I dressed. Keeping my hands off her body was more difficult than I imagined it would be. I distracted myself by telling her, “I doubt anyone would notice if I didn’t put in an appearance. They probably had the club officers in mind when they planned the homecoming. I’m just the spare that got swept up in the festivities, and I like it that way. It means I can come and go as I please without a care in the world.”

She eyed me as I slid my cut on. “I think you’re very wrong about that. The club girls are all distraught over losing out on the best cock in the clubhouse.”

My eyebrows shot up because that was the last thing I ever expected her to say. I just shook my head dismissively, “Who the fuck cares what they think?”

She just shrugged and came to cuddle under my arm, “I think you make more of an impression on people than you realize. Let’s go downstairs, have a drink or two and relax.”

“You can drink if you like,” I told her. “I’m too keyed up to dump alcohol on top of that.”

With my woman on my arm, I felt like the king of the world. I held off on the drinking in case Lacey wanted more sex later, but sitting around with my club brothers and shooting the shit with Lacey sitting on my lap was the most relaxed I’ve

ever been in ages. Laying around my cell, sleeping on and off from sunup to sundown had made me anxious and left me wanting something to do to stay awake.

When my club brothers began to thin out, I glanced down at Lacey and asked, “Would you like to take a ride on the back of my bike. We could ride along the coastline and relax at one of the scenic overlooks. I know a couple of places with amazing views and one that’s a little out of the way. It’s impossible to see from the highway.”

Her hands flew up to clasp together and she nodded. “I love being on the back of your bike. I never thought I’d take to something like motorcycles, but they’re definitely growing on me.”

I bent down and gave her a kiss before whispering, “It’s almost like you were made to be mine.”

She jumped up onto her toes and kissed my cheek. “What do you mean by almost? I love you and of course I was meant to be yours.”

“You say that now,” I told her good-naturedly. “When I’m old and grumpy, you’ll be singing a different tune.”

She shrugged and her reply caught me off guard. “You’re already grumpy but I still fell head over heels in love with you. I don’t see that changing anytime soon.”

“I’m not grumpy,” I shot back, then gave her a grin. “Okay, maybe sometimes I can be a bit tetchy. I’m surprised you managed to put up with me all this time.”

She cupped my face in her hands and said, “One day you’re gonna realize that true love can’t be bought, sold, forced, or coerced. It comes when you least expect it and explodes your life in the best way possible. You, Benjamin Ross, are an acquired

taste and I wouldn't change anything about you."

She pulled me down for another kiss, and I came willingly because she left me speechless. No woman had ever accepted me for being me before. We walked out of the clubhouse hand in hand, and I led her to my bike. "I've been thinking a lot about us while I was in lockup."

She climbed onto the back of my bike and smiled up at me. "Did it have anything to do with putting me in your property cut?"

I nodded, "Yeah, that went better than I expected."

Seeing her sitting on my bike, wearing my cut did things to me, made my cock hard and my chest ache with love for her.

"I've been thinking of you too," she confessed.

"Oh yeah, about what?" I asked, hoping it was something good.

She reached out to run her finger over the handlebar of my bike, there was something in the teasing way she stroked it that made my cock stiffen. "I've been thinking that I want to see more of you, especially at night."

My heart jumped in my chest, and I immediately responded with the first words that popped into my head. "If you're asking to move in, my answer is hell-fucking-yes! I'd love to have you at my place full-time. That's actually part of what I was thinking about when I was forced to cool my heels in jail for three long days. Only it was less like vague thoughts and more like fantasies."

Her eyes lit up. "I'm glad we're on the same page about that. My dad seems to be doing better now and the two of them are going through some kind of second

honeymoon phase. Having me in the house is getting awkward. It was only supposed to be temporary anyway, until I found my own place.”

I grinned at her and pulled her helmet out of my storage compartment. “Yeah, I already know all about how well your dad’s doing. I talked to him last week and he’s thinking about renewing their vows.”

“My mom will be thrilled. She needs something special to pick her spirits up right now.” Glancing away, she murmured, “We’ve all been through so much lately.”

I stepped forward and tilted her face up to look into her eyes. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here to support you when you talked to your cousin. I know it was traumatic for you when your family skeletons came tumbling out of the closet so unexpectedly. But don’t worry darlin’—from here on out I’m gonna be by your side.”

She reached up, locked one arm around my neck and pulled me down for one of the sweetest kisses I’d ever had.

Lacey

My parents got back two days after Rebel's homecoming. I talked him into coming with me so I could speak to my mom about the letter she was holding for Richie. He was reluctant at first because he was worried that he needed to catch up on the jobs he'd missed. I'd hired an extra electrician and had decided to give Richie a trial period working for the family firm as a trainee, so he was currently paired up with Harvey getting hands-on experience. If he was serious about getting clean, then I wanted to do everything I could to help him. That also included seeing if we could get the police to drop the charges, as there was nothing stolen. I was hoping my mom would agree. The thing was, I wanted to keep my father distracted while I had a heart-to-heart with my mother, and that was why I needed Rebel here.

When my mom opened the door to see both of us standing side by side her face lit up. "Come to welcome us back so soon?" she asked. Holding the door open, she added, "I put on a peach cobbler. Come on in and I'll make coffee to wash it down with."

When my father reached for the remote control to turn off the television, Rebel spoke up. "I hope you're not turning the game off. I'd love to watch it with you."

My father waved him into the living room with a pleased smile. "You're welcome to watch with me anytime, Rebel. Who are you putting your money on today?"

Rebel slid into my mother's rocker, which was beside my dad's recliner, and they began chatting about the teams. I followed my mother to the kitchen. She started a fresh pot of coffee and told me, "The cobbler has another twelve minutes. Should we add a scoop of ice cream?"

“Sure, but I need to talk to you for a minute about Richie.”

Her expression dimmed. “Did the police finally arrest him?”

“Not yet, and if they do, I’m going to intervene.”

She sat down across the table from me, frowning. “I know he’s family, but he broke into our home, Lacey. I don’t know how we can look the other way on this.”

“He’s got problems, Mom. He didn’t take anything, and I think he needs a chance,” I said.

My mom didn’t say anything, but I could see her lips thin out in a disapproving manner.

“Maybe if you hear what I have to say, you might think differently. I have a question for you. Sometime before Aunt Susan died she gave you an envelope, inside was a letter for Richie. Do you mind if I ask why you never gave it to him?”

She hesitated for a moment before answering. “It was because his stepfather asked me to wait until he was clean. He felt like the letter would cause him to spiral deeper into drugs.”

I dived straight into it, “Were you aware that she had a daughter, that Richie had a sibling?”

My mother’s mouth fell open, and she shook her head. “It must have been a stillbirth, otherwise she would have mentioned it.”

“No, Mom. Aunt Susan had a daughter. She would have been born when Richie was seven. From what he told me, she had problems. She was born with a missing arm

and a club foot. They put her in a home and left her to rot there after visiting her every Sunday for years and letting Richie get close and play with her.”

My mother’s expression grew angry. “No, he’s lying. Susan would never abandon her own child that way. You’d do well to stop listening to your cousin. Richie is nothing but trouble.”

“Why would he make up something like that? You’ve admitted that Aunt Susan gave you a letter. Why don’t you get it so we can find out for ourselves what it says? Richie said we could read it as long as I give it to him afterwards. He doesn’t want any more secrets in our family. That’s what he came here to find. He wanted to know what happened to Debbie.”

My mother murmured, “I can’t remember where I put it.”

I quietly redirected her, “It’s got to be in your safe. Richie looked everywhere else but couldn’t get into the safe. It has to be there.”

“Fine, I’ll get the letter, and you can see for yourself that this is all rubbish.”

She stalked out of the kitchen towards the safe in the family room. I hoped she would bring it back without messing about. I didn’t know how much more of this I could take. When she came back, the hand holding the letter was trembling. “I found it. Are you certain we should open it? It’s marked ‘Private and Confidential for Richie.’”

When she put it on the table in front of me, I reached for it without a single reservation. “Yeah, Mom. We should keep whatever is written to ourselves though and give Richie the choice to share the information with whoever he wants to have it.”

She sat down across from me again, and I read the letter out loud. There were profuse

apologies along with an explanation that made sense. She talked about her daughter, Richie's half-sister, with a certain kind of resignation, like she had no choice but to place her in a home. She didn't lay all the blame on her husband, but the implication was that he insisted on a placement for her. It was heartbreaking to realize that she went through with it to please her husband but lost her son in the process.

Before I realized it, tears were streaming down my face as I continued to read the letter out loud. My aunt, Richie's mother, apologized to him because she saw how much this hurt him.

My mother's still-trembling hand came up to cover her mouth. She was shocked, and her emotions were churning. I could tell from looking at her that this was as hard for her as it was for me, and our emotions didn't even cover half of everything Richie had been through.

When I finished reading the letter, I told her, "This is why Richie started acting out when he was twelve. He was worried that she got stuck somewhere really bad. He said that with no family checking on her, they might not be taking care of her."

"But his stepfather knew," she stammered. "He knew and let us all think Richie was just a bad person. He painted his stepson as troubled and made us all believe it."

"Yeah, I also think his stepdad convinced him that he was a bad apple and deserved for all of us to turn our backs on him."

She got to her feet and started pacing back and forth in front of the kitchen table. "You're right, Lacey. We've got to find him and make this right. I'm going to call the police and say it was all a misunderstanding. Richie needs our support."

"I already found him, and he's been clean for a few days after an accidental overdose. I put him with Harvey to train, and he's going to a local support group for addicts."

We're trying to get him into a treatment program."

She stopped pacing, and I could see tears in her eyes. "We've got to find that sister of hers. What did you say her name was?"

"Debbie."

My mother broke down, crying big, ugly tears. I ran and got her some tissues and put my arm around her. "Don't worry, we're fixing this. Rebel and his club are going to help Richie track her down."

"And then what?" she asked while wiping her eyes. "If her father is still the guardian, he's not going to let any of us take her out of that placement where she's been living for years."

I gave her a big hug. "Richie thought she might have learning difficulties, though he said she seemed okay when he visited her. Maybe she aged out of the system at eighteen and is living independently? Anyway, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it," I assured her.

When I let my mom go, she kept wiping at her eyes and trying to blink away the tears. "I don't know how something like this happened in our family."

"Me neither, Mom. All I know is now that we know the truth, we can fix it."

"Yes, we'll do our best to fix it. You take this letter to Richie and you tell him he can come here and live if he wants to. Your father and I will welcome him with open arms. Tell him that whatever he needs, we'll help him get it."

"That's really generous, but I think he's been taken in by Rebel's club. He's in a good place right now, what with going to treatment and working a real job. His mother

would be proud of him.”

“I’m really proud of him too, Lacey. Just tell him we’re here for him if he needs anything.”

Just then, the buzzer went off, alerting us that the cobbler was finished cooking. I pulled it out of the oven and placed it on a wire rack on the counter to cool. My mother and I kept talking, and at some point I realized that I had forgotten about how Richie had said he didn’t break into the office. I remembered when I first mentioned it Rebel thought that maybe he was just playing it safe—admitting to what we already knew—but I wasn’t so sure. Either way, this whole nightmare looked like it was about to go into our rearview mirror.

I had been expecting some raised eyebrows when I told my parents that I was going to live with Rebel, but they were remarkably okay about the whole thing. Normally, they might be cautious about their only daughter moving in with a big biker, but Rebel had proven himself to be a wonderful person in their eyes several times over already. Plus, they were seeing me as a fully functional adult, rather than their little girl, and they were better about trusting my judgment. Still, it was nice not to get any pushback from them on us living together.

Lacey

The next morning after waking up at his place, I realized that Rebel had gotten up early and created an area for me in the spacious empty walk-in closet across from his bathroom. It was the room I had identified in my mind as being perfect for a nursery. Since we weren't planning to have children anytime soon, I'd enjoy it while I could. I knew it was crazy thinking about having kids even in the future, when Rebel and I hadn't been together for long, but they always say when you know you know. And I knew .

Me and Rebel were in it for the long haul.

Thinking more clearly about children made me start to worry about all the sex Rebel and I had been having. We weren't using condoms, and I was coming up on three years of having my implant in place. I knew that I was supposed to get it checked two months before it was due to be changed, just to be sure it was still effective, but between moving back to Griffinsford, taking over my parents' business, the break-ins, and meeting Rebel, linking with a new doctor had completely slipped my mind.

I pushed away that little voice in the back of my mind that whispered I was possibly pregnant already. No, I told myself firmly. The implant was good for three years, probably longer. It didn't suddenly stop working one day out of the blue. The little voice whispered back that I was three weeks shy of three years at the moment, and the doctor had explained how different bodies respond differently, which was why they liked to check hormone levels. Damn, I had apparently turned into a woman who liked to live dangerously.

When I got dressed for the day and came downstairs, Rebel was all smiles. “I did good, right?” he asked before taking a sip of his coffee.

I walked over and gave him a hug. “Yeah, baby. You did more than good. Setting up that little space for me makes me feel like I belong.”

“You do belong here, ladybug,” he said warmly. I liked that he occasionally called me by my childhood nickname.

I also couldn’t stand to keep him in the dark about a possible birth control failure. He would consider that an unforgivable slight. And I didn’t want to hurt him just when we had worked all our relationship stuff out. I was going to make an appointment with my OB-GYN after the weekend and go and buy some condoms. But still I had to say something.

I wrapped my arms around him and laid my cheek against his chest before murmuring, “You know the problem with ladybugs is they tend to make more ladybugs.”

He froze for a second before wrapping his arms around me. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

I tilted my head up to look at him and shook my head, “I don’t think so, but—”

“You think you’re pregnant?” His eyes widened.

I pushed back from him and picked up the coffee he’d made for me. Bringing the cup to my mouth, I took a sip before answering him. “No. I don’t think so. With the implant I have, I don’t get periods so there’s nothing to give a hint. But I just realized that I missed a maintenance visit with my OB-GYN. I’m in the gray area where my implant might not be working as effectively.”

His face lit up. “So that’s a maybe, right?”

I nodded, shocked that he looked so thrilled about me possibly messing things up for us. “I guess we could use condoms until I can get an appointment made.”

The happiness fell right off his face. “If that’s what you want, I’ll do it.”

“Look Rebel, I know you’re a little older than me, but we haven’t been together long. We’re not even engaged, much less married—”

He interrupted me, “Is that what your problem with being pregnant is? Us not being engaged or married? I can fix that. Give me a few days.”

“Wait! What? I wasn’t insinuating we should rush into an engagement and I’m not pregnant—at least I don’t think I am. I just wanted to be upfront with you when I realized I’d forgotten to make the appointment.”

He took another drink of his coffee and seemed to be thinking carefully before he spoke again, “I think we’re having a communication breakdown. I’m gonna tell you how I feel, and then I want you to do the same thing. Even if it’s not what I want, I won’t be upset, and we’ll come to a compromise. Does that sound doable?”

I nodded. I was starting to regret bringing up the whole damn appointment issue, but if we were starting out on the rest of our lives together, then I wanted everything out in the open. I guessed now was as good a time as any to lay all of our cards on the table.

Rebel drained his cup and set it down on the counter before taking a deep breath and saying, “I get why you missed your appointment. We’ve had a lot going on in our lives and shit happens. From the moment I first decided you were my one, my goal has been marriage and babies. I didn’t bring that up because I thought we were

protected, and I didn't want to scare you off with long term plans that big so soon. If you are pregnant, I'd be fucking thrilled. If you honestly don't want to be pregnant right now, I'll support whatever decision you make. I'm not some mindless neanderthal that thinks women are baby factories, I respect your autonomy and shit. Just that someday, either now or in the future, I can see us being a family." Glancing away, he added, "That's all I have to say."

When I set my coffee cup aside my hand was trembling so much that some of the coffee splashed out. Rebel grabbed a paper towel and cleaned my hand and then the counter while I was trying to pull my thoughts together.

"Look, babies weren't something I saw in my immediate future, however if it turns out that I'm pregnant, I'm keeping our baby. You and I are very much on the same page about that. I'm more than ready for an engagement and marriage. I know it seems rushed, but I just had this feeling that we were meant to be. I figured when you were ready, you'd ask."

His hands came out to rest on my hips, and he gently tugged me closer. "So, all I have to do is ask and you'll be all mine?"

I nodded, caught in the thrall of having all his attention centered on me after being vulnerable with each other. "Yeah, that's what I'm saying. Only I'm already all yours, remember?"

The pleased expression on his face turned smug in an instant. And then he dropped to his knees to be face-to-face with my stomach. He put his ear to my belly first and I pointed out incredulously, "Even if I'm pregnant—and I'm pretty sure I'm not—there is nothing to hear."

He made a little knocking gesture with one hand and said loudly, "Little ladybug, if you're in there, don't worry, me and your mama are gonna love you so much." Then

he gave me a bear hug with both arms. His playful reaction made me tear up because now I really wanted to be pregnant with his baby. And if I wasn't, it was going to make me sad. Why oh why was the world such a cruel place?

When he got up, we talked about me finding a new doctor so we could find out if I was pregnant and if not, decide what we wanted to do about birth control. The idea of having a baby with Rebel was appealing, but if I wasn't pregnant then we both thought maybe waiting a little while might be a good idea. Time got away from us but eventually, Rebel headed off to the courthouse to support Storm. Their club's attorney was filing a motion to dismiss his case. Apparently, law enforcement tested the blood on the drug paraphernalia and dusted it for prints. The results came back negative for his blood type and the only prints on it were from when he grabbed it to take it away. Even though I was almost one hundred percent sure it would happen, I told him I would keep my fingers crossed that they would dismiss the case.

It was with a light heart that I left for work. Working alone in the office had been too much of a risk for my overly protective biker until now. But now it looked like everything was settled he'd eased off. Richie had been insistent that he hadn't broken in, so it seemed more likely that it was linked to the other local break-ins and not personal.

However, as I got out of my car and walked towards the office, I felt unsettled. Something was different—it was like the feeling I'd gotten while walking up to my parents' place. I kept looking over my shoulder as if someone was behind me, but the parking lot was clear. I quickly locked the door behind me and set the alarm, then ran from room to room to check that there was no one there. Once I'd satisfied myself that it was only me, I sat down at my desk and got on with work. After an hour, a customer turned up, so I buzzed him in. Once we'd finished, I showed him out to his car, and we chatted a bit more about the wiring project we would be doing on his

latest renovation. I was about to reset the alarm when a familiar voice called my name from behind me. “Lacey Livingstone, what a nice little office you have.”

It was my former boss from LA and his voice sounded fake and too bright. He must have slipped in when I was showing Mr. Aristides to his car.

The initial fear gave way to anger when I realized who it was. I really couldn’t be bothered dealing with Edward today, but I supposed that I had to be polite. However, my voice probably sounded irritated as I asked, “What in the world are you doing in Griffinsford, Mr. Edwards?”

He dropped down into the seat in front of my desk. “I came to check on you, of course. We were pretty close back in LA. When you stopped answering my texts and refused to pick up my calls, I got worried that something had happened to you. I couldn’t just sit around and do nothing. Taking a day off to come and check on you seemed like the right thing to do.”

I sat in my chair, feeling the frown on my face grow deeper. “You can’t just come strolling into my office and disrupt my workday.”

He sighed dramatically. “Why are you being so rude, Lacey?” Glancing around, taking in my office, he added. “Friends can visit friends. There’s no rule about that, you know.”

“Of course not,” I stammered. This man had a way of twisting my thoughts, but I wasn’t falling for it this time. “The thing is, I’m quite busy these days. You should have called first. The way we work here is strictly by appointment only, and we don’t have an open office policy.”

He grinned at me, “I’ll bear that in mind for future reference but I’m here now, so we should catch up.”

Eyeing him warily, I told him, “Our office was recently closed, and I’ve got a lot of work to catch up on, so I can’t visit for very long.”

“Well that’s a fine howdy do,” he complained. “I drove all the way here from LA and you’re giving me the bum’s rush.”

“You know I’m not doing that,” I said, desperate to talk him down and get him to leave.

“Then let’s grab an early lunch and talk?” he suggested. “Maybe we could order in, and you could work while we talk.”

“Alright,” I finally told him, “But next time please call before stopping by.”

“Of course,” he said politely. However the tone of his voice was hollow.

“How about Asian food?” I asked. “You liked that when we worked together.”

“Yeah, that sounds great. I’ll take a crispy chicken and a cola,” he said blandly.

“Alright,” I said indulgently as I texted our order in. I was annoyed that he’d turned up, but felt that I had to be polite to him. It wasn’t like he’d done anything to hurt me. I had a feeling he was going to try and persuade me to return to LA, and I was ready to explain that my life was here in Griffinsford now.

I did, however, take a minute to text Rebel about my old boss being here, but that was only out of an abundance of caution.

When I glanced up, he had a forced smile. “You have a nice setup here. Is this your parents’ company?”

“Yes, they’ve made me the general manager. So far, business is brisk.”

“So, you’re a one-woman show here, right?”

“Yes, I’m the only office staff, but I have three field workers and one in training.”

“This seems like a small town. I’m surprised there’s enough electrical work to support a whole electrical office.”

“We get referrals from all over the county. One of my field workers is a master electrician. His services are very much in demand.”

“Well, that’s impressive, if a bit wasteful to have such a high-caliber employee on the payroll in a one-horse town like Griffinsford.”

I ignored his insult, and we continued to chat until the food arrived. He mostly talked about how his wife was screwing him over in their divorce and how all his employees had suddenly become assholes, but he was soldiering on all on his own. He always somehow made himself the victim in every situation he had created by his own selfish, thoughtless decisions. I had somehow forgotten how irritating he could be. As we were eating, I turned the tables on him.

I cleared my throat and asked, “So, how has your business been since I left?”

“It’s been one misadventure after another,” he admitted nervously. “That’s one of the things I came to talk to you about. I can’t run that office all my own, and I want you to come back and work for me.”

“You know I can’t move back to LA.” I gestured around the room with one hand, “As you can clearly see, my parents need me to run their business. My father has Alzheimer's, and my mother is his primary caregiver. I’m their only child, so saving

the business falls to me.”

He shoved his half-eaten food container aside. “The food here is terrible. How can you stand to live in a backwater town like Griffinsford? You clearly came to LA for excitement like all you small-town girls do. You were lucky enough to find someone to employ you at a decent wage and just when I was starting to rely upon you, you picked up and moved back to Smallville.”

Having lost what little appetite I had, I dumped both our containers in the wastepaper basket beside my desk. “You’re right about the food being terrible but not about me going back to LA to work for you again.”

“If it’s a matter of money, I’m willing to raise your salary by fifty percent.”

“I really can’t. Like I said—”

“Yes, I heard you the first time. You think your parents need you to save their quaint little business located on the ass end of nowhere.”

“That’s about enough,” I snapped. “You’re being rude and condescending.”

“I’m exasperated with you, young lady. I gave up my wife for you and here you are throwing it back in my face.”

“What?” I asked.

“Oh don’t give me that Lacey, I could tell you were into me. Well now I’m free,” he said licking his lips in a manner that turned my stomach.

“You were my boss. I was absolutely not into you, not then and not now. I’m going to need you to leave now.”

“Playing hard to get? I love it. Look, this is how it’s gonna go, I want you to resign from this tiny hole in the wall and take over running my office.” He held up both hands in front of him, “Now don’t get me wrong. I’m going to sweeten the deal by offering you double what you were making before. You would be insane to turn down that kind of money—or me,” he said triumphantly.

I came to my feet and glared at him. “I’m turning down your generous offer. Please go and don’t come at me with more offers because I’m not looking to leave my family business behind.”

Before I knew what was happening, he reached out his hand and swiped it across my desk, flinging everything onto the floor. “I’m just about done with your stubbornness, girlie.”

My jaw almost hit the floor. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“We’re leaving here, grab your bag and pack what you need then we’ll be off.”

This was the part that clued me in that he was batshit crazy. Did he think I had a powder room with a full stock of clothing and accessories tucked away in my office?

“I’m not joking, Lacey. You’re wasting a big bunch of my time today. We need to hit the road immediately if we’re gonna avoid the rush hour traffic in LA. You’re doing this whether you want to or not,” he said.

“The hell I am. Get out of my office and don’t ever come back,” I reached for my phone so I could call Rebel.

Before I had a chance, his hand came out hard and fast around my arm and he started dragging me towards the back exit. I made another mad grab for my cell phone, but it clamored to the floor when I lost my grip on it. The next thing I knew he was

dragging me out the back door and into his old panel van. He was an electrician, one with delusions of grandeur, but still an electrician and they all had panel vans. When he pulled the side door open, I knew real fear for the first time. Something told me that if he managed to get me into this van, my chances of making it back home unharmed would diminish greatly.

Needless to say, I fought him every step of the way, to no avail. This man was absolutely crazy.

Just as he was dragging me over the threshold, I twisted my arm away and made a run for it. It felt like freedom for a brief second, until he grabbed me by the hair and stuffed me right where I didn't want to go. This asshole was seriously pissing me off.

When he handcuffed me to the bottom of one of the front seats and forced me to sit on the dirty floor, my fury spiked. "What do you hope to accomplish by abducting me? I'm never going to fall in love with you or run your office for you."

"We'll just see about that," he sneered. "You're gonna be mine. I worked too hard to make a life for us to let you just throw it all away because you don't understand what's at stake."

"What's at stake is you ending up behind bars for doing something outrageously stupid. You can't just kidnap someone and force them to work for you. You do know that, don't you?"

"By the time I'm finished with you, you'll be worshiping the ground I walk on and willing to do anything to please me."

"Not a fucking chance. You can either let me go now or I will make taking me your worst fucking nightmare. I know you don't believe me, but I'll make your life a living hell."

This fucker actually laughed.

Alright, game on, I told myself. I waited for him to start the van and then took a deep breath and screamed at the top of my lungs, long and loud. Then I just kept screaming over and over again. I could tell he was startled because his head whipped back to pin me with a menacing stare before growing, “Shut the fuck up.”

I ignored him and just kept screaming. I thought I heard him say something about how no one was going to hear me on the interstate, and I’d be too hoarse to scream anymore by the time we got back to his place.

See? My plan was working already. He’d spilled the beans about where he was taking me. That’s information I wouldn’t have otherwise had if just sat here like a good little girl doing nothing to save myself. As I continued mindlessly screaming as close to his ear as possible, I tried to remember what I knew about his house. I’d been there once for a Christmas party he and his wife threw for their staff and clients. He lived in a big, two-story brick home in a nice neighborhood, much like my parents did. I remembered that he acted like I should be impressed, so I acted like I was—even though his house was pretty standard when it came to the houses me and my friends grew up in.

My throat was getting seriously sore after about forty minutes of screaming, so I upped my game to kicking his seat. Since my hands were cuffed to the bottom back of the passenger side seat, I leaned against the side of the van and just started kicking his seat at one-minute intervals. At first, he jolted forward and almost lost control of the steering wheel.

His foot hit the brakes and the van slowed, but didn’t stop. “What in the hell are you doing, you stupid bitch? I thought you were smart. Kicking the driver’s seat while the car is in motion could cause a wreck or me to veer off the road and kill us both.”

I shrugged and replied hoarsely, “Either of those fates is preferable to living as your slave if I’m cooperative or tied up in your basement to be abused at your leisure if I’m not.” Then I gave his seat another hard kick to drive my point home.

“Look Lacey, I’m not a monster. I’m just a man who wants an opportunity to show you that things could be good between us. You wouldn’t let me, so I’m doing what I have to do in order for you to understand that we’re a good match.” He actually sounded hurt.

“Well, every villain is the hero of their own story I guess.” I told him before kicking his seat again.

His face twisted into a mask of fury. “Fine. I tried to play nice with you, but you’re too stubborn to see it for the kindness it was. From this moment on, every nasty thing you do to me will be revisited on you three times when we get to my place.”

“How very biblical of you,” I sneered, not giving two hoots in hell about all his manipulative bullshit.

He turned around again which was great because the ignorant asshole was still driving, albeit slower than normal. “I know you’re young and testing my resolve. I just want you to know that it’s gonna hurt me more than you, but I will teach you not to abuse my good will if the last thing I do. In the end you’ll see how stupid resisting me was.”

“Let me see if I’ve got this straight, you forcefully kidnapped me, tied me up on the floor of your filthy van and are threatening to harm me for objecting, all in order get me to fall in love with you but somehow I’m the stupid one?”

When he turned to look at me again his expression was shocked. “Lacey, you’ve changed in the time you’ve been gone from my life. You used to be quiet,

submissive, and agreeable. Now, you're acting like something spawned in the fiery pits of hell. I'm not even sure if I still want you at this point." The tone of his voice implied he expected me to straighten right up to earn the privilege of this kidnapping. Dude was complete moron.

I pointed upwards with one finger to the sign outside his driver's side window. "Good. I'm glad we got that cleared up. You can drop me off right here, I can call a friend for a ride home and we can forget about this whole unfortunate incident."

His voice turned suspicious. "I don't think so, Lacey. You're either going to turn out to be my new life partner, or a loose end that needs to be tied up—your choice."

This man was absolutely off his rocker. I'd thought he was a controlling prick when I worked for him, but that was apparently the getting all his little ducks in a row phase of his life. I literally watched him divorce his nice wife, never really suspecting that he intended me to be her replacement. If not stupid, I had certainly been naive.

He was right about one thing, though—I'd been timid and easily controlled back then. Moving back to my hometown and being responsible for the family business had changed me. If I was being honest, I'd admit that spending time with Zoe, Alison, and Rebel had helped me become stronger and more self-assured as well. I had a long way to go before I could claim the kind of strength of character my friends possessed, but every day that I resisted this asshole, the closer I came to coming into my own. My fate was sealed. I needed to resist, to save myself.

It was great that I was insightful enough to drop Rebel a text about my old boss showing up at my office. The old Lacey would sit around waiting for the rescue that was sure to come, compliments of her true-blue biker with a heart of gold. But I wasn't going to suffer the humiliation of Rebel finding me being a good little victim. No sir, I was going to fight this asshole every step of the way and in doing so, prove that I deserved the good man fate had sent my way.

Rebel

As I was waiting patiently for the judge to give his decision on whether or not to drop the charges against Storm, I couldn't help but think about the last few days with Lacey. If I wasn't mistaken, I had gotten me an old lady. Being in a relationship had exceeded my expectations in every conceivable way. Over the course of a few months I went from being stressed, lonely, and engaging in meaningless sex with club girls to having a wonderful woman who was smart, loving and as crazy about me as I was about her. Lacey didn't judge me for my flaws. Hell, she even saw some of them as advantages. I couldn't have made a better choice than Lacey. God only knows why she fell for me but I'm glad she did.

This morning blew my everlovin' mind. I know the likelihood of her being pregnant was slim, but the thought of her having my child made me giddy with excitement and the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. If it turned out she wasn't pregnant then I wondered if we should seriously think about starting a family now.

Shaking those thoughts from my head, I glanced up to find our club attorney gesturing to the judge and the prosecuting attorney objecting. It didn't get her very far because when the judge finally ruled, it was in Storm's favor. Celt leaned over and whispered, "I saw that comin'. That woman does not know when to give up."

"Yeah," I responded quietly because they were still winding down the court proceeding. "I don't think she likes our kind."

Celt grinned like the mad Irishman he so clearly was, "Our kind being bikers, right?"

“No,” I teased him. The ‘our kind’ I was referring to were men who risk their necks and get shit done. She probably thinks we should sit around on our asses waiting for the cops to do their damn job. If it hadn’t been for Storm, Richie would be dead, and no one would even know about that sister of his being wronged by her parents.”

“Ain’t that for damn sure. That kid’s family did them both dirty. I’d like to get my hands on his old man for a few minutes.”

A cold female voice came from nearby, “Maybe you could hold off on plotting violence long enough to make it out of the courtroom.”

We both looked up to see the prosecuting attorney standing over us. I was about to apologize when Celt did what he always does in situations like this. He got to his feet and got mouthy in the wrong way.

“Why the hell are ye over here mouthing off to us when we’re sitting here minding our own business? Is this yer idea of flirtin’ or somethin’? ‘Cause I ain’t interested, lassie,”

“What? Of course not,” she said in a shocked and angry voice. “This is me putting you on notice that if you end up engaging in any kind of violence in my county, I’m going to prosecute you to the full letter of the law.”

Celt opened his mouth to say something to her, but Storm came up from behind and cut him off. “You’ve got balls of solid brass to be harassing my club brothers the minute the judge smacked you down for trying to charge me with shit I didn’t even do. It’s almost like you didn’t learn a thing.”

She whirled around and pointed at Storm one time, hard and fast before lowering her arm. “You should not be in our county, much less interfering in police raids.”

“Look, I don’t have all day to argue with you about shit that the judge just declined to accept as fact. We were there to save a man’s life, and we did just that. Listen carefully, lady, you’re not in charge of anything. If we have a reason to be in this county again, you can bet your sweet ass that we’re gonna be. You can get pissed about it all day long but we both know you weren’t gonna go out to a crack house in the middle of the night to save someone from overdosing. So, maybe you need to get off our backs about the good deed we did.”

She looked like she was itching to continue the argument, but the bailiff stepped in. “I’m gonna need all of you to move along. We have another case to hear, and Judge Vega doesn’t tolerate distractions in his courtroom.”

She made a disgruntled sound, turned on her heel and stalked away, leaving us all staring behind her. This woman was a nasty piece of work that I hoped never to cross paths with again. I quickly came to my feet and all three of us silently headed for the door. When we got to the front, near the door, we approached the officer at the metal detector to retrieve our cell phones and keys.

On the way to my bike, I checked my messages and found one from Lacey that she’d sent a couple of hours ago.

Lacey: I just wanted to let you know my old boss just showed up at my office. I don’t know what he wants or even how he found me. I really don’t have time for his shit today.

I stopped in my tracks and immediately called her to check if she was okay after his visit. I saw Storm and Celt stop out of the corner of my eye and start walking back towards me.

As the phone rang out, Storm asked, “What’s going on, brother? You’re white as a sheet.”

“I hope nothing is wrong,” I told him. “Lacey sent me a text while we were in the courtroom. Her boss from LA showed up at her office and she said she doesn’t know what he wants or how he found her.”

Storm asked, “Is this the one that sent her weird messages for weeks begging her to come back?”

“Yeah, how did you know?”

“She complained about it to Zoe. I had Hacker run a background check on him just to be sure. He’s just a garden variety asshole that no one likes. He recently filed for divorce. That’s all he got, no arrests or anything.”

I left a voice message, “I got your message. Look, ladybug, I’m worried about you. Call me back when you get this message. I need to hear your beautiful voice.”

When I shoved my phone back into my pocket, both of my club brothers were staring at me. Finally, Storm said, “That was a little over the top, don’t you think?”

Celt added, “Flowery even.”

“What in the fuck are you two talking about?”

Celt responded with a grin, “Calm the feck down. We’re just messin’ with ye, brother.”

“Well, I don’t have time for jokes. That asshole is within striking distance of my old lady and now she’s not answering her phone. I need to get back to the office as soon as fucking possible.”

Storm sighed, sat down on his bike sideways, and pulled out his phone. He scrolled

for a minute and then said, “We’ve got a brother four minutes from her office. I’m gonna get him to do a little wellness check. I’ll put it on speaker because I know how you are.”

My anxiety clicked down a notch and I didn’t even debate him on me being extra possessive. The courthouse was a good hour from her office but with our club president’s help I’d soon know if she was okay. I started pacing and worrying because that woman was the love of my fucking life, and the thought of anything happening to her pissed me off.

I waited while Storm made the call.

When a familiar voice answered, our club president said, “Hey Renegade, It’s Storm. We have an old lady in trouble and you’re the closest brother. It’s an emergency because her last visitor was a real asshole.”

Renegade’s voice turned dead serious. “I’m all in. Who and where?”

“Get to Livingstone Electrical as soon as possible. You’ll be looking for Rebel’s old lady.”

I could hear footsteps hitting the pavement. “The pretty brunette he just put in a property cut?”

“That would be the one.”

“Fuck, I’m halfway there and I’m packing. Is this guy dangerous?”

“He’s a wildcard that we practically know nothing about. Her life is worth moving heaven and earth to protect. His, not so much.” I realized I was overreacting, all because she hadn’t answered her phone. Sure her old boss might be an asshole, but

here I was acting like a drama queen all because she'd probably decided to go for lunch with him.

"You know I'll do whatever it takes, even if it lands me behind bars again," Renegade said.

"It ain't gonna come to that, brother. We have security cameras all over the place. If anything goes down, it'll be on tape."

As long as he acted in self-defense it was all good. God knows I didn't want that man to end up serving time after already serving close to a decade behind bars for a crime he didn't commit.

I heard him breathing heavy from being on a flat-out run. "I'm near the office now, is the door open?"

"There's an entry keypad on the doorknob. Visitors usually use the doorbell, and she buzzes them into the office."

Renegade muttered, "That's a weird way to do business."

I spoke up again, "Not really, she's the only one in the office most days and we're on the outskirts of town, you never know who might be hanging around."

The footsteps stopped and I heard buzzing, then Renegade huffed out, "No one's answering. I need an access code."

I stepped closer and said, "It's one, nine, two, eight, five."

Renegade mumbled, "I see what you did there. The code is an X with the center button pushed last."

There was silence and footsteps. Then I heard Renegade curse, “Damn it to hell!”

“What’s happening brother?” I asked, hearing the tension in my voice.

“I’m in and it looks like he took her.”

“What the fuck do you mean it looks like he took her?”

“She’s not here and all the stuff has been shoved off her desk. There are half-empty food containers in the trash can. Her phone’s on the floor. The back door is hanging open, but your property cut is still on the coat rack.”

While Renegade was speaking on Storm’s phone, I got out mine and texted Hacker asking him to check the security feed for the office and see if he could get a location on Edward fucking Edwards.

“Right, I’ve locked up, you want me to take her phone to Hacker?” Renegade asked.

Storm answered for me, “Hell yeah, that’s a fucking outstanding idea.”

“Will do. Let me know if you need anything else.”

I stopped texting Hacker long enough to tell him, “Thanks brother. I owe you one.”

“Great, I’ll remember that,” he said brightly.

Storm chimed in, “You have my thanks as well, Renegade. Tell Piper I said hello.”

“You got it. Stay safe and call me if you need anything at all.”

Storm ended the call and then held his phone out to us to show the same address that

Hacker had just sent me. Our club IT genius was on the ball already, “Looks like we’re heading to LA.”

“Let’s get moving,” I told him. “Hacker managed to track his van to the interstate. They got a head start of two hours and I don’t want him having any more time alone with her than absolutely necessary.”

“I’ll see that the fecker doesn’t,” Celt murmured. He started texting someone, his fingers flying across the screen.

Storm shoved his helmet down and grinned at me. “I keep forgetting we have a prospect in Los Angeles.”

I had already put on my helmet and responded as I snapped it into place, “Dusty’s boyfriend, Corey, right?”

Celt frowned as he shoved his phone into his pocket. “Yeah, and that pain in the ass is finally gonna prove his worth today.”

Lacey

Edward had driven me all the way to his house, right into his garage, and closed the door before hauling me out of the van. I opened my mouth to scream, and he was ready for me. Before I realized what was happening, he stuffed something into my mouth and began dragging me into his house and down to the basement.

By the time he threw me into his home gym, I had managed to get whatever rag he'd stuffed in my mouth free.

He ended up shoving me down onto a sofa and handcuffing me to an old radiator. Trying to look on the bright side, I told myself that at least it wasn't a warm radiator. Thank goodness for that small mercy.

"Much as I'd like to be the perfect host and entertain you, I've got places to be." He then grabbed the handcuffs and gave them a nice hard yank. It really hurt, but I didn't let him know it. Turning to me he said, "These are solid steel. No matter how hard you try, you're not getting out of these until I use my key to get you out. Do you understand?"

I nodded, realizing it was pointless to object. "Yeah, I understand."

Motioning around the room he said with a grin, "Yell as loud and long as you like. I built this as a rumpus room for my kids when they were young. It's soundproof. Even those little windows along the top of the room are double-pane glass. They don't open and as you can see, I made sure no one could look in on me by adding a dark protective coating."

Great, I was for all intents and purposes in a dungeon.

Coming to his feet, he stared down at me. “The bottom line is you can’t get out, so don’t hurt yourself trying. I wasn’t planning on treating you so harshly. But then again, you being a belligerent bitch wasn’t on my bingo card for today either. You always used to do what I asked. We’ll hash this all out when I get back in an hour or so.”

“I don’t want to be with you. Please just let me go.” I said the words although it was pretty clear he didn’t care that I didn’t want him. To him, I was an object, a pretty trinket to wear on his arm and help him run his business. My thoughts, feelings, and desires didn’t matter one little bit to him.

“Like I just said, we’ll talk about this when I get back.”

I watched him stomp off back up the steps. Then he stopped and came back. I held my breath wondering what he was going to do. But instead of touching me he went to a minifridge and took out a bottle of water. Unscrewing the cap he set it down on the table beside me, and said, “Never let it be said I don’t know how to treat my house guests.”

With that he headed back up the steps. Once the door closed, I didn’t hear anything else. No sound of the front door slamming, nor his van starting up. He clearly wasn’t joking about this room being cut off from the outside world when it came to sound, but I had to assume he’d gone out.

I glanced at the bottle of water. It was only a small one, so I hoped that meant he wouldn’t be long. Then again, maybe I’d be better off dying of thirst here, than whatever dark shit he had planned for me when he got back.

I must have been sitting and contemplating my fate for around half an hour, when a noise from the window caught my attention. Suddenly it came apart from its cement housing around the edges and was tilted and pulled sideways through the hole it had formerly sat in. I saw a hand reach up and try to wrench it open. My heart raced as I realized that someone was going to rescue me. But then I had another thought—it couldn't have been Rebel, as he wouldn't have gotten here so soon. Was it a rescuer, or had I inadvertently ended up being caught in another break-in?

My questions were answered when a young man, maybe in his early twenties, suddenly poked his head and one shoulder through the opening. My mouth fell open when I saw that he was wearing a black leather vest, and he was clearly a biker.

He gave me a boyish grin and said, "I'm Corey, one of the Dark Slayer's prospects, I heard you were in a spot of bother. Rebel said I was supposed to tell you that you will always be protected by the long reach of the Dark Slayers MC and he's on his way to rescue you."

My chest was pounding, "Is that supposed to be some kind of joke?"

He responded cheerfully, "I can see how you might think that, but I think he's just a lovesick fool who thought his message would give you strength during your time of need."

Despite my predicament, I found myself smiling at his delivery. Finally able to breathe again, I told him, "Well, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather get the hell out of here now rather than later. Can you bust me outta here?"

"Dusty doesn't like it when I do illegal shit. I already disabled this crazy dude's security alarm. Breaking in might be a bridge too far."

"Thanks anyway, I suppose," I said morosely.

“I’m joking. I’ve got another guy I know coming with some equipment, but he’s thirty minutes away,” Corey said as he tried jiggling the window again. It was partially open, but there was no way that he could squeeze himself in. I might have been able to get out, but I was currently handcuffed to a radiator.

“Edward said he’d only be an hour, he might be back by then,” I said.

“Maybe I could help you get out of here on your own?”

I lifted my leg to show him the handcuff that barely fit around my ankle.

He nodded, “Yeah, I saw that.”

“He took the key with him. I’ve tried pulling but the radiator won’t move.”

Corey slid his hand into his pocket and pulled out a key. “Good thing I carry a master key. Might not fit the handcuffs that cops use, but for cheap shit that evil fuckers buy, it should do the trick.”

I jolted forward and held out my hands, “Toss it down.”

He carefully threw it, so it landed practically in my lap. I grabbed it and gleefully began unlocking the cuff from my ankle. When it clicked open, I glanced up at the young prospect and exclaimed, “I can’t believe it worked!” I stood up and stretched my legs. Then I headed across the room and jumped onto my tiptoes to hand it back to him. “Thanks for showing up here and helping me.”

“You’re welcome. I have my bike here, so we should be able to make a quick getaway.”

“Great. Do you think I could fit through that window?”

His eyes ran down my body, but not in a lecherous way. It was more like a doubtful scan for size. “Maybe, but it’s gonna be a tight squeeze.”

“I’ll take body compression and pain, over staying in this situation one minute longer than I have to,” I told him as I reached up and we clasped hands firmly. He started heaving me up and the minute I was within reach of the window, one hand came out to grasp the opening and I pulled myself forward. I was halfway through the window when something that felt like a bottle of water hit me on the butt.

“Ungrateful fucking whore!”

When had Edward gotten back? Had he actually gone out or had he been waiting upstairs? I had no time to consider this, because two big hands started tugging on my legs and I was getting pulled back into his basement.

It was around then that all hell broke loose. I heard the roar of motorcycles and voices I recognized shouting. Corey could clearly see what was happening through the window and he was shouting to his club brothers to get inside quickly.

“Lacey, I’m here babe,” the voice I most wanted to hear in the world called out.

The angry hands were torn from my body, replaced by the gentle ones of the man I loved. When Rebel helped me to the ground, and I turned around, I saw that Edward was curled up in a ball while Storm and Celt kicked him mercilessly.

Celt was yelling at him, “Ye think it’s cute to abuse women? Bet ye didn’t ever think we’d track yer dumb ass back home, did ye? Ye thought ye could just do as ye liked with this poor, innocent lassie.”

“Well, the joke’s on you, asshole,” Storm added with a few kicks of his own.

I probably should have felt some way about seeing a man being held down and beaten like that, but when I thought about what he could have done to me, I found it hard to feel any sympathy.

Edward yelled, “Lacey call the police, I’m being assaulted!”

Storm responded, “No way. You played stupid games by abducting one of our old ladies and now it’s time to collect your stupid prize.”

Celt muttered, “Yer pretty feckin’ ignorant to abduct one of the Dark Slayers’ old ladies.”

Edward groaned as he flailed around on the floor.

Storm snarled and gave him another good kick. “It means she’s untouchable for a dirtbag like you.”

I spoke up for myself, “He forced me into his van and tied me up on the floor. I begged him to let me go, but he said I’d either end up in his bed or I’d be a loose end to be tied up.”

Rebel’s head snapped around to glare at him.” Oh he did, did he?”

Edward pushed himself up, stumbled forward and made a grab for me. “You shut the fuck up, bitch. I was planning to treat you right, but you fucked it all up you—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish whatever he planned on saying, because Rebel casually backhanded him so hard he flew back, landing on top of the coffee table and rolling off onto the floor again.

Storm and Celt saw that for the prime opportunity it was and began kicking the shit

out of him again. Between him trying to get at me, and discovering he planned to kill me if I didn't let him rape me and use me as his office slave, the beating ramped up considerably.

“Stop,” Rebel finally told them. “Bring him up to the garage and handcuff him inside his van, just like he did to my Lacey. We'll put my bike inside. I want to take my time with him. Grab all his electronics and everything out of his safe. If he gives you any trouble with the combination, beat it out of him.”

I had every confidence that Edward would tell them everything they wanted to know. He was the type of man who abused women and clearly feared other men.

“I've got a better idea,” Celt said. “My cousin and I will put our bikes in there and take him to the clubhouse for ye. Ye and yer lassie can ride together without having to look at this fecker's ugly face. Ye can meet up with us when ye get your old lady settled down.”

When Rebel looked down at me, I nodded. “Let's ride together. I've had about as much of Edward as I can stand for one day.”

He jerked his chin towards the door. “You got it, ladybug.”

I kicked my feet for him to put me down. The second my feet hit the floor, I ran over to Edward and gave him a couple of good kicks of my own. “That's for putting your hands on me and thinking for one single second that I would eventually come around to the idea of being your fucking sex slave and office drone.”

Rebel wrapped one arm around my stomach and tugged me away. “Come on, save some of this asshole for me to deal with later. By the time that I'm finished with him, he'll be sucking his food through a straw.”

Strangely, after everything I'd been through, I liked the idea of Edward finally getting his comeuppance. Rebel helped me out of there and put me on the back of his bike. I'd be lying if I said my body wasn't sore from the injuries Edward inflicted on me. There was a nasty bruise where he'd handcuffed my ankle and then jerked on the cuffs, and I felt bruised from trying to get through the window. Still, I was alive. I hadn't given in at any point, and I was in the process of rescuing myself when Rebel and his club brothers showed up.

As we rode away, I tightened my hold on him. The fact that he'd tracked us all the way to LA was impressive in itself, and that he'd sent one of his club brothers to rescue me, made me feel safe and protected. I thought back to when I'd told him that I thought property cuts were ownerish. But now I saw them for what they were. As long as I wore his cut no one could hurt me.

When we stopped for gas, Rebel noticed how sleepy I was getting. "Do you want me to rent us a room? We've got another couple of hours riding yet," he asked.

I shook my head. "I can hold out for as long as it takes, I just want to get home."

He put me right back on his bike and got me home at record speed. I didn't even care about having a shower, I just wanted to crawl between the sheets, close my eyes and drift off into a blissful sleep.

Rebel

We decided to hold Edward in our clubhouse lockup while I took care of the woman he'd had a mind to rape and possibly kill. That fucker could rot in a cell for weeks or even months as far as I cared. I had every intention of giving this asshole the beatdown of a lifetime. I was keen on getting him to admit that he'd broken into Lacey's office.

Okay, I didn't know for sure that it was him, but I'd eliminated everyone else. That meant it was either him or it was like the police said, some random break-in by the same gang who had broken into other establishments on the same street. One way or another I was going to get to the bottom of this mystery and see that Lacey and her family got justice.

In the meantime, I had Storm bring over the jeweler who custom-designed many of the engagement rings for my club brothers to give to their old ladies. I'd decided it was about time I made an honest woman of her. Lacey was recovering from her ordeal, but she still felt tired. I'd left her in bed, and Storm, his jeweler friend, and I, were on my porch where she couldn't overhear what we were talking about.

His friend seemed straightforward enough as he set out a multitude of clear containers, each with about twenty compartments containing a single ring each. Next, he pulled out a tray of sample gemstones.

"Alright, I'm intrigued," I told him. "How does this work?"

Resting his hand on top of the boxes of rings, he explained, "These are samples of the

rings I've designed. If you find something you like, great. If not, you tell me what you want, and I'll create a custom design."

"I suppose your rings are pretty expensive, right?" I asked. Truth be told I had no idea how much a custom-designed ring was supposed to be.

He dipped his head. "There are lots of nice rings out there. You can buy a mass produced ring from a jewelry store, but if you want your woman to wear a totally unique one-of-a-kind design, then you'll need to buy from a custom designer like myself. It's not cheap, but how does price compare to a lifetime of happiness?"

I grinned at him, "That might just be the best sales pitch I ever heard."

Storm snorted a laugh but didn't say anything.

His friend pointed out, "Practice makes perfect, and I've been doing this for a long time."

"Well, I want only the best for my woman. Let's have a look at what you've got."

After looking over his entire selection of bands, I found one that was elegant and the setting for the stone was good and strong. I held it out to him, "Okay, here's what I want you to do, I want a round three-carat diamond, but I want you to make this mount look like the bottom of a light bulb."

The jeweler's face lit up. "You must be an electrician."

"I'm a master electrician but my woman's family owns Livingstone Electrical. She loves running her family business and since that's what we plan to do with the rest of our lives I think she'd really love to have a ring that reflects her professional passion."

Storm spoke up, “Are you sure about this, Rebel? Don’t you think leaving your profession out of it might be more romantic.”

Shooting my club president a quick glance, I shook my head. “Trust me on this. It may seem crazy, but this represents us as a couple more fully than any other symbol I can think of.”

“I could design matching wedding bands that look like a cord,” the jeweler offered.

“Hold that thought,” I said. I went to my kitchen and pawed through my junk drawer, coming back with a three-inch section of broken extension cord to show to him. “See how this is flat with a line running down the middle? Can you just make basic bands that look like this in yellow gold. All her jewelry is yellow gold, so I’m pretty sure she’d want her rings to match.”

“Yeah, of course I can do that. If you don’t mind me saying so, I think it will be amazing, and you have the satisfaction of knowing no other woman in the world will own anything similar.”

“Would anyone want anything similar?” Storm muttered.

I fixed my club president with a glare, “That’s what I want. Write me an estimate on the three piece set and tell me how long it will take for you to complete the work.”

“No problem, brother,” he responded happily. I watched with interest as he packed up his gear and pulled out a notepad. After scribbling for a few minutes, he tore off a sheet of paper and handed it to me.

After staring at it for probably longer than I should have, I glanced up at him, shocked. “Are you sure this is the right price?”

His expression blanked out. “Yes. I thought you understood it’s custom work.”

Still in disbelief, I asked, “So you’re gonna make me three custom rings for under twenty grand?”

He nodded. “This is my full time job. Trust me to get the work done on time.”

“So how long will it take?” I asked.

He gave a shrug, “I’ve got a few jobs on right now. For something like this I don’t wanna rush unless I have to. Would three months work for you?”

“Goddamn it yes! Let me grab my checkbook before you change your mind,”

Relief flooded his face, but he spoke up quickly. “Nobody uses checks anymore, Rebel. I’ve got a card reader.”

I reached for my wallet, trying to stop acting so surprised and held it out to him. This was the most important gift I would likely ever give Lacey. And this man was going to make it happen for just over fifteen grand. I signed off on the work order and we said our goodbyes.

The second he walked out the door, Storm asked, “Do you mind if I ask what the fuck that was about?”

I couldn’t keep the smile off my face for anything. “That was me getting the fucking deal of a lifetime on the ring my old lady is gonna wear for the rest of her natural life.”

Storm shook his head like I was a crazy person. “How much did you think a custom ring was gonna cost you?”

“I dunno, a hundred thousand dollars? I was half expecting to tell him I couldn’t afford it. I mean gold is expensive, right?”

“Yeah, gold’s expensive, but it’s the time and his level of skill that costs so much.”

I assured him, “I’ve seen the quality of work he does on the fingers of a lot of the club’s old ladies, so I’m sure it’s gonna be great.”

“I’m glad you’re happy. You might want to save the rest of your cash for a fancy wedding. Once that’s out of the way, you’ll both be set. You can settle down and live the American dream together.”

“Oh, I plan to, Prez.”

Glancing around my place, he added, “Don’t be surprised if she decides she wants a big house.”

“Not my ladybug. She loves my container home. Says it’s trendy, modern, and cool.”

Storm just smiled at me. “You are the luckiest fucker on planet earth, and you don’t even know it.”

“The hell I don’t,” I told him. “Right now there is only one thing standing between me and marrying the woman of my dreams.”

Storm teased, “Let me guess. It’s the three months you’ve got to wait on that ring to come back, right?”

“There’s two things, one is waiting for the ring to be made, but the other is beating information out of the asshole who abducted her.”

Storm looked almost guilty when spoke, “Celt had a go at him and got new intel.”

“Don’t leave me hanging, Prez. What did that cousin of yours find out?”

“It didn’t take much to get the asshole to admit that he was the one who broke into Livingstone Electrical.”

I shot him a disgusted look. “I figured as much. What I really wanted to know was why. What did he hope to gain by breaking into the family business?”

“Edwards admitted to wanting to find something incriminating to blackmail her with.”

My mouth fell open. “He thought my Lacey was cookin’ the books? That’s crazy talk. He doesn’t know Lacey at all to think she’d be stealing from her own parents.”

Storm explained, “He wasn’t focused on any particular kind of wrongdoing, he just wanted to find something embarrassing to manipulate her with.”

“Of course, my Lacey was squeaky clean. That’s why it took him time to work up the nerve to abduct her, right?”

“It looks that way, Hacker managed to check his van’s GPS, and it looks like he made quite a few trips from LA to here over the past few weeks.”

“So he was stalking her? I am going to beat the fuckin’ stuffing out of that dipshit.”

“That’s the thing. I think my cousin messed him up already. All he does it stare at nothing for hours now.”

“The fuck? It sounds like he might have some kind of head trauma.”

“We could drop him off at the ER or give him a dirt nap. Your choice,” Storm said with a shrug.

I ran one hand through my hair. “I’d like to say dirt nap, but my Lacey would say take him to the ER.”

Storm grumbled, “Yeah, women are softhearted that way. What we need to ask ourselves is how likely it’ll be for him to talk to the cops, or even come after her again.”

A soft feminine voice drifted from behind us, “Just drop him off at the ER. You know I don’t approve of killing.” Storm and I both whirled around to see Lacey standing at the door. I wondered how long she’d been there for, and I hoped she hadn’t heard me talking with the jeweler.

I tried to cover my surprise by walking over and putting my arm around her. “That’s just what I was gonna say. We’ll drop him at the hospital and let the doctors there figure out what’s wrong with him.”

Lacey looked thoughtful for a moment, “What about the police, would he tell them you’ve been holding him?”

“He might, but if he knows what’s good for him, he’ll shut the fuck up. We have the tapes of him abducting you from the office, Hacker’s also got a bunch of sick shit from his laptop. If we hand that over then he’s going behind bars for a long time,” I said.

If I had my way, he’d be locked up and the key thrown away. Letting him off didn’t sit right with me, but maybe after Celt’s workover he’d see the error of his ways.

Storm added, “Whatever. We can always give him a dirt nap another day if we decide

to go in that direction.”

I gave him the shut up look, because Lacey didn’t need to know that.

“Or we could just forget about him,” she shot back. Gesturing with one hand, her expression turned hopeful. “No one dislikes Edward more than me, and I kind of feel like he ended up with enough physical punishment for us to consider it even.”

“Fine,” Storm said. His voice was disgruntled enough to make it clear he didn’t approve of calling it even.

I tightened my hold around Lacey and told him, “You know this is our own fault for hooking up with decent women. They’re gonna keep us on the right side of the law and make moral upstanding men of us.”

Storm’s eyes narrowed on me. “Speak for your damn self. I’m so fucking filled with morality I can hardly walk.”

Lacey’s light amused voice spoke up. “Why don’t you two make yourself comfortable on the porch and I’ll make you a nice Irish coffee to take the chill off.”

Suddenly, Storm was over his bloodlust. “A shot of Irish whiskey would be nice about now. Celt’s gonna be sorry he missed it.”

“You should call him to come over. I’ll make enough for everyone.”

I glanced at her. “Are you sure you’re up to it, ladybug?”

She nodded, “Heck yeah, I can’t lay around in bed all the time. It’s been days and I feel like I need to do something productive.”

“There’s no need to rush back to work. Harvey’s wife is holding down the office for us and Richie is proving to be a quick learner.”

“I’m glad. It’s nice to have a few days to ourselves after what happened.” She pulled out from under my arm and said, “Stay outside with Storm and I’ll get started on those drinks.”

“If you’re sure,” I said reluctantly.

She headed for the kitchen, “I’m fine. Go, socialize with Storm and whoever else you two can dig up.”

It was the perfect day to be outside. There was a slight chill in the air and a cool breeze moving around the fall leaves. I grabbed the rocking chair beside Storm before glancing over at him. “You’re right. I am the luckiest bastard in the whole world. And so are you.”

Seeing the happiness in his expression was enough for me to let go of any ideas I was harboring about circling back around to Edward. I had a good life, as did the brothers in my club. I’d kill a man if I had to, but putting Storm and my club brothers in jeopardy just to get revenge didn’t sit right with me. I’d rather be vigilant, stand guard over my woman and make damn sure he never got another chance to grab her. Truth be told, I think after my club is finished dealing with him, he’ll lose interest in getting his hands on Lacey. Knowing he’d get beaten senseless for trying was huge disincentive. However, in the interest of doing what Lacey asked and keeping my club brother out of trouble, I was willing to let sleeping dogs lie.

I’d spent my life overthinking things, trying to find problems and solutions, worrying about what people thought of me, or whether I was good enough. The weeks I’d spent with Lacey had taught me to cherish the moment—seeing what her parents were going through had brought that home. You never knew what the future would bring,

and you needed to enjoy every second of life. So right now, instead of fretting about that asshole Edwards, I was gonna enjoy looking forward to the life I was building with my woman, and nothing and no one was gonna get in the way. I thought that love was something that happened to others, but finding myself hook, line, and sinker, head over heels in love with Lacey, it was like a hole I didn't know I had inside me had been filled. I was finally complete.

Lacey

Four Months Later

My parents invited everyone to our family's lodge in the mountains. Even though it was winter, and all the leaves had fallen from the trees, it wasn't too cold for the kids to play outside. I stood by the lodge with a huge cup of hot cocoa in my hand and gazed out at the multitude of friends and family roaming around our property. Most of the older folks, like my parents, aunts, and uncles, along with Rebel's grandmother were bundled up in rockers, with warm drinks of their own just taking in the sights.

There was a fresh pine scent on the wind from the trees that covered our property.

Richie had been welcomed back into the family and had carved out his niche as the giver of rides in our three-wheeler. The kids kept fighting over whose turn it was to ride next. His shame-faced stepfather was nowhere to be found, and he most certainly wasn't missed. Richie and Eric were doing their best to track down leads on his sister's whereabouts—they still hadn't found anything concrete, but no death certificates had turned up with her name or date of birth on them, so they were sure that she was still alive somewhere. I prayed that wherever Debbie was, she was safe and happy going into the holiday season.

My mom had even invited all of Rebel's club brothers. About a dozen came out to meet our family and enjoy a weekend in the great outdoors. They'd planned on hunting excursions with my uncles and older cousins. This property was on prime hunting territory. It had been in our family for several generations and was currently locked in a trust. The trustees were my father and his siblings. It would pass on to me

and my cousins at some point. We'd do our best to keep the property up and in use.

A pair of warm hands slipped around me and a big hand slid into my coat pocket. I knew what Rebel was after. It was the sonogram printout in my pocket. It turned out my implant hadn't failed, but after talking to Rebel we decided that we wanted to try for a child, so I got my doctor to remove it. We must have hit the jackpot, because six weeks later I was pregnant, I'd just had my twelve week scan, and everything was looking good.

"You sure you want to announce it to everyone today, ladybug?" he said.

Glancing at him over my shoulder, I nodded. "Yeah, it's the perfect time. Everyone is here, including your gran. No one else has news they want to announce, so we wouldn't be stealing anyone's moment. Now's the time, babe."

"Alright. If that's what you want, that's what we'll do."

He took my cup and set it down on the banister. Then he took my hand and led me down to the center of the porch where our family and friends were sitting. He brought his hands up to his mouth and whistled so loudly that I wanted to cover my ears.

"Gather around everyone. Lacey and I have news to share."

However, instead of holding up the sonogram like we'd planned, he dropped down onto his knees and pulled a ring box out of his cut. I froze in place because this was not part of our plan for the day. Rebel had gone off-script in the most unexpected manner possible.

When he opened the black velvet box, my breath caught in my throat.

"Lacey Livingstone, I had this ring made especially for you in order to increase the probability of you saying yes to becoming my wife." When I didn't immediately

respond, he added, “Don’t pretend like you don’t like the ring, because I can tell by your expression that you do. Just so you know, the ring and me are a package deal. You can’t have one without the other.”

Everyone around us burst out laughing and so did I. Leave it to Rebel to come up with an absolutely gorgeous ring design and a humorous proposal, specially crafted to make me laugh.

“I wasn’t expecting a proposal today but since you went through all the trouble to make a perfect one and I’m head over heels in love with you, I’m gonna have to say yes.”

He removed the ring from the box and slid it onto my finger. I just shook my head, staring down at it. “This is the most adorable engagement ring I’ve ever seen,” I gushed.

Rebel was all smiles, “I knew you would love it. Do I need to take a vote on whether I’ve earned a kiss for all my hard work?”

Everyone started shouting for me to kiss him, so I did and everyone cheered. Rebel raised his hand into the air. “Hold up. Don’t nobody go nowhere. We’ve got one more announcement to make.”

I glanced at my parents and my mom’s hopeful expression told me she was hoping this announcement involved a baby. She slid her hand into Rebel’s grandmother’s. The older woman looked her fondly and gave her hand a squeeze in response.

Rebel didn’t disappoint. He held the sonogram picture and announced, “We’re expecting a baby ladybug.”

I chimed in, “Or a baby biker. We won’t know for sure for a few more weeks.”

Rebel kissed me long and hard before being pulled away by his club brothers. He pretended to fight them every step of the way to get back to me. Again, it was amusing and added fun to the occasion.

When I turned around to face my mom and his grandmother, they were all smiles. I rushed over and knelt in front of his grandmother to show her and my mom my ring. Suddenly, there was Zoe and Alison on my other side.

My mother commented, "It's a little lightbulb. The perfect ring for a master electrician's wife."

"Yeah, I love it."

Zoe grinned at me, clearly surprised by the unique design. "Storm said it was amazing, and he was right."

Even Rebel's gran had to admit, "My grandson did good by you, Lacey."

Alison stared down at it for a second. "That's the cutest thing I've ever seen."

After everyone had finished admiring my ring, my mom, Zoe, Alison, and a couple of my aunts, crowded around me asking questions about how far along my pregnancy was and how long I'd been with Rebel, and pelted me with questions about his club. I immediately got swarmed by my female cousins asking questions about some of the single brothers. If I was being honest, it was starting to get overwhelming.

That's when Rebel swooped in, scooped me up in his arms and walked off with me. I snuggled my face into his neck as he took me down to the pier. There was a boathouse I barely remembered, and several of his club brothers were milling about outside. They moved further away when he carried me into the wooden building, like they were standing guard.

When we made it inside, I realized why. Rebel had created a little place for us to rest. It was a mattress on a frame with loads of warm blankets and a little heater.

“This is really romantic, babe. Did you think up this all on your own?”

He glanced up at me with an amused expression on his face. “Of course. You act like I don’t know how to treat a woman.”

I grabbed his hands and gave them a little squeeze. “It’s not that. It’s just that the ring was so spot on and this little getaway you’ve made for us is so thoughtful and well planned. It’s even color coordinated. Zoe mentioned they have an event planner they work with, and I thought you may have availed yourself of her services.”

His eyebrows flew up. “Nope, I damn sure did not. This is all one hundred percent me, ladybug. If I’d known about this event planner, you can bet your sweet ass I would have used her though, because I worried myself stupid trying make everything perfect for you.”

I reached up and cupped his face in my hands then pulled him down for a kiss. “Like your gran said, you did real good for me today.”

Looking down into my eyes, he asked, “You aren’t teasing me, are you?”

“Nope. You gave me your love, put a baby in me, picked out the perfect ring, and created the perfect cozy nest for us on a cold day. What more could a woman ask for?”

He gave me an indulgent smile before saying the last thing I expected. “I thought you might want some orgasms. That’s why I posted some club brothers around to keep your family away.”

Giving him another lingering kiss, I said, “Well done, babe. Getting a little one-on-

one time with you would be the perfect ending to a perfect day. But don't you think they're gonna miss us?"

"Listen," Rebel said.

I did and I could hear music.

"The band's started up so I reckon we have at least an hour where everyone's gonna be distracted, so I thought it was the perfect time to distract my woman," he said with a wicked glint in his eye.

He laid down on the bed, pulling me on top of him. I went eagerly, loving every minute of being with him. We kissed, cuddled, and talked about our day for a while. As the sun set, we ended up shedding our clothing and quickly warding off the chill by crawling under all the blankets he piled high for us.

Just being snuggled up together felt like coming home. Rebel had gone from being the grumpy guy who knew exactly how to get on my last nerve to the warm, fun-loving guy who knew how to make me feel not only seen but loved, secure and cherished.

When his hand splayed over my stomach protectively, my heart melted for him.

I ran one hand down his naked chest, pausing to feel each bulging muscle. "You're way more involved in this pregnancy than I thought you'd be."

"Why shouldn't I be? I've waited a long time to find the love of my life. I'd be a fool to miss out on all the best parts of becoming a husband and father. I don't think being married or having kids is ever gonna get old."

"Maybe once you get a kid or two, having a wife won't be such a big deal."

He literally groaned. “If you knew how much I craved the taste of you on my tongue, you’d never worry about me losing interest in you. It’s like the more I touch you and taste you, the more addicted I become.”

“That’s a weird animalistic thing to say.”

“Yeah, but it’s a little hot too, right?” Something in the tone of his voice seemed unsure.

“Yeah, babe. It’s totally hot,” I told him, before I bent down and gave him a long, hot, open-mouthed kiss. We got lost tangling tongues and his arms came up around me, holding me close. When I was just about to pull back and let him breathe, he tangled one hand in my hair and held me in place for another round of kissing. Something about that tiny bit of control he wielded so well set me on fire for him.

When his hand moved down to fondle my breasts, I sucked in a breath as my nipples responded to his touch. Arousal pooled hot and heavy in my stomach, making my need for him expand into an inferno. Soon he was shoving me upwards so he could kiss his way down my body and sucking on my nipples as his hands moved down, so his fingers could explore my slit. It took him no time at all to go from having his mouth on my breasts to moving me up to his face so he could run his tongue over my clit. Sitting there with one knee on either side of his head while wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me, caused me to rub myself more firmly against his face. Being on top was one of my favorite positions.

Soon his fingers were inside of me, diligently searching out my g-spot. Once he found it, it was game over. He pushed me into one orgasm after another until I nearly collapsed on top of him. I made him stop by moving my hips down his torso to cover his thick cock with my still trembling pussy.

“Damn, I love the way your pussy clings to my cock. It makes me want to be inside you before you’re ready.”

“I’m ready,” I pleaded. “I’m ready right now. Want you inside me.”

He rolled us over and forced himself inside in one long slow stroke. I could still feel my core clenching around him. “God, you always totally wreck me in the best way.”

“You’re a good woman who deserves only the best cock.”

I chuffed out a laugh. “How do you always manage to compliment yourself right along with me? If you had a super skill, it would be that.”

Pulling out, he plunged back in. “I always thought making your pretty pussy come around my thick cock was my super skill.”

“There,” I said breathlessly. “You did it again.”

“Yeah? Well, I plan to do a lot of things that might be classed as a super skill with you.”

He set up a dizzying pace that made it hard to carry on a conversation. “Like what kind of things?”

He made a strong thrust, twisting his hips, which caused his cock to slide against my clit.

That’s when the next orgasm hit, hard and fast. My body went momentarily rigid, and I clamped down harder on him than ever before. He didn’t stop though. He kept leisurely rocking his hips until I came all over his cock a second time. Then he thrust deep a few times, coming deep inside me.

He whispered in my ear, “It’s moments like this that make me believe there really is a happily ever after for a man like me.” Moving a strand of hair out of my face, he tilted my head up to look into my eyes. “You and me are forever. I’m gonna be so

good to you that you never want to be anywhere but right by my side.”

When he leaned down pressing his forehead to mine, I whispered, “You can consider that mission accomplished, babe.”

It felt like it was such an honor to be his happily ever after, because he was mine for sure. I didn’t want the love flowing back and forth between us to ever stop. I just wanted peace and quiet and lots of little ladybugs and bikers filling our home and hearts for all the days of our lives.

THE END

Hope you enjoyed the book!

The next book in the Dark Slayers MC series is Havoc