



Shadow (Ghost Born MC)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Hes been mine since the moment I laid eyes on him inside those prison walls

Malik

Ive always been an uncontrollable wild card. My temper is quick, and my fists are even quicker. Which is how I landed myself behind bars.

I did my best to survive inside, but trouble has a way of finding me.

Realistically, I knew I should have spent more time inside for all the trouble I got caught up in while behind that razor wire fence, but I got out on time as planned.

But my freedom came at a cost.

Rurik Tarasov is a powerful man with deep pockets and an obsession with me. Hes made it clear he owns me, and hell keep me by any means necessary.

Hes good at toying with me, but Im even better at deflecting him.

Until I make one wrong move.

Now, all the cards are in Ruriks hands, and GAME OVER is flashing through my brain.

~*~*~

Rurik

My obsession with him knows no bounds. Hes mine. Ive been patient. Bided my time.

But now, time is up, and Im tired of waiting.

Spending the next few weeks alone with him is just step one in my end game.

Bringing him to heel so he obeys me and only me is step two.

I always get what I want. Malik might think he can escape me, but

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PROLOGUE

Malik

For as long as I could remember, I'd always been a problem child. Couldn't remember a day in my life when someone wasn't punishing me for something. And it wasn't that I didn't have a good home life. Mom always took damn good care of me, paid all the bills, put food on the table, and gave me all the love and attention I needed and wanted. I just, for some reason, always had this burning rage inside of me that I couldn't control— especially when I got uncomfortable. And I got uncomfortable a lot .

Mom tried anger management classes, but when I got sick of the mother fucker asking me questions, trying to get to the root cause of my rage, I ended up tearing his office apart. No rhyme or reason as to why. Just didn't like him prying, and I lost my shit.

In middle school, I ended up in what they called “alternative school”, which was where troublesome kids like me ended up when the school system didn't want to expel kids, but they couldn't keep them in regular classes with the “good” kids because we were too disruptive.

And despite the alternative school having teachers with military, police, etc. backgrounds, it didn't stop me from still always getting in fights, always arguing with authority, and somehow always finding trouble.

Some people said I was ungrateful. That I didn't give a damn about my mom. But

they were wrong. I loved my mom to pieces, and she was the one and only person in the entire fucked-up world that I respected. I bit my tongue with her. I said “yes, ma’am”, “no, ma’am”, “please”, “thank you”, and “you’re welcome” around my mom.

It was just the rest of the world that made me feel like a ticking time bomb.

At eighteen, knowing I was headed down a dark path and not wanting to break her heart by winding up dead or in prison, I asked Mom to take me to see a Marine Corps. recruiter. I’d done my research. They were the easiest branch to get into. I swore, my mom had tears in her eyes when I brought it up at dinner. She thought the military would save me. Would keep me out of prison as an adult. Or out of a casket.

And when I went four years without getting kicked out, without going to jail, without being hit with an Article 15, I thought maybe I could be in society as a normal adult. Hold a normal, steady job. Stay out of trouble. Sure, I got into it with my commanding officers quite a bit, but I mostly shut my mouth and listened.

I was a fool for ever thinking I could be a civilian and not land my ass in jail.

Two days was all it took for me to fuck my life up. For my straight and narrow path to bend and create a fork in the road. And of course, I went down the wrong fucking lane.

Mom had to work that night. She got called in to cover a shift in the emergency room at the local hospital. I got bored at home, so I went out for a couple of drinks, thinking maybe I could get a piece of ass while I was out. I was flirting with some random girl in a tight little black dress with ivory skin and vibrant red hair when her fucking ex-boyfriend popped up, running his mouth and trying to drag her out of there.

I busted a beer bottle over his head, then bashed his face into the bar top. And then, because she was crying and cradling her wrist, which was clearly broken by then, I beat his face in with my fists. Cops showed up. I got arrested and charged with drunk and disorderly, public disturbance, and battery. Only reason I didn't get hit with assault is because that girl—Shannon—showed up at my hearing as a witness. Her story, along with proof, got the charges reduced.

A year later, I was on the outside again, and I wasn't the same man that'd gone in. I ran my mouth a lot, and most mother fuckers in there liked to run their mouths, too. I was a big guy with bulked-up muscles. I was built like a fuckin' tank, really. So when they popped off at me, I popped right back.

With words and fists.

It was a miracle I got out on my one-year mark like I was supposed to. Parole would be a bitch for the next several years, but I'd deal. I just had to keep my ass out of jail, and I could manage the rest.

Hopefully.

“You.”

I looked up from the ground, frowning at the two men in front of me. They were standing by two gleaming Harleys with leather cuts on their shoulders that named them Trick and Satan. Trick was apparently the secretary of whatever club they were with, and Satan was the Sergeant at Arms. Didn't know what either of them wanted with me, and I wasn't sticking around to find out.

Motorcycle gangs were the perfect way to land my ass right back inside lock up. No fucking thank you.

Turning on my heel, I began walking in the opposite direction. “Malik,” I paused, my muscles bunching at the use of my name, “I know you heard me.”

Gritting my teeth, I turned back to face them. Something in my gut told me I wasn’t getting out of this conversation. “The fuck you want?” I demanded.

“For you to come with us,” Trick said. He had a sort of baby-faced look about him with olive skin and dark brown eyes. His hair flopped over onto his forehead. He was clearly of some kind of Asian descent, and he was only about half my size.

“You can fuck off,” I told him.

“You walk away again,” Satan warned when I turned to do just that, his voice cold enough to freeze hell, “and we’ll take you by force.”

The muscle in my jaw ticked, and tension rode my shoulders hard. I eyed Satan, taking in his paler skin, the curls on his head, and the shadow of a beard on his jaw. He was even slimmer than Trick, but there was something about him that warned me not to let his size fool me. There was a darkness beneath his impassive mask. Something cold and heartless.

He had the gaze of a predator.

“What do you want?” I snapped. “I don’t have time for bullshit and games.”

“You made quite the name for yourself in there,” Trick said, jerking his head toward the looming fortress behind me that’d kept me captive for three hundred and sixty-five days. “We’re offering you a chance to prospect with our club. You’ll have a home. A job. Steady income. And we’ll help keep your reckless ass out of trouble.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes. “I’m just supposed to trust the word of two strangers

sitting out here waiting for me like fucking creeps?”

Satan shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest. “We’ve got people who have interests in our club that want to see you part of it. We’re giving you an option?”

“The illusion of an option,” I corrected, making him scowl at being interrupted. “If you’ve got people who want to see me part of your bike riding shindig, I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

“Bike riding shindig,” Trick snorted.

“Not really, no,” Satan answered, ignoring the man at his side. “You come with us now, or they’ll show up in a few days and force you. I promise you don’t want them forcing you.”

I gritted my teeth, looking around the lot. Suddenly, the inside of that fence topped with barbed wire seemed like a better option. Joining any kind of organization—like a motorcycle club—was a lifetime deal. Take that oath and the only way out was death.

“What’s it going to be?” Trick asked, arching a brow at me.

I had no fucking choice. Satan was right, I didn’t want anyone forcing me. I had no idea whose attention I’d snagged while I was inside, but I wasn’t keen on finding out the hard way. Most people inside had been affiliated with some organization or another. Guessed it was better whoever was tracking me wanted me on their side rather than wanted to eliminate me... at least, not yet.

Silver linings and all that bullshit.

Because if I got out of prison just to find myself in a casket, my mother would bring

me back from the dead just to kill me again herself. No fucking thank you.

“I’ll be there tomorrow morning,” I bit out.

“You don’t even know where you’re going,” Trick called after me as I began to walk off.

I scoffed. Did he think I was a fucking idiot or something?

“I’m sure it won’t be hard to find you.”

I had a feeling I was trading one prison for another type of prison, but I didn’t have much choice in the matter. I lived in a city full of criminals, most of whom answered to people with deep pockets and fingers dug into many pies.

I’d keep my cool for now and follow their lead. But eventually, I’d make sure they knew there was no bringing me to heel.

I was Malik fucking Carter. I bowed down to no one .

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Malik

TWO YEARS LATER

I peered one eye open when someone loomed over me, blocking the sunlight from beating down on my face. It was cold outside, but the cooler temperature combined with the sunlight felt damn good, and I was trying to enjoy it.

Couldn't when some fucker was standing over me, though.

"What?" I snapped at Chet, also known as Trick. He knew I hated being disturbed when I was trying to get some alone time. Wasn't much of that in a club though. Sure, I had a brotherhood to belong to now. And part of me would always be grateful that Chet and William, also known as Satan, had forced my hand, even if they were doing it under the orders of someone else.

That someone else being Rurik fucking Tarasov—the goddamn bane of my existence.

The Ghost Born MC had kept me out of trouble with the law. Sure, I still had a quick mouth and even quicker fists, but they had pull within law enforcement, and the Russians we were all tied up with had even more pull than we did.

If they didn't, there was no doubt in my mind I'd be rotting in a prison cell for the rest of my life.

The man whose radar I'd been on while inside? Yeah, that was Rurik—the Bratva's consigliere. I had no clue what his fascination with me was, but he was doing his damnest to sink his claws deep into me. And I was fighting like hell every step of the way.

“Rurik is on his way here. We've got a problem.”

I scowled. A problem. Fucking hell. Rurik Tarasov alone was a goddamn problem in my book. Sure, the rest of the guys got along with him. I mean, we all had to considering the Ghost Born MC and the Russian Bratva were so tightly tied together due to the Mother Charter's president's marriage to Amaliya, the Pakhan's daughter.

But Rurik and I? We mixed about as well as oil and water did. He was the silent type. Was able to command an entire room with one fucking arch of his eyebrow. And he didn't rise to anything . Like he thought he was better than all of us.

And fuck if that didn't rub me the wrong way. Didn't matter how much I snapped at the asshole, how much I got in his face. Didn't matter what I did.

He just seemed to find me... amusing. And he was always so calm . So unbothered.

“Goddammit,” I growled, leaning forward. Reaching into my hoodie pocket, I pulled out my cigarettes and lighter. Chet's lips twitched in amusement. Chet didn't take much seriously. Everything in life was a game to him, and my intense dislike for Rurik was a major source of comedic relief for the asshole.

Rurik was the reason I'd been pulled into the Ghost Born family. I'd beat the absolute dog shit out of one of his soldiers when he'd been inside to get intel, and that put me on his radar. Come to find out, Rurik was also the reason nothing more ever got added to my sentence for all the shit I stirred up inside those walls. All the fights. The disobedience toward the guards.

He'd been the key to getting and keeping my freedom, and it just made me hate him even more.

Lifting a cigarette to my lips, I lit it and deeply inhaled. Chet dropped down into the chair beside me and slouched, his legs spreading—the perfect image of relaxation. That'd been me before I realized Rurik was on his way here.

“What's your deal with Rurik anyway?” Chet asked.

“Besides the fact that he's a pretentious, rich asshole that thinks he's better than everyone else?” I flicked my ashes onto the ground. “He's got a silent way of taunting me.”

Chet snorted, and without even looking at him, I knew he was rolling his eyes. “Brother, you lose your shit over the littlest things,” Chet reminded me. “Maybe you're just overreacting.”

“Oh, fuck you,” I growled, pushing to my feet. Chet's snickers followed me as I stormed off toward the garage. We were technically off today, but knowing Rurik was on his way had me sitting on a knife's edge. I needed something to do. Something to focus on.

Using my keys, I unlocked the office door, then stepped inside. After unlocking the door between the office and the bays, I stepped in and pulled up the garage door that opened up the bay where the car I'd been working on was, letting in the cool, fresh air to hopefully chase away some of the cloying scent of gasoline and oil. I didn't mind it, but I also wasn't trying to die from the fumes.

My mom would bring me back from the dead just to kill me again for dying from something so preventable.

Holding my cigarette between my lips, I popped the hood on the old Corolla and set to work on replacing the water pump, pulley, and belt. I didn't know how much time passed, but apparently, enough did that the sound of tires over gravel finally reached my ears. I ignored it, knowing one of the guys would deal with Rurik.

Because I had no doubt it was him.

Car doors shut, and then, silence rang again. I focused back on the task at hand. Maybe they wouldn't need me inside for anything, and Rurik could go in there, tell Hiram, our president, what was going on, and then be on his fucking way without us having to cross paths.

"You should be inside."

Every muscle in my body tensed at his voice. Grunting, I set my wrench aside, then turned and snagged my pack of cigarettes off the work table behind me. I lifted one to my lips, and just as I was about to grab my lighter, Rurik was suddenly there, holding his torch up to my cigarette. I narrowed my eyes at him as I inhaled, letting him light it.

Rurik was about half a foot shorter than me with a much slimmer build. Ink covered every bit of exposed skin I could see, apart from his face. With a strong jawline, narrow nose, and dark hair that flopped over onto his forehead, he could easily be a model. Instead, he'd chosen to become an underboss, second-in-command to the Pakhan. Didn't make sense to me, but what the fuck did I know.

"What do you want?" I asked, turning back to the car. I could feel his eyes on me, and it had tension thrumming through my muscles. "Surely, you can just tell Sicle what the fuck is going on and be on your way back to Washington."

Sicle was Hiram's road name. His name had something to do with his little sister,

Francesca, who was married to Arlo, the mother charter's road captain. She called Hiram Pickle, for some reason I didn't understand. And somehow, Sicle had come out of that.

"No, I can't do that," Rurik told me. "I need you at that table, Malik, so let's go." Reaching forward, he gripped my arm, attempting to turn me away from the car. I yanked my arm out of his grip, baring my teeth at him. I snatched my cigarette from my lips, and my upper lip curled into a sneer.

"Keep your fucking hands off of me."

Rurik evenly met my gaze, not the least bit intimidated by my size or the rage pulsing through me like a separate, living being. "Chapel, Malik."

"Fuck you," I snarled. "I don't follow your goddamn orders, Rurik."

Before I could really even register what he was doing, he swung his leg out, knocking me in the back of my knees. I was barely aware of what was happening before I was on my knees in front of him. He knocked my ballcap off my head and wrapped his hand around my throat. My cigarette was long forgotten on the ground as I snarled at him, my body vibrating with the urge to knock his teeth down his mother fucking throat.

"You do starting today," he told me. I hated every bit of his demeanor. His breathing was steady, and his eyes were still calm as he stared down at me. Not a single bit of his clothing or hair was out of place. His suit was still impeccable, fitted to his slim form like it'd been specially tailored for him. Fuck, maybe it had been. He had more money than he'd ever spend in three lifetimes.

I tried yanking back from him, but he just reached forward with his other hand and gripped my shirt, yanking me closer. He leaned over me until our noses were mere

inches apart, his bright blue eyes staring into my dark ones. In that moment, he looked every bit of the man with all the power in the world.

And I fucking hated that it made me tremble the tiniest bit.

“I’ve played your little games long enough, Shadow,” he said, a silk-edged warning weaving through each word he spoke. A shiver raced down my spine. I didn’t miss that he’d used my club name. It was a name that’d been used numerous times since I’d joined the Ghost Born MC, but it was the first time Rurik had used it. And the way he used it was almost like a promise.

A promise that my life was in his hands. A cold, cruel reminder of who I actually belonged to. And it wasn’t this club.

Rurik had owned me from the moment he realized I existed.

“Now, we start playing my games.” Abruptly, he released me, and then, he stomped out my cigarette with his shiny, expensive shoes. I clenched my jaw but kept my mouth shut. “Get up and get inside that chapel.”

With that, he turned and walked off, adjusting his suit jacket as he did so.

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Rurik

Malik fucking Carter alone was a testament to the patience I held. He knew exactly what buttons to press to irritate me, but I held impeccable control. He would never see me snap. Never see me lash out.

Not at him, anyway.

Not at the man I had plans of making mine. And today was step one of that.

Hiram had gotten word of a neighboring club getting a bit pissy over territory. It happened, especially in this line of work. The Oregon charter of the Ghost Born MC was still a pretty fresh club. They'd only been around about a year, which meant this charter still had to make a name for itself and establish dominance.

But Shaw, the president of the mother charter, was concerned the Oregon charter couldn't handle this properly without bringing on trouble. Not with Malik and his hotheadedness on board. Had it been up to Shaw and Hiram, Malik would've never been part of this club. He ran his mouth too much. Preferred to throw his fists instead of working things out civilly. And he had a problem with authority.

It was because of me he was here. After he'd damn near killed one of our soldiers who was inside those prison walls to gather intel for us, I'd kept a close eye on him. There wasn't a damn thing about Malik Carter I didn't know. I pulled strings to keep him from getting a longer sentence, and whether he realized it or not, it was because

of me he didn't end up with a severed artery at the hands of one of our men.

I made him untouchable.

When he got out, I knew I wanted him to be close to me, but I knew I couldn't bring him into the Bratva. Anatoly, the Pakhan and my best friend, would never allow what I wanted. The man trusted me, but it was everyone else he didn't trust, which I understood, especially after it'd come to our attention that one of our own men had been involved in the sex trafficking ring we'd worked to take down five years ago.

So, to keep Malik as close as possible, I'd had Anatoly talk to Shaw and Hiram about bringing Malik into the club. The day he'd been released, Chet and William had been sent to fetch him. Of course, he hadn't come immediately. He took his fucking time.

But that was fine because he still ended up exactly where I wanted him. Right under my damn nose where I could keep an eye on him.

Normally, I kept my distance from him. Malik, from what I knew, was straight. He'd never given any hint that he wasn't, and I wouldn't make a move on a straight man. But fuck , the way he'd so angrily bowed down to me in that garage had my blood pumping hotly in my veins and my cock thickening in my slacks.

He'd been furious . But he'd stayed on his knees, and he hadn't fought me.

I could bring him to heel. I'd never doubted that. And now, it was time for me to do so, and this whole situation worked right into my favor.

We had a conflict brewing, and Malik, if left to his own devices, could damn well tip us over into a war. And I couldn't have that. Shaw and Hiram wouldn't either. I'd gotten a phone call late last night from Anatoly telling me I would be in Oregon for the foreseeable future, and he was sending four of our soldiers with me.

And my orders were to keep Malik under tight control.

I couldn't fucking wait to watch him break under my control so I could rebuild him into the perfect machine.

My perfect machine.

"Rurik," Malik barked from behind me. I paused and slid my hands into the pockets of my slacks, but I didn't turn to face him. I knew it'd just piss him off more, and God, I loved it when he got angry with me. "Turn around and fucking face me."

I looked up at the sky, taking my sweet time in giving him what he wanted. The sun was beaming down, wispy white clouds lining the blue expanse. The weather was almost taunting his foul mood into worsening.

I heard him approach and braced myself for his closeness. When his massive fingers curled around my shoulder, my lips twitched with an aborted smirk. I allowed him to spin me to face him, and I tilted my head up a little to look into his handsome face.

"Your beard needs a trim," I noted, reaching up to run my fingers over the dark scruff. I was mostly trying to annoy him, but it wasn't a lie. His beard did need a trim. He usually kept it well-maintained.

Malik blinked, a frown pulling at his lips. Dropping my hand, I slid it back into my pocket again, my fingertips tingling from our contact. I so desperately wanted to feel more of his skin beneath my fingertips.

"You wanted something?" I prompted. "We need to get inside. I'm sure Hiram isn't in the business of waiting on others."

And there was that pretty scowl again. "I'm not in the business of someone putting

their fucking hands on me,” he retorted.

I arched a brow at him. “Touch me, and you’ll fail, Shadow,” I warned him, using his club name again as a warning. He knew I didn’t go anywhere without guards. And while my men were under strict orders to never touch him, Malik didn’t know that.

This man had more protection on him than probably the fucking United States president. He was practically untouchable.

He had no idea I’d start a war over him. I’d turn my back on my family, the Bratva, for him. He owned me just as much as I owned him, which was wholly.

“I fucking hate you,” Malik snarled at me.

I smirked, then turned on my heel, continuing my walk to the clubhouse. “Chapel, Malik.”

A deep growl sounded from his chest that had my entire body tingling with the need to put him on his knees again, but I continued walking.

In due time, I’d have him exactly where I wanted him. But first, I had to handle this bullshit so I could get Malik away from this clubhouse for a little while.

Malik

H yram looked up from the manila folder laid out open in front of him when Rurik and I stepped into the chapel. His lips flattened into a thin line, and he arched a single eyebrow at me, probably wondering what the fuck had taken me so long to get my ass in there, but I ignored him. Because that was what I always did. I respected H yram, don't get me wrong, but authority figures made my skin crawl.

Using my foot, I pulled my chair out from beneath the table, then dropped down onto the plush leather and crossed my arms over my chest. Nolan—club name Hutch—sighed and shook his head, but he didn't say anything either. He was the vice president of the club, and like H yram, I respected him. But again—the whole authority figures issue.

These guys had taken me in without batting an eye. Sure, their hands had been forced, but they'd brought me into the fold regardless. They could've treated me with nothing but animosity and hostility, but they hadn't. They'd done their best to make me feel at home and show me that I had a brotherhood here, no matter what circumstances had brought me to their doorstep or how much we all clashed heads.

With my fiery temper, we clashed heads a lot . I knew most of it was my fault. I was too defensive, too quick to run my mouth, and too quick to throw my weight around. But they gave back just as good as I gave, and I knew with certainty that once it was all over and we were bloodied and maybe a bit broken, we were all good. We helped each other up, dusted each other off, and went back to normal.

I was pretty sure Shaw sometimes felt like he'd done nothing more than throw a bunch of animals together and hoped they made a decent club. We were fucking barbarians.

“So...” Malachi drawled as he rocked back and forth in his chair, “why are we here?”

Malachi was the road captain. He and Nolan had served in the military together and knew Shaw and Konrad, the VP of the mother charter, from their time in the service. I swore Malachi had a few screws loose, but he was a fun guy to be around. The shit that came out of his mouth sometimes made even my hard exterior crack. And I didn't even think the guy was trying to be funny. I was pretty sure most of the time, he was being serious.

“We have a potential problem on the horizon,” Hiram announced. He pushed the manila folder toward the center of the table. Chet leaned forward to grab it, and he frowned as he began flipping through it. William leaned in to look, too, and though his expression never changed, his muscles did tense, giving away how serious this could be.

Fucking great. Whatever was in that folder, it was the last fucking thing we needed.

“Looks like rival club bullshit,” Chet said as Malachi took the folder to look through it. He looked at Hiram. “The fuck does this mean for us?”

“They're claiming a territory dispute,” Rurik answered, drawing all of our eyes to him. “Intel we've gathered leads me to believe that while this may not be a problem just yet, it will become one. They're getting angrier and angrier that another club has moved into the area.”

“The area we operate in was unclaimed,” William said, sitting back in his chair again. He drummed his fingers on the table. “Shaw and Konrad made sure of that, and then

Anatoly double-checked.”

Anatoly was the Russian Pakhan, and his daughter was married to Shaw. Nothing happened in or around either of the Ghost Born MC charters without him knowing about it.

And suddenly, I understood why Rurik was here.

“You’re here to negotiate with them,” I said, looking at Rurik. Silence fell on the room, and everyone glanced between me and Rurik, but I didn’t remove my eyes from him.

Rurik nodded once, his eyes not leaving mine. “I am. We want to avoid a war. And if this is not handled carefully enough, a war will happen. Anatoly has sent me here to keep peace and to keep you on a leash.”

My jaw clenched so tightly, my molars ground together. Leaning forward, I braced my elbows on the table. “Fucking excuse me?” I snarled. “The fuck did you just say? I’m not a fucking dog , Rurik.”

His lips twitched with the beginnings of a smirk, and I swear to fuck, I saw red . I jerked up from my seat so fast, my chair flew backward, crashing to the floor. Hiram and Nolan both lurched to their feet, and Malachi gripped my arm. I tried shrugging him off, but he just tightened his grip.

“Stand down ,” Hiram growled. He pointed a stiff finger at me. “ Now , Malik. You’ll show Rurik the fucking respect he’s earned, you hear me?”

“Fuck you .”

“This is why I’m under orders to bring you to heel,” Rurik said, always the calm

mother fucker, as he rounded the table to come closer to me. I was vibrating with rage, but he simply came to a stop in front of me, toe-to-toe. He tilted his chin up to meet my gaze. “Your temper will send this club into trouble head first with no fucking plan. You’re a damn good man, Malik. But that temper of yours will get everyone in this room killed.” He jerked his head in the direction of the door. “You and I are done here. Go pack a bag. You’re hitting the road with me.”

“Like hell I am,” I growled. I wasn’t going anywhere with him.

His hand snapped up, and his tattooed fingers wrapped around my throat. Before I could even retaliate, he had me on my knees again, the back of my knees throbbing from the force of his kick to drop me. My upper lip curled, and I spat into his face. He calmly wiped it away with his free hand, seemingly unbothered.

Always so fucking calm . I hated it.

“Your obedience starts here, Malik,” he warned me. “And if you choose to continue being a pain in my ass... well, you’re deciding how difficult this will all be.” He abruptly released me, then adjusted the sleeves of his suit jacket. “Pack a bag and meet me out by the SUV. You have exactly five minutes starting...” he looked at his watch, “now.”

With that, he turned on his heel and left the chapel. I pushed myself to my feet and looked at Hiram. He sighed and scrubbed his hands down his face. “This is out of my hands, Malik,” he told me quietly. I gritted my teeth. “Shaw has given me the order as well, and he ranks above me.”

I had to physically bite my tongue to keep from lashing out at Hiram. Without a word, I stalked from the room and headed toward my apartment in the back of the clubhouse to pack a bag. I was backed into a corner.

Well, if they all wanted to treat me like a fucking dog, I'd show them what happened when a hit dog was cornered.

4

Rurik

Malik stalked out of that clubhouse looking like he wanted to murder me, and fuck if that didn't get my dick hard. I'd never made him come to heel in front of his club brothers before, but it had to happen today. He needed a reminder of who was in charge, and I also didn't have time to stand around and argue with him, even if I would've liked to just to watch him get all fired up and out of control.

Malik was a force to be reckoned with, and if I could teach him to control that rage, harness it, and use it properly, he'd be un-fucking-stoppable.

That was what I wanted to make him: a beautiful machine that only bowed to me .

And I always got what I wanted.

"Ready?" I asked as he neared me. He scowled, his lips twisting into a sneer. One of my men opened his door, and his scowl only deepened. But instead of arguing, no doubt wanting to tell Denis that he could open his own door, he just tossed his bag onto the floorboard and slid inside onto the plush leather seat.

Denis frowned. "Mr. Carter, I can take your bag?—"

"Touch my shit, and I'll break all ten of your fucking fingers," Malik growled.

Denis inclined his head respectfully. "Understood, sir."

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Malik muttered. Reaching out, he grabbed the door and slammed it shut, yanking the handle out of Denis’s hand.

I patted Denis’s shoulder as I walked around him to get in on the other side, where Abram was waiting to open my door for me. “He’s an acquired taste,” I told him quietly. “And he’s quite furious with me. I apologize for his behavior.”

Denis nodded. “It is no problem, Mr. Tarasov.”

It was a problem because my men had done nothing to Malik. They were only doing their jobs. I’d make it clear to Malik that treating my men with anything but respect would not be tolerated. Unless my men fucked up, they did not get yelled at or cussed at. Loyalty was earned, not given. It was a lesson Malik needed to learn—and quickly.

Abram inclined his head to me as he opened the back driver’s side door, and I slid inside. Once the door was shut, I turned to Malik. He was stewing, practically vibrating with rage.

“Malik,” I said calmly. When he didn’t turn to look at me, I drew in a deep, calming breath. He was surely working my nerves, but when it came to him, I had endless patience. If he was hoping I would snap and stoop to his level, he was sorely mistaken.

Reaching out, I gripped his jaw and dug my fingers into his cheek. He fought me for a second when I tried to turn his head, but finally, he gave in, narrowing his eyes at me once we were face-to-face.

“When I call your name, you give me your attention,” I warned him. If his lips weren’t puckered from me squeezing his cheeks, I just knew that top lip of his would be curled up into a look of disgust. “The next time you treat my men with disrespect

when they've done nothing to earn it, I'll lay you out on your back, do you understand me? And not in the fun, kinky way."

"Fuck you and your men," he snarled when I released his jaw.

I arched a brow at him. "I suggest you get over yourself, Malik. You're stuck with me for the foreseeable future, which means you're stuck with my men, too. Learning to get along with us will make our time together go by much smoother. But if you want to be difficult..." I let the threat hang in the air.

"This won't last that long," Malik snapped. "You'll be lucky if I stick around for a day."

I smirked, highly amused. "You really think you can escape me, Shadow?" I leaned in close to him. When he tried to press himself closer to the door in an effort to create distance between us, I gripped the front of his shirt and twisted it in my fist, bringing him so close, our noses brushed. "I will chase you to the ends of the fucking earth if you ever try to escape me. I own you."

"Nobody owns me," Malik snarled.

"Wrong," I breathed. "I'm the reason you're a free man. I'm the reason you stay out of prison. I'm the reason your parole officer never comes around to check on you." He clenched his jaw because he knew I was right. "Don't ever think you have the upper hand with me, Malik. Because if I truly wanted, it would only take one single phone call to tear your world to pieces."

With that, I let him go. He remained silent, his arms crossing over his chest. He stared out the window as we slowly eased off the gravel lot and onto the highway.

Malik didn't know I'd never do any of that. But his lack of knowledge of just how

much of a hold he had over me was what would keep him in line. And it was what would help me mold him into the unstoppable force I knew he could be.

He might hate me now, but before long, he'd be bowing down to me, murmuring, "Thank you," before I stuffed his throat with my cock and showed him the power in submitting only to me .

"You should call your mom," I told him once we'd been riding in silence for a while. The only person Malik never lashed out and truly, one-hundred percent respected was his mother. He loved her to pieces, and I knew he'd burn this whole world to the ground to protect her.

His love for her was one of his best qualities. When Malik loved someone, he loved deeply and wholly. He was never one foot in, one foot out. He might have been a man with an explosive temper that never let anyone close, but he loved just as fiercely.

I was hoping, one day, I'd be on the receiving end of that love, too.

"Why?" Malik grunted, still not looking at me.

"So she doesn't go to the clubhouse looking for you," I said. "You know she likes to do surprise pop-in visits." Just because Malik was an adult didn't mean his mother let up. Besides, I knew she also popped in to do his laundry and cook all the guys food. It made her feel like she was still needed in Malik's life, even if he and the guys were more than capable of taking care of themselves.

Malik sighed, but instead of arguing with me like I'd been prepared for him to do, he simply tugged his phone out of his pocket.

Good boy , I thought, turning away to give him the illusion of privacy.

One day, I'd be able to say those words out loud to him. But today wasn't that day. There was only so far I could push, and I knew Malik was damn near at his limit with me.

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5

Malik

Mom answered on the third ring. I was honestly surprised she answered at all, considering she was supposed to be at work. And I knew she was doing a rotation in the emergency room, which usually didn't leave her much downtime. When she worked ER shifts, I did my best not to bother her, but Rurik was right. I needed to let her know I was going out of town for the foreseeable future.

Fuck all knew I didn't need her calling to light a fire under my ass for neglecting to tell her I was doing a disappearing act for the club.

She was the one person in this world who could bring me to heel with a single, terrifying look. My mother had an incredible ability to put the fear of God into me.

"Do you need bail money?" she asked in lieu of a greeting.

I snorted, my lips twitching in amusement. "What?" I asked, laughter filling my voice. "No, Mom, I don't need bail money. Why would you think that?"

She sighed. "Because you never call me when I work the ER shift. Thought something was wrong. And jail is the first thing that came to mind."

I scratched at my beard. "So much faith in me," I teased. But honestly, I wasn't the least bit offended. It was a reasonable conclusion to come to.

“Oh, baby, I’ve got all the faith in the world in you. But I also know you, and I know that temper of yours.”

Growing up, I’d been intimately familiar with law enforcement officers. Because they had such a high respect for my mother, they usually just took me home and warned her to keep me under wraps. And damn, she did her best with me.

My behavior was not her fault. She’d tried therapy for me. Tried anger management courses. My mom did everything she knew to do. Eventually, she had to let me learn my own lessons. And I knew that wasn’t an easy decision for her because at the end of every day, all she wanted to do was protect me.

“We’ve got a... potential problem on the horizon,” I told her. She was the only person outside of the club permitted to know little details, apart from the Bratva. And the only reason she was granted that was because of Rurik. Despite him being a dick, he’d fought for my mother to sort of be in the know. They’d only met one time, but I knew Rurik respected her just as much as I did.

It was one of the only good qualities the son of a bitch had.

“And you have to leave town for it?” she asked. “Who’s with you?”

“Just Rurik,” I told her, my tone filled with bitterness. “He claims I’m a problem that’ll make this problem bigger.”

“Probably not wrong,” she said, siding with him. I grunted. I wouldn’t argue with her, and she knew it. No matter how much I hated that they both thought I’d do something to jeopardize my club family, I knew their fears weren’t unfounded. I was a hot-headed mother fucker, after all.

“The boys need anything at the clubhouse?” she asked me when I remained silent.

An exasperated sigh slipped from between my lips. “They can fend for themselves,” I told her. “Stop babying them, Mom.”

“I’ll do what I damn well want to do, Malik Quinn Carter.” I winced. I hated it when she used my full name like that. Rurik cut his eyes to me, no doubt able to hear her considering she’d raised her voice and used my middle name. “I’ll contact Hiram. Be good for Rurik, you hear me? I need to go. Do not give that man problems.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I muttered, even though she and I both knew I wouldn’t pay attention to her last order. “Love you, Ma.”

“I love you, too, baby. I’ll see you when you get back home. Be careful.”

“Always,” I promised.

She ended the call, her voice being cut off as she shouted at someone to tell them she was on her way and to hold their britches. I locked my phone and set it in my lap. I could feel Rurik’s eyes on the side of my face, but I ignored him. Wasn’t a damn thing I had to say to him.

“Everything good with your Mom?” he asked me.

“Yeah,” I muttered, leaving it at that.

He hummed but didn’t say another word. Turning away from me, he looked down at his phone. After a moment, he grunted and reached into the pocket behind the driver’s seat, pulling out a sleek, black laptop. He flipped it open, then went to his email. I knew he could sense I was watching, but he didn’t say a word or reprimand me for being nosy.

I could never figure him out. One moment, he was as chill as fucking ever, and the

next, he was forcing me to my knees and reminding me of my place.

I refused to even acknowledge the part where both sides of him made me hard as fuck. Nope. Never going there. Pansexual or not, Rurik was not my type. He would never be my type.

“He was your cell mate, wasn’t he?” Rurik asked out of the blue, dragging me out of my head. He turned his laptop around to face me, showing me a picture of a white guy with blonde curls, two teardrop tattoos beneath his eye, and a smirk tilting his lips. It was his mugshot, and yeah, he was definitely my cellmate. He was a decent guy. A bit out there, but decent.

“Yeah—Kaleen Jacobs,” I said. “Why?”

“He’s part of the club that’s not happy with the Ghost Born.” He turned his laptop back toward him. “I’ve got someone working on tracking him down. He got out not long after you did. I’m hoping we can use him as an in to begin negotiations for peace.”

“Kaleen’s not one for negotiations,” I warned him. “He runs by his own book, and he doesn’t care whose toes he steps on in the process.”

Rurik hummed. “Maybe. Maybe not. But you never had problems with him, did you?”

“No,” I said. “He owes me one, actually. I took a pen to the arm so he wouldn’t get stabbed in the throat while he was running his mouth.”

Rurik smirked at me. “Good. We’re using that to make him work with us—at least in the beginning.”

I sighed. “I’m guessing I don’t even have a fucking choice?”

“No,” Rurik answered, not even bothering to look at me. He just continued typing rapidly, his eyes never moving from his computer screen. “You’ll do this for your brothers. For the GBMC.” He did look at me then. “And you’ll do it for me .”

My upper lip curled in a sneer. “I’ll never do a goddamn thing for you ,” I snapped.

He turned back to his computer, not the least bit bothered. “We’ll see about that, Shadow.”

6

Malik

He had to be fucking kidding me. All of this had to be one big ass joke.

I tightened my grip on the handle of my small duffel bag, glaring at the single bed in the small hotel room. I already felt out of place in this expensive, fancy ass hotel Rurik had put us in. When he'd ordered two rooms, telling me I was sharing one with him and the other was for his guards and driver, I'd had to physically bite my tongue to keep from lashing out at him and making a scene in the middle of a place that would one hundred percent call the police.

I could've suffered if there'd been two beds. But there was one .

One fucking bed .

There wasn't even a fucking couch I could crash on. Just an expensive, uncomfortable-looking chair that seemed like it'd be more for show than actual comfort sat by a small table. The floor would be better, honestly.

"I'm getting my own fucking room," I growled, turning for the door. I grunted when I turned straight into Rurik. His hands landed on my biceps to steady us both, and my cock thickened behind my zipper. I hated how weak I always was to his touch. I wanted to hate him—not want him.

He drove me fucking insane .

“Going somewhere?” Rurik asked, arching a brow at me. I tried pulling away from him, but he just tightened his grip. The man might be small, but there was no denying the strength he had.

“Yeah, to get another fucking room,” I snapped. I tried pulling away again, only to growl in annoyance when he still didn’t release me. “Fucking let me go, Rurik.”

“No,” he said. He backed me up until the backs of my knees met the mattress, and when he pushed me down, I obediently sat, my jaw clenched so tightly, my teeth audibly ground together. “You’re not getting another room. You’re going to be right here where I can keep an eye on you.”

“Fuck that, and fuck you ,” I seethed, my hands shaking with rage.

Rurik calmly took my bag from me and set it in the armchair. Then, he turned to me and slid his hands into the pockets of his perfectly fitted slacks. I swallowed thickly when I noticed the hard outline of his cock, and it took quite a bit of effort for me to rip my eyes away from his impressive member.

“I’d love to fuck you, as you so eloquently put it,” Rurik said, making my entire body flush hot, “but I’m sure that’s not what you meant.”

Asshole .

“You attract trouble without even trying. I want you close where I can keep an eye on you and keep you in line. You can bitch and moan about it all you want, Malik. I’m fully prepared to listen. But it won’t change anything.”

For the second time in less than fifteen minutes, I had to sink my teeth into my tongue to keep from lashing out and saying something that would just land me in a heap of trouble with Rurik.

Standing from the bed, I snatched two of the pillows off the bed and tossed them onto the floor. “If I have to be in the same damn room with you while you treat me like a caged dog, then so be it,” I snapped. “But I’m sleeping on the fucking floor. Not with you.”

I couldn’t sleep in the same bed as him. I’d never get rest. It was bad enough I would be in the same room as him for hours , forced to breathe in his scent and hear him breathing as he slept. But if we were in the same bed beneath the same cover with mere inches separating us, my self control would crumble .

And I could not give in to temptation. I could not give in to Rurik. If I did, that’d be it. I knew without a shadow of a fucking doubt that Rurik would own me.

“Sure,” Rurik said, a slight smirk tilting his lips. I glared at him. He waved his hand toward the floor where I’d tossed the pillows. “Be my guest, Malik. I’m going to take a shower.” He nodded toward the room phone. “Order us some room service, yeah? I’m hungry. I’ll take a steak medium-rare. Tell them to charge it to the card on file.”

With that, he grabbed his bag from by the door and headed into the massive bathroom, quietly shutting the door behind him. My teeth audibly ground together, and for a good minute, I contemplated telling him to order his own fucking food and that I wasn’t hungry. But my stomach rumbled, and I knew I needed to eat, or Rurik would be putting me on my ass tomorrow.

I was already hard to deal with on a good day, but when I was hungry? I was damn near intolerable.

Fuming, I made my way over to the phone. A menu was sitting beside it, so I took a moment to skim over it before ordering Rurik’s food and ordering myself a burger and fries. After hanging up the phone, I worked on finding extra linens, only to discover there weren’t any. Because of course, a fucking nice ass hotel like this didn’t

just leave extra linens lying around.

Fuck my life .

When Rurik came out of the bathroom, steam billowing out behind him, I turned, ready to order him to get another blanket and sheets for me to make a pallet on the floor, but my mouth dried and the words died in my throat.

Rurik was clad in only a towel wrapped around his hips. Every hard, tight plane of his body was on display, and water droplets still clung to his pale, tattooed skin. I swear to fuck, I swallowed my tongue when he lifted his hand to rake his fingers through his wet, dark hair, slicking it back from his face.

“Shower’s free,” he told me.

“You don’t need your bag?” I rasped. My voice sounded like raw sex, and his eyes flared at the sound of it.

He smirked, his eyes taking on a dangerous glint that made me both hard for him and cautious all at once. There was something predatory in his gaze as he looked at me. A sensual promise.

“Nah. I like to sleep naked, Shadow,” he purred. My cock hardened so fast at the image his words painted in my mind that I swayed on my feet. He jerked his head in the direction of the bathroom. “Go take a shower.”

I literally had no words because all I could picture was him sleeping naked in the same room as me. So I silently walked into the bathroom and shut the door. It wasn’t until I was beneath the hot spray of water that I realized my bag was still in the room on the chair, which meant I had no clothes nor any of my own toiletries.

I thunked my forehead against the tiled wall and groaned, my jaw clenched tightly.

Fuck me with a brick .

Rurik

“Thank you,” I told the hotel employee as she placed mine and Malik’s food on the small table by the armchair. I handed her a twenty as a tip, and her eyes bugged a little. “Have a wonderful night.”

Once she left, I flipped the lock to the room and headed back to the food. I’d donned a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt after Malik escaped into the bathroom, not wanting to answer the door in nothing but a towel once the food arrived. I wanted to tease the hell out of Malik, especially after seeing him eyeing my cock through my towel with a hunger so visceral it made me lightheaded, but I didn’t want to scar the hotel employee.

The bathroom door opened, and I turned to look over my shoulder, damn near swallowing my tongue when Malik stepped out, steam billowing behind him. A towel was wrapped around his hips, leaving the rest of his beautiful creamy skin on display. Water droplets clung to his skin and rolled over his pecs. My mouth ran dry at the sight of his chiseled abs and those thick biceps.

Jesus fucking Christ, the man was going to kill me. I’d always known Malik was a beautiful man. Even when he was scowling and raging at the world, he was magnificent and jaw-droppingly gorgeous. But nothing could prepare me for how damn intoxicating the sight of him naked would be.

“You got a fucking staring problem?” Malik growled as he walked over to where I

was standing, clutching the towel at his left hip so tightly, I was actually surprised he didn't rip it. His scent wrapped around me as he drew closer, and my dick hardened so fast, I went lightheaded for a moment. He'd used my body wash, and goddamn, I wanted to lay him out over that bed and rut into him like a fucking beast. Having my scent on him made something primal bubble up inside me.

"Just admiring a good-looking man," I rasped.

Malik's eyes flared with heat, and his nostrils flared. We stared at each other for a good minute before he ripped his eyes from mine, snatched his bag from the chair, and stormed back to the bathroom. When the door shut behind him, I leaned over and gripped the edges of the table. Closing my eyes, I drew in a deep, calming breath, willing my body to cool the fuck down.

Malik was not going to fold for me overnight. I knew that. But it sure as fuck didn't stop me from hoping. I'd been head over heels for the man for so damn long, I didn't know what it felt like to not want him anymore.

Sighing, I pushed off the table, then lifted the lids off our food. Malik came out just as I was sitting in the armchair. It was uncomfortable as fuck, and I grimaced. But it would do since I couldn't exactly sit on a bed and try to eat my steak. That was just a disaster waiting to happen.

Malik stepped out of the bathroom in a pair of gym shorts and a plain black t-shirt. Without a word, he walked over and grabbed his burger before taking a seat on the bed. We ate in silence, and eventually, Malik grabbed the TV remote and began flipping through channels until he settled on SpongeBob.

"Didn't peg you for a guy who watched this," I said, surprised by his choice.

Malik grunted. "Doesn't require a lot of thinking to watch. And my mom used to

always put it on for me when I was little. Using it to keep myself engaged and calm became a... coping mechanism of sorts.”

I chewed on my bite of steak, my eyes on the television screen, but I wasn’t actually paying attention to it. I was pondering the little piece of himself he’d let me see.

“You were angry as a little kid, too?” I finally asked.

Malik nodded, not removing his eyes from the TV screen. “Mom tried anger management classes for me, but it didn’t work too well. She tried therapy, too, but that went about just as good. So, she did her best to just come up with her own coping mechanisms for me. Cartoons that were simple and maybe even a bit stupid worked.”

We continued eating in silence for a little longer as I thought over his words, thinking back on what I remembered from the single psychology class I’d taken in college. I hadn’t taken it because I wanted to take it. The college had forced me to take some bullshit elective to “broaden my horizons” because it would look great on my college transcript.

I only went to college because Anatoly and his family made me. Not because I wanted to. But Anatoly wouldn’t let me move up the ranks and become his second if I didn’t have a college education behind me. He wanted to make sure I would be highly respected in our world since I hadn’t been born into his family—had only been a kid they found starving on the streets after my mom skipped out on me and my dad drowned himself in the bottom of a whiskey bottle.

I glanced at Malik. He’d set his plate aside and was calmly focusing on the TV while twisting the draw string of his shorts around his finger. He unwound it, then did it all over again.

Was it possible Malik had anxiety? Sure, everyone had anxiety in some form, but was

Malik's overwhelming enough that his manifested in bursts of rage?

"Has your mom ever had you speak to someone about anxiety?" I blurted.

Malik swung his head toward me, his brows furrowing over his dark eyes. "What? No. I don't have fucking anxiety, Rurik." And there it was—the anger. And now that I thought about it—yeah, anxiety made perfect sense. Every time Malik was faced with a situation that made him uncomfortable, backed him into a corner, or left him feeling like he didn't know what choice to make, he became angry.

I shook my head. "I'm pretty sure you have some form of anxiety, Malik." I held up my hand when he opened his mouth to no doubt bite my head off. "Before you go chewing me up and spitting me out, anxiety isn't always panic attacks. Sometimes, you just get... mad."

He frowned then, like he didn't know what to do with himself. Without a word, he turned back to the TV, but that confused yet thoughtful look didn't leave his face.

Maybe—just maybe—I might be able to make some headway with the beautiful man now that we were possibly getting to the root cause of his explosive personality.

8

Malik

The floor was fucking uncomfortable. I'd slept in a lot of shitty places since joining the Ghost Born MC and while I'd been in the military, but this floor took the cake. There was no blanket. No sheet. Just me, my clothes, and two fucking pillows. I'd been down here tossing and turning for what had to be a good hour, and I couldn't even begin to fall asleep.

Fuck Rurik for this. He was backing me into a corner, and I fucking hated it.

Growling under my breath, I pushed myself up into a sitting position and scrubbed at my face. Dropping my hands to my lap, I peered up at the bed. Rurik hadn't moved for a while, and his breaths were even, but I didn't think they were deep enough for him to actually be asleep. Which fucking sucked because he would know the moment I got into that bed.

I didn't want to give in to whatever fucked up plan he had in his head, but if I wanted sleep, I couldn't remain on this floor. And since I had no idea what Rurik had planned for tomorrow, I needed to be well-rested. I couldn't exactly protect either of us if I was tired and sluggish.

Protect either of us .

Fucking hell. I did want to protect him. While Rurik rode every fucking nerve I had and I didn't want to give into the temptation he presented, I knew I'd rip this entire

world apart if something happened to him.

How had I come to this point? Mere hours alone with him and I was caving. Did I not have any willpower at all?

When it came to him, apparently fucking not.

Scowling, I pushed myself from the floor and snatched up my pillows, placing them on the bed. Rurik opened his eyes, watching me, but I pointedly ignored him. I didn't want to see the smug look on his face or the glimmer of triumph I knew would be in his blue eyes.

Stiffly, I laid down on the bed, staying as close to the edge of the mattress as I could without falling off. I heard Rurik sigh behind me, and I stiffened even more, my muscles so rigid, it kind of hurt. Why couldn't he just leave me fucking be?

"You're going to fall off the bed," Rurik grumbled from behind me, his voice low and husky. I hated the way it made my body come alive, and I detested even more the image that came to mind—him between my thighs as he slid inside of me and used that same tone to tell me how good I was being for him.

Fucking hell . I didn't even bottom. I was strictly a top.

"I'm fine," I grumbled, crossing my arms over my chest when the air conditioning in the room turned on. Seriously, it was cool outside. Why was the damn AC on?

I heard Rurik shifting, and then, a moment later, the sheet and comforter draped over me. I clenched my jaw, but I wasn't stupid enough to complain. I was getting cold, and between the blanket and Rurik's body heat radiating from beneath the covers, I was going to warm up quickly.

“At least don’t freeze half to fucking death,” he muttered before laying back down.

I didn’t respond—just closed my eyes and tried willing myself to sleep. But it didn’t work. While the bed was much more comfortable than the floor—at least the hotel had sprung the money for a comfortable mattress—having Rurik behind me and in the same bed with me made it extremely difficult for sleep to come.

“You’re so tense, it’s making me tense,” Rurik complained with a huff as he moved again. “Relax, Malik. I won’t bite... unless you ask me to.”

“Oh, fuck you,” I snapped, glaring at the wall in front of me. “You just can’t help yourself, can you? You always have something?—”

Suddenly, his arm banded around my midsection, and then, he was yanking me across the mattress until his chest was flush against my back and his knees were tucked right behind mine. I sucked in a sharp, surprised breath when his hard, thick cock pressed against my ass, and mine thickened in response almost instantly.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I snapped, hating how breathless my voice sounded.

“Cuddling you,” Rurik said as if it was the most normal thing in the world. “You’re tense, and neither of us will get any sleep if you keep being all rigid.” He slid his hand under my shirt, and I couldn’t contain the shiver that rolled down my spine as he slid his rough palm up my abs to my chest, pushing my shirt up as he went. When his hand settled over my heart, he lightly tapped his index finger in time with my rapid heartbeat. “Relax, Malik,” he murmured against the back of my neck.

“Hard to do when you’re—” I cut myself off, refusing to finish that sentence. Being this close to him was making my tongue loose—too fucking loose.

He hummed and tightened his arm around me, still tapping that index finger over the

center of my chest. My heartbeat was slowing, and even if I didn't want to, my body was relaxing back against his.

Damn him .

“Hard to do when I'm what , Shadow?” he asked, his voice low. Soft. I swallowed thickly. “When I'm holding you?” He pressed a kiss to my shoulder, and I closed my eyes, another shiver racing down my spine at the shockingly tender kiss. “Don't think so hard about it. Just let me hold you. Go to sleep.”

I didn't respond. Instead, I just let my eyes stay closed, focusing on the soothing tap of his finger over my chest. I didn't know when he stopped or even if he ever did. The gentle, rhythmic tap of his finger and his soft, steady breaths fanning over the back of my neck lulled me into a state of semi-consciousness until I leaned back into him a little more.

He made a little rumble of contentment and nuzzled against the back of my neck. And that was the last thing I remembered before sleep took me and I had the best night's rest I'd ever had.

Malik

I refused to acknowledge that I'd slept peacefully the entire night, and I pretended as if last night didn't happen at all. I was not going to acknowledge how calm I'd felt all night in Rurik's arms nor how well I'd slept with him at my back. And discussions of how I woke up rock hard and practically on top of Rurik with my head on his chest, my arm thrown over his flat stomach, and my leg thrown over his, were off the damn table.

As soon as I'd woken up, I'd been internally horrified that Rurik was already awake and had been scraping his blunt nails along my scalp. I'd shot out of his arms immediately and lurched from the bed, rushing into the bathroom. I took an ice-cold shower to force my dick to practically retreat into my body, and then I got dressed for the day. Thankfully, when I emerged from the bathroom, he just told me to get my shoes on so we could go get breakfast. He didn't say anything about me crawling into bed with him or how I'd practically laid on top of him while sleeping.

Now, as we sat in a small diner down the street from the hotel we'd stayed in for the night, Rurik was still quiet, which was unlike him and had me on edge. The only reason I was able to swallow every bite of food I put into my mouth was because I needed to eat to keep my strength up.

That and the whole hunger-rage thing. I wasn't keen on being dropped to my knees by Rurik again, even if I did sort of like it. And I refused to focus on that either or how every time he dropped me to my knees, something in my head went quiet and

forced the rage I constantly felt to recede a bit.

“When we finish here,” Rurik finally said, making me drag my eyes up from my plate of eggs and hashbrowns to look up at him, “you’re going to make the phone call to Kaleen and arrange a meeting.”

“He’s going to want to meet alone,” I warned him. Kaleen wasn’t the kind of man to back himself into a corner, even if we had no intention of harming him. I would be meeting him alone or there would be no meeting at all, regardless of if he owed me or not. That was just how he worked.

Rurik nodded. “I figured as much. You’ll be alone, but you’ll wear a wire.”

I dropped my fork to my plate with a loud clatter, glaring at him. People turned to look at us, but I ignored them. Rurik sighed and scrubbed a hand down his face. A wire would just set Kaleen off. He was fucking stupid if he thought the man wouldn’t pat me down for something like that. If he was part of the Savage Dreams MC, then he was definitely going to know who I was attached to.

Wearing a wire was a sure-fire way to get me killed. No fucking thank you. My mother would resurrect me just to kill me herself.

And that notion was more terrifying than dying in the first place.

“A wire is not fucking happening,” I growled. “You want me to fucking die, Rurik? Because make no mistake, Kaleen will put a bullet through my skull quick as fuck if he catches me wearing one.”

Rurik clenched his jaw. “I can’t have you going in without being able to keep check on you, Malik.”

I scoffed and grabbed my fork again. “I’m more than capable of taking care of myself, Rurik. Don’t ever doubt that.”

He blew out a harsh breath and grabbed his coffee. “It’s not you I worry about. It’s every other uncontrollable mother fucker in the world I worry about.” He lifted his gaze to look at me over the rim of his mug, his blue eyes meeting mine. My stomach swooped, and my heart stalled in my chest at the possessive, predatory, claiming gleam in his eyes. “I don’t want you in a situation I can’t fucking control.”

My fingers tightened around my fork. Clenching my jaw, I forced my gaze away from his and glared down at my plate, forcing myself to breathe and focus on forking food into my mouth. I would not give in to Rurik. I would not fall into whatever trap he was planting in front of me. He wanted to... what? Possess me? Own me?

It could not happen. Already, I wasn’t myself around him. It was like I lost all control of who I was. He made me so fucking agitated, but when he looked at me like that, all that agitation melted away.

He left me feeling... discombobulated. And what the fuck was I supposed to do with that feeling? How was I supposed to operate when he left me feeling so goddamn unhinged?

“Tough luck, Rurik,” I finally said after I’d chewed a bite of my food and felt a little calmer. Like I could fucking breathe again. “You put me in the GBMC. I’m always put in situations you can’t control.”

When I looked at him, his jaw was tight, and for a second, I for sure thought he was about to grab me by the front of my shirt, drag me across the table, and kiss the ever living fuck out of me. But then, he closed his eyes and took another sip of his coffee, reigning himself in just like that. Always in control. Always calm.

God, I fucking hated him .

10

Malik

Rurik passed me a flip phone and a slip of paper, dragging my attention from the passing scenery outside the window. I took it from him without a word and flipped the device open, typing in the digits he'd given me. The SUV hit a pothole, almost making me hit the wrong number, and I shot a scowl at the driver.

"You couldn't have avoided that?" I snapped, irritation lining my voice.

"Ignore him," Rurik told Denis. "Malik is in a foul mood for some unknown reason."

Denis cast Rurik a look through the rearview mirror that practically screamed when isn't he ? My skin flushed hot, and my fingers tightened around the stupid fucking phone in my hand.

Everyone was on a mission to piss me off today, apparently. And it didn't help that Rurik and I had another dumb fight over a wire after we left the restaurant—a fight I won. But he did not want to drop it. I knew Rurik was trying to keep me safe or whatever, but a wire was a sure fire of way of getting my head blown off.

I'd like to keep it firmly on my shoulders—thanks.

"If you two shut the fuck up for two goddamn seconds, I can make this phone call," I seethed.

Rurik smirked at me. “Denis didn’t even say a word, Malik.”

I sneered at him, my upper lip curling. Rurik hummed and sat back in his seat, turning his head to look out the window. Muttering under my breath about what a dick Rurik was, I pressed the button with the little green phone on it and lifted the phone to my ear. It rang three times before a deep voice asked, “If you’re a fucking spam caller?—”

“Not a spam caller,” I said, interrupting him. I hadn’t heard Kaleen’s voice since I got out, and honestly, it was kind of nice to hear the voice of someone who’d once been on my side. Sure, we’d been behind bars and being cellmates had been the center of our friendship, if it could even be called that, but being in prison would either make or break someone.

Kaleen and I decided to let it make us.

“Who the fuck are you?” Kaleen growled, a dangerous edge leaking into his voice. “I don’t like fucking games.”

“It’s Malik,” I told him.

He was quiet for a moment—long enough that I had to pull the phone away from my ear to make sure the call hadn’t been dropped.

“Malik fucking Carter?” he finally asked, his voice a bit lighter now. I swore, his moods flipped like a fucking switch. It’d always been alarming. Bunking with Kaleen had always been a trip. I never knew what version of him I was going to wake up to. “Well, fuck me with a brick, brother. How the fuck did you get this number?”

“I’m resourceful,” I said, leaving it at that. I didn’t want him to know Rurik existed, and I was not pondering over that. “I was hoping we could meet and talk.”

He grunted, a clear sign his mood was souring again. “This about the Ghost Born bullshit?” he asked. “Got wind you were part of their club now. Bunch of pussies if you ask me. If you were looking for somewhere to belong, bro, I could’ve brought you into the Savage Dreams.”

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, already over this conversation. “It’s a lot more complicated than that,” I admitted. I didn’t want to belong to any club, but I did. And my hands were tied. And to be honest, yeah—the GBMC had kept my ass out of prison and kept my hands virtually clean so my parole officer couldn’t come after me.

I knew most of that had to do with the man next to me, but I refused to dwell on that too much. Shit was already complicated between me and Rurik, and last night had blurred too many lines in my mind, leaving me on edge and feeling like a ticking time bomb.

“We can meet,” Kaleen finally agreed. “Got to be by yourself though, Malik. You bring someone along, and we’re gonna have problems.”

I grunted. “Understood. I’ll drop you a set of coordinates.”

With that, I ended the call and tossed the phone toward Rurik. It hit the leather seat with a thump. I crumbled the phone number in my fist before flicking that his way, too. It hit his arm and bounced off into the seat. He arched a brow at me, clearly unimpressed.

“Childish much, Shadow?” he murmured. I hated the way a shiver rolled down my spine at his use of my road name—a road name he’d given me. Didn’t know why. I’d asked Hutch once why I had that name, and when he told me it’d come from Rurik, I let it drop. Because like fuck was I digging into that.

“Send him coordinates of where to meet. He’s expecting them.”

With that, I turned to look out the window, not giving him another bit of my attention. And thankfully, he didn't push me any further. I wasn't in the mood to fight with him. I just wanted to get this meeting over with and move on with my life, which would hopefully mean going the fuck home so Rurik could return to Washington.

And leave me the hell alone.

11

Malik

My boots crunched over the gravel as I made my way across the lot toward where I'd be meeting Kaleen. Rurik had chosen an abandoned chicken factory as our meeting point. The factory had clearly been abandoned years ago. Grass was growing between the cracks in the sidewalk closer to the building, and there were potholes in the gravel lot from years of just sitting untraveled on.

The heavy, steel door creaked when I pushed it open to walk inside. My steps were audible as I walked inside, echoing off the walls and the long-ago abandoned equipment. Pausing, I took in the room, scanning for anything out of place before I walked further inside.

A red light caught my eye as I turned, and I looked up, gritting my teeth at the sight of the camera. This place shouldn't have had power, which meant that camera shouldn't have been working.

This had Rurik written all fucking over it. I bet it was wireless, operating on a battery, and I could probably place money that the fucking thing sent the video feed right to his damn phone or laptop.

Was he trying to get me fucking killed?

Growling, I stepped back outside and yanked my burner from my pocket, calling Kaleen. Because fuck Rurik. If Kaleen caught sight of that camera or any other

camera that Rurik might have in that place, I'd be a dead man walking.

Kaleen did not like being watched.

"I'm almost there," Kaleen said, his voice almost muffled by the sound of his bike. "Keep your panties on, Malik."

"Not meeting here," I told him as I made my way to the SUV Rurik had sent me with today. "But I need you to come pick me up first. I think I've been compromised." I knew I had been, but if I confessed that much, Kaleen would turn around and wouldn't meet with me at all. And even though I hated that Rurik was calling every fucking move I made, I couldn't abandon my club brothers.

Despite how much of a piece of work I was, they'd stuck by me and invited me into their fold. They'd given me a place to belong, and even if we clashed heads, I knew without a shred of doubt that I always had a home with them.

"Fuck," he growled. "I'm almost there. Be ready."

Oh, I fucking would be. And I'd be sending Rurik a message while I was at it. Did I still have to deal with him after this? Yeah. But did I give a fuck? Not a single bit. And I knew he'd come hunt me down. And I also knew he'd find me easily. But I wouldn't be hiding either.

This explosion between us was long fucking overdue. And maybe—just maybe—he'd realize I was too much work, then fuck off back to Washington and leave me the fuck alone. For good, this time.

I hung up the phone, ignoring it when it began to ring with a call from Rurik. Grabbing some dry weeds from near where I'd parked the car, I walked over and opened the gas tank. It had one of those that didn't need a cap, but that was fine. I

could work with that, too.

I found a crowbar in the back and shoved it inside, forcing the little metal door to stay open, and then, I shoved the grass inside. My phone was vibrating constantly now, but I continued to ignore it. Gripping my lighter from my pocket, I flicked it, watching the flame spring free. I set it to the grass, and then, I sprinted from the SUV, running like hell.

Kaleen pulled up just in time, and I jumped onto the back before he even came to a full stop. “Go!” I shouted at him.

He spun out of the lot just as the SUV exploded behind us, shaking the ground beneath the bike. Kaleen wobbled for a moment but quickly regained control, flying out of the parking lot and down the highway.

Rurik might very well kill me for that move, but at least then, I’d be fucking free of him. Because I couldn’t keep playing this game with him.

I needed him to go away.

“Any particular reason you blew up your ride?” Kaleen asked before he raised his glass to his lips, taking a sip of whiskey the bartender had set in front of him.

“Being tracked, I think,” I said, partially lying. Because I didn’t think I was being tracked. I knew without a single doubt Rurik had a tracker on that SUV. With shit in the air like this, he wouldn’t let me go somewhere alone without him knowing my every move.

I wondered if I’d finally broken through that calm facade he always wore. God, I couldn’t wait to see him fucking fracture and break with fury.

“Couldn’t just find the tracker instead of leaving yourself abandoned without a ride?” he asked, amusement lighting up his eyes.

I snorted and lifted my beer to my lips. “Wanted to send a message.”

The bartender looked at me, then nodded his head toward the beer in my hand. I shook my head at him. I didn’t drink much anymore—not since I’d gotten out of prison. More than one beer would make me tipsy. I’d become a bit of a lightweight now that I didn’t drink much anymore.

I needed to keep my head about me because Rurik was coming for me. I knew it with every fiber of my being.

Kaleen had brought us to a bar on the outskirts of his territory. It was neutral ground—I knew that much, even without him having to tell me. It would be a safe place for us to have this talk, and we were surrounded by other patrons, so there was less risk of either of us doing anything stupid to each other.

“So, what’s up?” Kaleen asked me. “Why the meeting just between the two of us? Your prez don’t wanna meet with mine?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think it’s that. I’m sure you know the GBMC has major connections. Those major connections are calling the shots. This is out of Sicle’s hands,” I said, referring to Hutch by his road name.

“The fucking Russians,” Kaleen growled, disgust coloring his tone.

Yeah, that basically summed up how I felt about them right then, too.

“Yeah... the fucking Russians,” I agreed because one in particular was a pain in my ass. He’d gotten so annoying that I’d had to snap my burner phone in half and toss it

about halfway here. I couldn't deal with his constant calling any longer.

"You moved into territory near us without talks or negotiations," Kaleen told me. He didn't sound pissed—just very matter-of-fact about it. "Burn ain't fucking happy about it. He wants blood and to wipe your charter off the map. The Savage Dreams has been an established club since the fifties, and the Ghost Born completely disregarded that. You understand why he's furious, don't you?"

"Sounds like a bunch of dick size comparisons," I admitted.

Kaleen barked out a laugh. "Honestly, it is. But it's the lack of respect, too. And trust me when I say Burn doesn't take well to being disrespected. It makes him... blood thirsty."

"So... what?" I finally asked as I set my empty beer bottle aside, waving off the bartender when he moved to get me another. Fucker couldn't take a hint that I didn't want another goddamn beer. "Sicle just needs to have a meeting with him? Work this shit out?"

Kaleen shook his head. "Pretty sure it's past that now, brother. Burn wants blood, and he's not stopping until he's got it. And he'll take down anyone in his path. But —" he said, looking at me over the rim of his glass— "I can sit down with Burn and see if he's open to a talk."

I nodded. "That'd be good. Let's do that."

Kaleen tossed back the rest of his drink and stood from his barstool. "I'll be in touch. When you get a new phone, give me a ring so I've got your new number."

He turned to leave. I stood as well, planning to find somewhere else to chill for a while, maybe grab a bite to eat. Wasn't like I had any way of getting somewhere. I

was down a ride and down a phone.

The door to the bar slammed open, and Rurik stalked inside, all lethal power and enraged man. In pressed, fitted black slacks, shiny Oxfords, and a white button down rolled up to his elbows, he looked every bit the influential, powerful man I knew he was.

And his steely, icy blue eyes were locked right on me. I halted, my stomach dropping to my feet. I'd hoped to make Rurik snap, but in the face of him when he was fractured...

I'd fucked up.

Kaleen whistled low and clapped me on my shoulder. "That who you're running from, bro?" he asked, sounding highly amused.

I sighed, every muscle in my body locked tight. "Unfortunately," I muttered.

Kaleen snickered and patted my shoulder. "Good luck, man."

He walked out, not paying Rurik a bit of mind. But Rurik didn't even seem to notice. Or if he did notice, he didn't give a rat's ass. He shoved one hand in his pocket, and the other pointed to the door he'd just barged through.

"Outside, Shadow. Now ," he growled.

12

Rurik

Fuck .

The moment I saw him look up into that camera, I knew he was going to go off script. Knew I'd lost control of him. He already didn't trust me much, and whatever trust he had in me, I'd officially broken at that moment.

All I'd been trying to do was make sure he was safe. I didn't trust Kaleen, and I trusted the club he was part of even less. I wanted to make sure if something did go down, I could get to Malik and get him help. But instead, he'd blown up the fucking SUV I'd sent him and rode off with Kaleen to fuck knew where.

Goddammit .

My phone rang from beside me, and I looked over at it, hoping it was Malik calling me back, though I knew that was a very slim possibility. The last few times I'd tried calling him, his phone had gone straight to voicemail. Either he'd turned it off, or he'd trashed the phone.

I could probably place a thousand dollars on the bet that he'd tossed his phone. Because Malik was nothing if not fucking dramatic when he was pissed off.

And fuck knew he was pissed off with me.

Gritting my teeth at the sight of Anatoly's name, I grabbed my phone and answered his call, raising the phone to my ear. Hitching my shoulder up, I held the phone between my ear and shoulder, then set back to work on trying to track down Malik. I was hacking security systems and traffic cameras to find him.

And when I did find him, I was going to remind him of his fucking place.

That was if Anatoly didn't decide to put a bullet through his fucking skull first. What Malik had pulled was as dangerous as hell.

"Anatoly," I greeted, my teeth gritted. This conversation wasn't going to be a pleasant one. Anatoly only called me if he needed me to do something or if he was pissed about something. I highly doubted he needed something from me right then.

"I was just informed one of my vehicles that you are using just went offline," Anatoly said, his voice eerily calm.

I hacked into another business's security cameras, focusing on the ones that gave me some kind of view of the street in front of their store. I replayed the footage for the past fifteen minutes on fast-forward, gritting my teeth when I got nothing.

"I'm handling it," I told him.

"Are you?" Anatoly asked. My teeth audibly ground together. "This has Shadow written all over it, Rurik. You were meant to bring him to heel. To prevent him from causing more trouble. Mind telling me what happened to my vehicle?"

I blew out a harsh breath, hacking into another traffic camera when that store gave me jack shit. "He blew it up, but it's my fault he acted out," I told him, already trying to take the blame off Malik. Because that was what I did. I'd take anything Anatoly dished out if it kept Malik out of his crosshairs. Malik was mine. Mine to protect.

Mine to take care of.

He was just being a stubborn ass about it all.

“And how is it your fault, exactly?” Anatoly asked.

“I sent him to meet with Kaleen Jacobs, who might be able to get us some kind of meeting with the Savage Dreams. I wanted him to wear a wire, but he wouldn’t hear of it, so I sent him to a factory with cameras I set up. He figured it out.”

Anatoly was silent for a moment. I continued flicking through cameras, trying to find any sign of Malik. It was fucking time-consuming to do shit this way, but it was the only way I knew to track his ass down.

“If this were any other man who had blown up my SUV and continued to defy the orders of my second-in-command, he would already have a bullet in his skull and a shallow, unmarked grave to rot in,” Anatoly reminded me. My teeth audibly ground together again. I did know that. But Anatoly also knew that I’d take Malik and go underground if he tried to harm him.

It wasn’t a joke when I said Malik was more protected than the president of the fucking United States. I’d made him practically untouchable.

“I know,” I told him just as I caught an image of Kaleen and Malik walking into a bar. A smirk tilted my lips, and I zoomed in on the bar name.

Found you , baby .

“Get him under control, Rurik,” Anatoly told me. “There is only so much fucking patience I have.”

“Understood.”

I ended the call and stood from the chair, closing my laptop. I called Denis, who was residing in the room next door with the guards Anatoly insisted I needed with me at all times. He answered on the first ring. “Sir?”

“Bring the car around,” I ordered as I slipped my shoes on. “We need to go pick up Malik.”

The bar Malik and Kaleen had decided on was a dive bar basically in the middle of nowhere, but I knew enough about the area to know this was unclaimed, neutral territory. It made sense they’d decided to talk here, and part of me was relieved that Malik was smart enough to go somewhere where there’d be other people.

It gave him less of a chance to be hurt or killed. If Kaleen had tried something, I would’ve blown Anatoly’s, Shaw’s, and Hiram’s plans of peace out the water. I would’ve gone off the fucking rails and destroyed him and his fucking club for daring to harm my man.

Because Malik was mine . And it was goddamn time Malik figured that shit out.

Denis opened my door, and I slipped out, rolling my sleeves up to my elbows, revealing the ink bleeding across my forearms. Walking forward, I shoved open the bar door, letting it slam against the wall. Every head in the bar turned to me as I walked inside. My gaze immediately landed on Malik standing beside the bar, and rage pulsed through me.

My vision tinted red at the edges when Kaleen gripped Shadow’s shoulder and said something to him so quietly, I couldn’t hear. I took another step forward, arching a brow at Malik. Every muscle in his body was locked up tight, and for the first time since I’d known him, he looked like he wanted to run.

Run, little rabbit , I silently dared him. I'll chase you to the ends of the fucking earth. There's no escaping me .

Kaleen finally began walking toward me, but he didn't say a word. Just passed me and headed out the door. I slid one of my tattooed hands into my pocket, and with my other hand, I pointed at the door Kaleen had just disappeared through.

I was done being nice to Malik. Done playing his fucking games. Now, we were playing my game.

“Outside, Shadow,” I growled. “ Now .”

It was time to remind Malik who called the shots and who fucking owned him.

13

Rurik

Thankfully, Malik followed my orders without a word, but as he passed me to go outside, his anger licked at my skin like a fucking real fire. And it had me half-hard in my slacks. The time to bring him to heel had come, and I wasn't putting it off any longer. I'd played with him long enough.

The game had finally changed, and I was holding all the cards.

He threw Denis a flinty glare as Denis opened the door for him, but Denis just stared blankly ahead, more than used to Malik's attitude by now. Hell, all of my men were. And I was pretty sure they were wondering why the fuck Malik didn't have a bullet through his skull for the shit he'd pulled earlier. Had any of them tried what Malik did, they would've already been on their way to the crematorium.

But not Malik. Never my Malik. Even if Anatoly pulled something, I'd lose my shit. And Anatoly knew this. It was the only reason he was giving me an opportunity to fix this before he had to step in and make Malik disappear. He knew as well as I did that if something happened to Malik, he'd have to put me down, too.

Once Malik was inside the backseat of the SUV, I slid in beside him. Turning his head, Malik stared out the window, his jaw clenched tight. Neither of us said a word, and tense silence filled the vehicle as Denis slid into the driver's seat and pulled off down the road.

When we finally reached the hotel, Malik shoved open his door, not even waiting for one of the soldiers to open the door for him. I closed my eyes and drew in a deep breath, seeking patience I didn't feel like I had. Both of us exploding would do us no good, and we'd get nowhere. Malik already didn't respond well to me, but his response to rage was even worse.

I had to keep my head about me, even if I wanted to do nothing more than pin him to the nearest surface and drive my cock inside of him over and over again until all he could focus on was obeying me and moaning my fucking name.

Denis opened my door, and I slid out, nodding once at him. "This will be all, Denis. Take the rest of the day off." I clapped his shoulder, then headed inside, following after Malik. When I walked into the lobby, he was already impatiently jabbing his finger against the button for the elevator.

The woman working the front desk was eyeing him with trepidation, and it made my jaw clench. Letting my eyes meet hers, I stepped up and pressed my hand to Malik's lower back.

She instantly cast her eyes away, her cheeks coloring in shame.

"Get your fucking hand off of me," Malik growled, his voice low and threaded through with an undercurrent of danger.

"Get your temper under control before one of the employees calls the police on you and I have to get you out of trouble again," I quietly warned. "You're frightening the front desk employee."

"Fuck her."

My lips quirked with a smirk, and I leaned in, letting my lips trail over his ear as I

whispered, “If you touch anyone that’s not me , I will haul your ass to Washington and chain you to my bed, where you will live out the rest of your fucking days.”

He swung his wide, shocked eyes to mine just as the elevator doors opened. I stepped to the side, hooking my fingers in Malik’s belt loops to tug him back with me. I let an easy, carefree smile tilt my lips as I inclined my head to the couple stepping out. They returned my smile, and then, their steps faded away as they headed toward the exit.

Malik stepped inside the metal box, removing my hand from his jeans. I stepped in with him, and he jabbed the finger for our floor before slamming his finger over the button to close the doors.

As soon as those shiny, metal doors closed, I pounced.

He sucked in a sharp breath of surprise when I wrapped my hand around his throat and slammed him back against the elevator wall hard enough to make the box rattle. Leaning in, I smashed my mouth to his. He resisted at first, trying to turn his head, but I just dug my fingers into his jaw, holding him in place. And then, I sank my teeth into his bottom lip hard enough to make his lip bleed. Snarling, I lapped the blood up, then pressed my hand in harder against his neck, cutting off his air flow. Immediately, he stilled, realizing he no longer had the upper hand.

Hell, he never had it to begin with.

“I’ve played your fucking game long enough, Shadow,” I growled as the elevator slowly came to a stop. “Now, we’re playing my game, and your hand is empty ,” I warned him. My hand dropped from his neck just as the elevator doors opened, and he reached up almost absentmindedly, rubbing at his neck as he stared at me.

I pressed my arm against the door to keep it open, then arched a brow at him. “Let’s go,” I told him, jerking my head in the direction of the hallway.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” he rasped, his throat obviously hurting. I’d put a lot of pressure beneath my hand. If I’d really wanted, I could’ve crushed his windpipe. And that look in his eyes let me know he was very aware of that.

He was even more aware that I hadn’t.

My other hand snapped forward, and I gripped the front of his t-shirt. Twisting the fabric in my fist, I yanked him toward me. His pupils blew wide, and unable to help myself, especially when a trickle of blood ran down his chin, I leaned in and kissed him again, taking a moment to lick that blood up.

“Our room. Now ,” I growled as I pulled back and shoved him into the hall.

He stumbled, quickly catching himself. I stepped out after him and adjusted my shirt. When I arched a brow at him, waiting to see if we were just going to have this shit out in the hallway—because I didn’t give a fuck where I got inside of him at—he turned on his heel and walked off toward our room.

Good boy .

With a smirk tilting my lips, I followed after him, my shiny Oxfords silent on the hallway’s carpet. His hand shook as he swiped his keycard over the door pad. When he pushed the door open and stepped inside, I followed, quietly shutting the door behind me. When that little shnick echoed and the electric sound of the lock engaging reached his ears, his shoulders stiffened.

I licked the front of my teeth, then began to slowly and carefully unroll my shirt sleeves. He turned to face me, and for the first time since Malik had appeared on my radar, he looked nervous and unsure.

Fucking good .

“Strip,” I snapped, letting my mask fall away. That rage I’d been feeling consumed me, and Malik swallowed thickly, nervousness glimmering in his dark eyes. “And do not say a fucking word unless it’s to say yes, more, please, or my fucking name.”

14

Malik

I was out of my fucking depth. Within one brutal kiss and his hand around my throat, Rurik had accomplished stripping away my defenses, leaving me feeling vulnerable and raw. Splayed open. For the first time, I was laid bare in front of Rurik, and he was seeing everything I tried so fucking hard to hide from the world.

I'd thought seeing him finally crack, finally give in to that lack of control would make me feel better. Make me feel higher than I usually felt around him. More in control. Because I'd been the one to make his perfect mask fracture.

To break.

But instead, I'd only backed myself into a corner. Dug myself into a proverbial hole. Because Rurik wasn't like me when he got angry, when he was pissed off with the world.

No... Rurik let his humanity slip away. His eyes were blank and cold as he stared at me, waiting for me to follow his command. I swallowed thickly, hating that my fingers trembled at my sides. I didn't want to obey. Fuck, I did not want to give him more power than he already had over me. But when he arched that perfect fucking brow at me, impatience leaking into his features, I knew I didn't have a choice.

Either I'd strip or he'd come do it for me. It was written in every aggressive angle of his body.

We're playing my game, and your hand is empty .

His words echoed in my head on repeat. It was clear I no longer held the control in this situation, and that lack of control left me spiraling. I was untethered. Fucking lost. I couldn't even bring myself to be angry in the face of the monster standing in front of me.

It didn't matter that Rurik was both shorter and smaller than me. Seeing that mask of his gone made him seem larger than life, and now, I understood how he'd come to be Anatoly's second when he was only in his late twenties.

Rurik had always been nothing more than the devil in disguise.

"Five... four... three..." His words were soft. Careful. Completely the opposite of the cold look in his eyes. And they had me scrambling to tug my shirt over my head. My nail split and blood welled on my thumb when I fumbled to unbutton my jeans and yank my zipper down, but I didn't pay the pain or the blood any mind.

Once my boots were off and my clothes were kicked to the side, Rurik began slowly working open the buttons on his dress shirt. I damn near swallowed my tongue as slowly, inch by torturous fucking inch, more and more of his tatted skin was revealed to my hungry eyes. My cock, hard and leaking, jerked against my belly, and my fingers twitched.

"On the bed on your stomach," Rurik growled.

It took me a moment to obey. My feet felt rooted to the floor. I was caught between wanting to obey him and wanting to fight him. See where fighting him might get me. But when he paused, danger flickering in his blue eyes, I bit the inside of my cheek and followed his order.

I knew when to fight fire and when to let it burn me. And today... today I was going to let it burn me. I might come out less burned if I did. If I fought that fire... it might damn well kill me. I wouldn't win. I knew it with every fiber of my fucking being.

Blowing out a soft breath, I moved onto the mattress, hating that my cheeks flamed as I crawled across the king-sized bed to settle in the middle. I'd never been the bottom. Never. I needed to be in control. But Rurik was one hundred percent a top. A dom. I couldn't ever see him bottoming for me, especially not when he had a cloak of steely rage wrapped around him. His anger was so damn palpable, I could barely breathe through its cloying thickness.

Slowly, I flattened myself to the mattress, my breath shuddering out of me. I hated that I trembled as I waited on him to do something. Anything. But Rurik was silent behind me. I couldn't even hear him moving anymore. Was he still undressing? Or was he just staring at me, bare and laid out before him?

Suddenly, my arms were wrenched behind me. I gasped, trying to push up, to knock him away, but then, Rurik was on the bed, one knee resting on my upper back. Vomit clawed its way up my throat as he pinned my wrists together in his steely grasp. And then, the leather of his belt was wrapping around my wrists, capturing them and holding them at the small of my back.

"Rurik," I gasped, panic clawing at my senses. I swallowed bile. "Rurik?—"

His knee moved, and then, his hand was clamping around the nape of my neck. He leaned over next to me, his blue eyes meeting mine. Some of his mask was back in place now, and his eyes were cool and calm.

My heart hammered against my chest bone as I stared at him, my breaths panting out of me. I yanked at my wrists, trying to dislodge the belt, but my efforts were futile. Rurik had me captive.

“Breathe,” he growled. His hand slid from my neck to my hair, and he gripped the strands, tugging until my scalp smarted. But my brain silenced, and I sagged against the mattress, my skin already growing clammy. He loosened his hold and scraped his blunt nails along my scalp as I closed my eyes, sucking in deep breaths. “That’s it. No matter what happens here, Malik, you’re safe with me. I need you to remember that and hold on to that.”

What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

My eyes snapped open as his hand disappeared. He was standing by the bed now. His shirt was missing, and the snap of his slacks was undone, but his zipper was still up. Still, there was no mistaking the thick bulge pressing against his zipper.

“What?” I gasped. “Why?” He just continued staring at me. Rurik?”

“I’m not going to be gentle with you, Shadow,” he warned me. A shiver of trepidation raced down my spine. “But you’re always safe.” He slowly eased down the zipper of his pants, and I swallowed thickly, the sound audible to my own ears. “Safeword, Malik?”

My chest was too fucking tight. And there was a pit in my stomach growing and growing and threatening to swallow me fucking whole. I was filled with trepidation and unease.

Still, I managed to croak the first word that came to mind.

“Prison,” I whispered.

15

Rurik

P rison ...

I swiped my tongue over my front teeth as I regarded Malik. His eyes were shut again, but he was trembling just the slightest bit. I'd been burning with rage since the moment he blew up that SUV. Had barely been able to keep my mask—a mask Anatoly had made sure I perfected so I could blend into society despite my psychopathy—in place long enough to get him back to the hotel.

I'd seen that fight in him. Had seen that anger burning beneath his skin. Sure, he was mad at me. Oh, he was furious . But when we'd stepped into that elevator and he'd lost control, the root cause of his rage bubbled to the surface.

The moment I'd seen all that anxiousness bleed into his dark eyes, I knew I was fucking right last night.

Malik had undiagnosed acute anxiety. And that panic attack he'd just had only solidified that. His eyes had been wild with panic. His breaths had been coming too fast. The moment I'd snapped that belt tight around his wrists, his control had snapped . His mind had fractured.

In the face of my unhinged mind, he'd submitted . Fucking beautifully , at that.

But his safeword wasn't lost on me. His voice might've trembled when he said that

single word—prison—but I knew exactly why he'd chosen that word. It was his last-ditch effort to taunt me.

Prison—where he thought I'd trapped him under my thumb.

Prison—where I'd made him mine .

Prison—a metaphorical place he felt trapped in now.

Prison—that metaphorical place where I'd watch him fucking rise from the shackles of his mind.

With my eyes locked on his, I grabbed the bottle of lube I'd set on the end of the bed before I'd restrained Malik and clicked the lid open. Malik flinched, but he didn't open his eyes. Like he thought if he couldn't see me moving, couldn't see what I was doing, he could pretend that this wasn't happening.

I smirked. I'd let him pretend for a little while longer. But he'd realize soon enough pretending wasn't happening while he was beneath me. While my cock was splitting him open and breeding him. While I was fucking owning him.

After slicking my cock up, I tossed the lube aside and moved onto the bed, not bothering to remove my pants. When my slacks brushed his legs, Malik tensed, his brows pinching as he squeezed his eyes shut tighter. A shudder rolled through his big frame, and I grinned.

He was naked, restrained, and at my fucking mercy, whereas I hadn't even bothered to remove my fucking pants. I knew it had to be bothering him, and I fucking relished in it. It was demoralizing, and he hated it.

I nudged his thighs apart just enough to fit myself between them, and then, I gripped

his ass cheeks, pulling them apart to reveal his pretty, puckered hole. It fluttered as he clenched. I made a tsking sound.

“If you fight me on this, it’ll just hurt,” I warned him.

“Fuck... you,” he growled.

My grin was fucking feral. “Oh, I am, baby,” I promised. Then, I spit on his hole, watching my saliva trail down from his puckered hole to drip onto his balls. A low whimper crawled past his throat before he could stop it, and precum dripped from my tip.

By the time I was done with him, he’d be nothing more than a fucked-out mess.

My fucked-out mess.

Leaning over him, I kept his ass spread apart and pressed the blunt head of my cock to his hole. He choked on a breath as I pushed inside, forcing him open for me. Every muscle in his body locked tight, and he tried pushing up on his knees. But he immediately halted, a pained cry escaping his mouth when that only pushed his ass further onto my dick.

“Easy , baby,” I growled, leaning over him. I pressed my lips to his shoulder. “ Easy . Let me in, Malik. Just breathe and let me in. Your body is made for me. It knows what to do.”

“Prep?” he croaked, shaking wildly beneath me. His hands curled and uncurled against my abs, his breaths shuddering from his lungs.

“No,” I growled into his skin. “I want it to fucking hurt, Malik. And trust me, you want it to hurt, too. You’ll thank me after this. You’re not the kind of man who wants

prep and attentiveness—not when you’re feeling like this.”

His lips trembled, and fuck, it just about wrecked me. But I couldn’t be soft with him—not yet. He needed this, even if he didn’t realize it yet. He needed me to be brutal with him. To hurt him. Only then would he allow me to actually take care of him. Only then would he rip down that last barrier between us and fucking trust me.

Malik needed to see me at my worst, to see me still caring for him while hurting him, to let down his guard. He didn’t trust kindness. Only like this would he submit to me.

“Rurik…” My name was shaky on his lips. I didn’t know what he was asking for. Maybe he was pleading for something. I ignored him all the same.

I eased out, then pushed back inside him, going a little deeper this time. His mouth opened on a silent cry, his eyes pinching shut. But his body was opening up for me so well. Like it knew who I was. Like it knew who fucking owned it.

“God, you’re so fucking tight ,” I snarled, easing out and pushing back in again. His hands curled into fists, and I watched as a tear ran down his cheek. Growling low in my throat, I leaned over him and licked the tear up. On the next stroke in, I moaned, finally bottoming out, my balls flush with his ass. “Fuuuck , baby,” I rasped, moving my hands to brace myself over him. “You take me so fucking well .”

With my arms braced on either side of him, I eased out and then thrust in hard. A choked, desperate sound fell from his throat, and his eyes snapped open. I laughed softly, then truly began to fuck him. The headboard smacked against the wall every time I drove into his hot, tight hole. Words weren’t needed. I was lost to the sensation of finally being inside of him. Lost in how fucking good he felt wrapped around me.

And I was drowning in every desperate, pathetic moan, whimper, and sob that fell from Malik’s lips. His trembling hadn’t ceased, but he was eagerly lifting his hips

now, making me go deeper inside of him. God, he wanted this as badly as I fucking did, and he'd been denying me for so fucking long . Denying both of us.

Turned out, he just needed me to take control of him. And now, I would. For the rest of our lives, I'd call the shots. And he'd follow without complaint because it would keep his pesky little brain quiet .

“This all you needed, baby?” I panted into the back of his neck, sweat running down my temple. Christ, he was so tight . So perfect for me. “You just needed me to pin you to the bed, restrain you, and treat you as my fucking cum dumpster all while you laid here like my pretty little pillow princess?”

He whined, his breaths coming faster. But it wasn't from panic this time.

No...

His hole was fluttering around me, a clear sign he was about to fall the fuck apart for me. And I was goddamn ready for it.

“That's all it was, huh?” I asked, a husky laugh spilling past my lips. He whimpered. “You can be my pillow princess anytime you want, Shadow. Just lay here and be the hole I use and fill. The hole I fucking breed .”

That was all it took. He cried out, snot and drool running down his face. Tears poured from his eyes as he came all over the bed, his ass milking my cock with desperation. With a growl, I pumped my hips into him harder and faster until finally—fucking finally —I came, too, bathing his insides with my cum. My teeth sank into the back of his neck, and white noise filled my ears as Malik milked every drop of cum from my balls.

16

Rurik

The moment my brain came back online, I eased out of Malik and straddled his ass, quickly unwrapping my belt from around his wrists. They flopped to his sides, and he didn't even try to budge. Moving aside, I gently rolled him onto his back and grabbed his left wrist, gently massaging blood back into it before working my way up his arm and to his shoulder. He remained silent as I did the same to the other side, his tired, dazed eyes just watching me as I worked, roving over my face like he was trying to read me or figure me out.

I pressed my lips to his in a soft kiss and stroked my thumb over his cheek. "Stay," I gently ordered.

He didn't utter a sound.

I eased off the bed and headed into the bathroom, taking a quick moment to clean myself up and rid myself of my slacks. After grabbing a clean, damp hand towel, I headed back into the room, finding Malik in the same position I'd left him.

Those dark eyes of his locked back on me as I set to cleaning him up, wiping the cum from his belly and the neatly trimmed hair around his cock. Then, I eased one of his thighs back and cleaned between his cheeks. I wanted nothing more than to stuff my cum back inside of him, but the little flinches he gave told me he was definitely too sensitive for that. I'd been extremely rough with him, and he needed rest and time to recover.

Tossing the hand towel aside, I propped the pillows up and then leaned against the headboard. Malik still didn't move, and I sighed.

"Come here," I murmured.

Surprisingly, he moved without hesitation, pushing himself up on trembling arms until he was leaning back against me, his head resting on my shoulder. I wrapped my arms around him and dropped a kiss to the top of his head. He shivered and relaxed even more against me, his eyes sliding shut.

"You're awfully quiet," I murmured as I stroked my fingers through his dark hair, scraping my blunt nails along his scalp.

He frowned, but his eyes didn't open. Finally, he shrugged, making a small noise I couldn't decipher. "Maybe you're right about the whole anxiety thing," he said after a moment, his voice low and soft. "My head is... quiet. I don't ever remember my head being this silent. It's... nice."

I hummed and tightened my arm around him. "You know it can always be like this for you?" I asked him. "If you would just stop fighting me and let me have you, your head could always be this blissfully silent. Because I'd make your decisions, and you'd never have to think. Not while I'm around."

He sighed. "It's not that simple," he mumbled, his voice thick with sleep.

"It can be," I assured him. "I can make it that simple. I just need you to give me the chance. To stop fighting me every step of the way." I settled my chin on his head. "You've been mine from the very beginning, Shadow. I named you, giving you the name I was to you—a Shadow. Put you in that club so you were within my radar. I've kept you a free man. You're more fucking protected than a goddamn king, Malik. You know why Anatoly didn't have a bullet put through your stubborn, thick-ass

skull for that stunt you pulled today? Because you're mine . And Anatoly won't touch what belongs to me."

Malik sighed, and he was still so lost in that headspace I'd put him, he hadn't even tensed at my confession. Instead, he just slumped even more against me, letting me take his body weight. He was bigger than me, but I'd support him anytime. Hold him however long he let me.

"I'll think about it," he mumbled, sleep quickly taking him.

I chuckled. "Okay, baby. You do that."

A knock sounded on the hotel room door, dragging me from my slumber. At some point, Malik and I had flattened ourselves onto the mattress, and he had become the little spoon to my big spoon, his body curled into a little ball, and I'd wrapped myself around him. He didn't even stir, soft snores leaving his mouth. But when a louder knock sounded, this one a bit more impatient, he jerked, his eyes snapping open as he reached for his gun—the gun he did not have near him.

"Easy," I rumbled as I slid from the bed. "Get some pants on, baby."

I made my way into the bathroom as the knock sounded again—this time with impatience behind it. Grunting in annoyance, I snatched my slacks off the floor and tugged them on, doing up the button and zipper as I headed for the door. One look through the peephole had me tensing.

Unlocking the door, I opened it and leaned my shoulder against the doorjamb, arching an eyebrow at my boss and best friend.

"Not like you to make a personal visit."

He hummed, running his eyes over my half-naked form. Closing his eyes, he drew in a deep breath and reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Do not fucking tell me your idea of teaching your boy a lesson was to fuck him ?” he growled.

I smirked. “I mean, it worked.”

His sigh was weighted with annoyance before he stepped past me and into the hotel room. Malik was tugging his shirt over his head when Anatoly stepped in, and he quickly tugged it down the rest of the way, every single one of his shields going up against the Pakhan.

Which meant, more than likely, they were going up against me, too.

Fuck .

“Anatoly,” he said quietly.

“Find some shoes, Shadow,” Anatoly ordered. “You and I have a dinner reservation.”

“The fuck?” I blurted, instantly suspicious. Malik cast me a questioning look, and though I was sure Anatoly wouldn’t pick up on it since Malik hid it well, there was a hint of trepidation there, too. My man just couldn’t hide a fucking thing from me. “What game are you playing at, Balakin?” I snapped, calling Anatoly by his last name.

“Shadow and I just need to have a talk,” Anatoly told me as Malik worked on finding his socks and shoes.

“If you fucking—” I growled, my temper spiking and my mask slipping. Anatoly knew I’d slaughter anyone who harmed Malik. He was mine .

And family or not, I'd slit Anatoly's throat if he tried anything funny with him.

Anatoly held up a hand, his brow arching in a warning to bring myself back under control. I drew in a deep breath, forcing myself to breathe so I could recenter myself and slip that mask back on. The mask that hid the demon. The monster.

"I will not harm him, Rurik," Anatoly promised me. "But I want to make him aware of some rules. Remind him of his place. If it makes you more comfortable, you can send some of your own men with us."

I looked at Malik as he stood from the bed, his shoes now on. His muscles were tight with tension as he met my gaze, his eyes hard and flinty.

"Give us a minute?" I asked Anatoly. But he knew as well as I was that I wasn't truly asking.

Anatoly inclined his head to me and then left the room, shutting the door behind him. My hand snapped out and wrapped around Malik's throat, and surprising the fuck out of me, he leaned into me, letting me take control of him all while that tension bled out of his shoulders.

Good boy .

"If you don't want to go with him, I'll put a stop to this," I promised.

Malik shook his head. "I'm good, Rurik." He sighed. "How much trouble am I in?"

I snickered and drew him closer until our lips brushed. His shaky exhale fanned over my mouth, and I barely bit back a groan.

"You actually care about being in trouble, baby?"

He cocked his head to the side just the tiniest bit. “Only if he might take me from you.”

So last night really had been all you needed, huh, Shadow ?

“No one is taking you from me,” I promised him. I kissed him hard, reopening that bite mark on his lip. I lapped at the blood there, groaning as the coppery taste of him exploded on my tongue. “I’ll be here waiting.” Releasing him, I grabbed my burner phone and pressed it into his palm, since he no longer had one. “Call me if you need me.”

He nodded once. “I will.”

17

Malik

“ You’re quieter than I thought you’d be,” Anatoly commented as his driver slowly navigated the evening traffic. I just grunted. I knew it was disrespectful to not verbally answer him, but I was in a mood. I’d been woken up from the best bit of sleep after the most earth-shattering orgasm I’d ever had, and now, I was being forced away from the one person in the world who could make my head go silent, just so Anatoly could have fucking dinner with me.

“You can speak openly with me,” Anatoly tried again.

I snorted. “Trust me, you don’t want that,” I muttered.

Anatoly hummed. “I used to wonder what Rurik’s obsession with you was. You nearly killed one of my soldiers who was gathering intel for me. I was ready to have someone take you out, but the moment Rurik laid his eyes on you on that security feed, he ordered protection on you. Made you untouchable, even to me. But now...” He cocked his head to the side as he regarded me.

“Now?” I grated, becoming increasingly annoyed.

“I think I see it. You’ve got a nasty temper, Mr. Carter. But if controlled properly, you’d make a damn good weapon, I think.”

I sneered at him, my temper spiking. “I’m not a fucking weapon ,” I growled. “I’m a

goddamn person .”

He arched a brow at me. “No? We’re all weapons, Shadow. Even Rurik is a weapon. I’m a weapon. My own daughter was a weapon I was able to utilize to solidify an alliance with the Ghost Born MC.”

My upper lip curled in disgust. “Think so low of your own blood?”

He shook his head. “I love my daughter. Amaliya has never wanted for anything in her life, and now that she is married to Shaw, she is happy . They are so blissfully happy, it is kind of sickening to watch, if I am honest. But it does not change the fact that we are all weapons. And I am sure Rurik will have you filling your role soon enough.”

I was so tense, it fucking made my muscles ache. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” I snapped.

Anatoly shrugged. “Take it to mean however you want.” We pulled into a parking lot, and his driver pulled up to the front door of a restaurant that I would one hundred percent feel uncomfortable in. It was clearly fancy, complete with a valet and two people ready to open the restaurant doors. Familiar fury crackled beneath my skin, and my hair stood on end. I didn’t want to fucking be here, and I didn’t want to be in Anatoly’s presence a second fucking longer.

But I knew I didn’t have much of a choice in the matter. Rurik might think he had me protected and that no one could touch me, but I knew if Anatoly truly wanted me to bend to his will, he’d make me—consequences be damned.

Anatoly’s door opened first, and he slid out. My door opened next, and I narrowed my eyes at the Men In Black mother fucker who opened my door. I stepped out and made my way around to where Anatoly was standing, waiting on me. “Shall we?” he

asked, gesturing to the hotel door.

The glint of the sun reflecting off steel caught my eye right before a red laser landed on Anatoly's chest. "Move!" I barked, shoving him to the side. As soon as I moved into the laser's path, pain exploded through my chest, and another shot landed in my shoulder. The force of the bullets slammed me back against the side of the SUV, and immediately, warmth spilled from the wounds, and crimson stained my skin and shirt.

People were screaming. Chaos was ensuing. But I couldn't think past the pain searing through my chest and shoulder, and my breaths were too shallow. The world was spinning around me as I slumped to the ground, so much liquid warmth sliding down my body. Too much.

Anatoly appeared in front of me, and he ripped open his dark button-down shirt, yanking it off, leaving him bare and exposed. I grunted when he applied pressure to my chest. One of his men pressed their shirt to my shoulder. "Stay with me, Shadow," Anatoly snapped, fury lining his face. "Why the fuck did you do that, you idiot?"

"Because of Rurik," I rasped, my eyelids drooping. He was Rurik's best friend, and I didn't want to witness Rurik's pain if something happened to Anatoly.

Anatoly slapped me—hard. My head whipped to the side, and my eyes snapped back open. I slowly turned my head to look back at him as sirens wailed in the distance, drawing closer and closer. "Yeah, well, you should have let me take the fucking bullets," he growled. "Because now my second is going to lose his goddamn mind, and I will not be able to stop him, Shadow. You are the only thing in this world he truly cares about, and he is going to burn everything to the ground to get revenge."

A stupid smile tilted my lips as I sagged, the world going dark around me. "Fucking good," I whispered.

“Malik!” Anatoly barked, but the world faded to nothing.

18

Rurik

My phone rang from beside me, and I looked away from my laptop where I was attempting to get some work done while Shadow was with Anatoly. Sighing, I grabbed the device, answering Anatoly's phone call.

"What did he do?" I asked in lieu of a greeting. Because the only reason he was calling me already was because Shadow had done something to piss him off. They hadn't even been gone thirty damn minutes.

"Get to the hospital," Anatoly barked. I swear to fuck, my heart stopped in my chest. There was a lot of commotion in the background—beeping, loud talking, the opening and shutting of drawers. "I'm dropping the location to you now." My phone pinged with the coordinates, and I lurched off the bed, scrambling to get dressed and find my fucking shoes.

"What the fuck happened?" I barked. "Where's Shadow, Balakin?" I snarled, my chest feeling too fucking tight. Something in my gut was telling me Malik was in trouble. Something was fucking wrong. "Where the fuck is he?!" I roared when he didn't answer me.

"Just get here."

He ended the call before I could say another word. Snarling, I stormed out of the room, heading for the room next door while still buttoning my shirt. Denis answered

the door in a hurry when I banged my fist against it. “Sir?”

“Car keys,” I growled, holding my hand out. “Where is the car parked at?”

“In the parking garage on the first floor, sir.”

He didn’t question me or attempt to try to drive me himself. Instead, he simply reached into his pocket and grabbed the keys to the SUV, placing them in my palm. I turned on my heel and stormed off for the stairs. I didn’t have time to deal with the goddamn elevator. I was coming unglued.

If something was wrong with my Shadow, I was going to burn this world to the fucking ground, starting with Anatoly mother fucking Balakin. And I would dance in the ashes of it all after I was fucking done.

The receptionist working the front desk looked up in alarm when I slammed through the stairwell, but she smartly kept her mouth shut and cast her eyes away from me. I made my way out through the exit that led to the parking garage, easily finding the gleaming, black SUV amongst all the other vehicles.

Once I was inside, I quickly backed out and headed for the exit. And when I hit the highway, following the GPS to the hospital, I pressed my foot down on the accelerator, breaking numerous laws as I rushed to get there.

If Malik was not waiting there for me, alive and fucking healthy and unharmed, I was going to snatch the leash Anatoly had on me right out of his cold fucking hands. And I was going to turn into the feral dog he’d done his damnest to train.

“Where are you?” I snarled into my phone when I walked inside and didn’t see Anatoly or any of his men waiting on me in the emergency room lobby. I prowled toward the heavy steel doors that led into the emergency department, ignoring the

nurse who was shouting at me to stop and trying to tell me I couldn't go back there.

I'd like to see her fucking stop me.

I barged through the doors, my eyes scanning the alarmed workers for any sign of men in black suits. And there they were—triage room thirteen.

“Room thirteen,” Anatoly told me just as I started making my way in that direction.

I hung up the phone and shoved it into my pocket. The guard standing outside of the room swallowed thickly when he saw me and quickly moved out of my way, casting his eyes away from me. I could only imagine what I looked like—cold and fucking empty . Why the fuck did I need to fake anything or wear that goddamn mask when I knew in my fucking gut that I was going to walk into my worst nightmare as soon as I opened that damn door?

Gripping the handle, I shoved the door open?—

And immediately stopped in the doorway.

Anatoly was standing beside the hospital bed, which meant he wasn't the one in it. For the first time in my long, cold existence, I prayed one of his men would be in that bed instead and he'd called me to come here so we could figure out a plan of retaliation.

Steeling myself, I turned to face the bed, already knowing in my gut I'd find my worst nightmare come to life.

Shadow was laying in the bed, his eyes closed, and his skin too pale. He was hooked up to a blood bag, an IV line, a heart monitor, a blood pressure cuff, and an oxygen sensor. My hands curled into fists, and my breathing grew heavier as that monster

beneath my skin clawed its way to the surface.

“He’s alive,” Anatoly told me as if that was supposed to somehow calm me down. “He took the bullets for me.”

I swung my gaze to his. A lesser man would’ve at least flinched, but Anatoly just met my gaze, more than aware of the monster I truly was. “He took bullets ?” I growled. He’d put a mother fucking s on the end of that word, and I didn’t miss it. “And he took them for you ?”

Anatoly nodded once as I walked further into the room, coming to stand beside him as I stared down at my man. He was so fucking pale, the color leeches from his skin. He was damn near gray, and seeing him so weak and helpless shook me to my fucking core.

“Took two—one to the chest and one to the shoulder. Damn near killed him. Help got to us in time.” Anatoly sighed. “He saw what I didn’t.”

Anatoly didn’t see my fist coming. It was the only explanation for why he didn’t block it. His back slammed against the wall with the force of my swing, and numerous medical items crashed to the floor as his hip knocked into the cart next to him. I pointed a finger at him, my hand trembling with my rage.

“If he dies,” I snarled, “I will burn your entire fucking empire to the ground starting with you ,” I promised. “Mark my fucking words, Pakhan.”

Anatoly clenched his jaw, but he kept his mouth shut. Turning on my heel, I stormed out of the room. Two officers were waiting on me, and the smile I aimed at them was cruel and full of pure malice. “Problem, officers?” I taunted.

“Let him go,” Anatoly said from behind me.

The officers stepped aside dutifully, and I stormed out of the hospital. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I called Hiram. He answered on the second ring. “Rurik,” he drawled.

“Your brother is laid up in a hospital bed,” I told him, barely recognizing my own voice. “Get two men up here to protect him. We’re at fucking war.”

With that, I hung up the phone and made my way to the SUV. Whoever put those bullets in my man was about to fucking meet their goddamn maker.

And I didn’t mean the man high in the fucking sky.

Nah.

They were about to meet me .

19

Rurik

There wasn't a security system I couldn't hack my way into. If the FBI knew about me, they wouldn't lock me up behind bars. No—they'd try to recruit me. To bring me under their control. Because I wasn't just good at hacking; I had a knack for always getting what I wanted.

Right then, what I wanted was the blood of whoever put Malik in the hospital on my fucking hands.

I growled under my breath when yet another security camera didn't show me anything. Gritting my teeth, I shoved my laptop away and pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to force myself to think past the rage bubbling in my gut. From what I saw from the restaurant's camera feeds, it'd been a sniper that hit Malik with those bullets. And Anatoly was right—those bullets had been meant for him, not my man.

Yet Malik had shoved Anatoly out the way and taken those bullets for him.

"You fucking idiot," I whispered to myself.

Shoving from the bed, I paced to the window and crossed my arms, looking out over the streets. I needed to think like a sniper. Like someone intent on taking out a high-value target. There'd be a lot of money riding on a hit like that, which meant there would be a lot more risk. Anatoly was not just the leader of a huge criminal organization. He was involved in politics all over the world. He was a businessman.

His death—or even the attempt on his life—would make a big splash. And it already was. Even on my way back into the hotel, all I'd heard were people whispering about the attempt on Anatoly Balakin's life and the unknown man who'd saved him, risking his own life in the process.

Yeah... Malik was going to fucking pay for that one when he woke up.

I focused on the buildings across from me. If I, personally, was taking out a high-value target like the Pakhan, I'd get somewhere that couldn't be easily seen by cameras. I'd be crouched low so no one could see me from the street. I'd be close enough to get my shot cleanly, but I'd still be far enough away that when the job was done, I could quickly gather my shit and get the fuck out.

Or maybe I wouldn't leave. Wouldn't go on the run. Maybe, if I had balls big enough, I'd live my life normally. And a man taking on the job of assassinating Anatoly Balakin had balls that were just about too fucking big for the United States of America.

If I was just cocky enough, too, I'd do the hit from my apartment. And there were apartment buildings over there. Because who would think to look in someone's own home first? If someone was just cocky enough, they'd think, surely, no one would do a hit from the comfort of their own fucking living room. Which would give them ample amounts of time to do clean up and get rid of the weapon.

I snatched up my laptop again and watched the video where Malik got shot, forcing my rage down as I watched those bullets slam into him and knock him back against the SUV. Instead, I watched that laser, and then, I went through all the surrounding buildings, going through their security feeds again. Except this time, I was much more careful.

This time, I was thinking like the sniper.

And there .

Mother fuck, am I fucking good.

Sure enough, it was coming from an apartment. The rifle was just resting on the edge of the window. I would've missed it if I didn't know exactly what I was looking for. I zoomed in, taking in the furnishings. It was a small apartment, just a studio. A bed was against one wall, and a TV was mounted across from it. There was a bowl of some kind of food sitting on the kitchen table. No doubt, he'd paused his dinner to try to take out Anatoly.

A smirk curved my lips, and for the first time since I got that soul-crushing phone call that split me the fuck apart, I felt like I was coming back together again.

"Gotcha," I whispered.

It didn't take me long to figure out which apartment it was and who it belonged to. Joseph White—ex-military, SEALs to be specific. Grew up in foster care. Not married. No kids. No girlfriends or fucktoys. He was a man that went to work as a quiet little accountant and took hitman jobs on the weekend.

He was well known on the dark web. He only took high dollar kills. Didn't know what he did with all that money considering where he lived, but I imagined it wasn't about the money for him.

Nah... it was about the thrill of the kill.

I found his information and sent him a little message under some bullshit alias I created on a message board, asking him if we could meet for coffee at a quaint little coffee shop in a small town. The owner of the cafe I planned to meet at was the wife of one of Anatoly's guards, Akim, and I knew she'd keep her mouth shut. The

woman was fierce and ex-military as well, only she'd served in the Marine Corps. The only reason she'd left was because she'd fallen in love with Akim.

And the only reason she wasn't one of Anatoly's soldiers was because her husband would not hear a word of it. Honestly, it was the only control that fiery woman let him have.

I thought it was adorable.

She had Akim by the balls, and we all knew it.

When Joseph responded we could meet that night at nine, I closed my laptop and gathered my keys. I didn't have long to get there if I wanted to have the element of surprise on Joseph. Once I was on the highway, I called Larisa, Akim's wife. She answered on the third ring.

"Rurik," she drawled.

"Hey, doll," I rasped, forcing myself to keep my tone pleasant even though I'd felt anything but since Anatoly had fucking called me. "Need to use your coffee shop."

She sighed. "I'm not cleaning up after your mess, Rurik. You better get a clean-up crew."

My lips quirked in amusement. "Don't I always get a clean-up crew?" I asked. "I'm a big boy, Larisa."

She snorted, and I cracked a grin. "What time do you need it?"

"Nine, which is after closing, so it won't interfere with your business hours," I told her.

She scoffed. “So considerate, Rurik.” Sarcasm laced her tone. I snickered. “Sure. I’ll be in my office doing paperwork. Don’t bring the local law enforcement to my doorstep.”

“Never,” I promised.

With that, I ended the call and tossed my phone into the passenger seat.

The coffee shop was dimly lit, and I was nursing a latte when Joseph pulled into the nearly empty lot. He turned his vehicle off and stepped out, every move confident and sure. Like he was in control of how this meeting would go.

The moment he stepped inside, he would realize he wasn’t. Because I’d taken the time to hide my SUV in the back, and I’d moved Larisa’s BMW to the front of the store. If he’d taken time to run the plates, he’d realized it was owned by the coffee shop owner. It made him feel like he had the element of surprise. Like he was in control of how this meeting went.

My gun was resting on the table, and Larisa had turned off all her security cameras, even going so far as to unplug them. And since we controlled them, no security company would be calling her to bug her and try to come fix the problem.

The bell above the door jingled, and he stepped further inside, his eyes scanning the room as the door shut behind him. When his eyes landed on me, he froze, his face paling the tiniest bit. I smirked and sipped at my latte.

“If you run,” I warned as he took a step back toward the door, “I will catch you. You’re only postponing the inevitable. It was, after all, all too fucking easy to find you.” I smirked. “I’m sure you thought taking out a target like Anatoly from your apartment would give you an added bit of protection, right?” My smile dropped from my face, and I stared at him with an expression empty of anything. “But then you

made the mistake of shooting the wrong mother fucker. I wasn't stopping until I found you, Joseph White."

Lifting the gun, I pointed it at his head. "Want to know something about me, Joseph? Whether I'm at close range or I'm shooting from the distance you shot my man at, I don't need a laser. And I never fucking miss."

"Wait—" he rasped as I clicked the safety off. I arched a brow at him. "I can tell you who ordered the hit."

I snorted. "I'll find that out in the morning," I assured him. "I'm not here because of Anatoly Balakin, Joseph. I'm here for Malik Carter—the man you put two bullets into today."

With that, I pulled the trigger, watching as his brain matter exploded all over the wall behind him. Larisa stepped out of the back as I set my gun down, and her face screwed up in distaste. Her upper lip curled in disgust as she looked at me. "You couldn't have used a gun of less caliber?"

I waved my hand at the splatter. "And miss all those dramatics? No."

She made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat before spinning on her heel and going back into her office. I pulled my burner out and made the call.

Her place would be spotless in an hour, and her walls and floor would be so clean, people could fucking eat off of them in the morning when she opened.

I grabbed my cup and swallowed down the last of my latte. After tossing it into the trashcan, I made my way through the kitchen and to the back door.

It was time to get the fuck back to Shadow.

20

Malik

I fucking hurt . And something annoying was beeping, dragging me out of my slumber and grating on my last fucking nerve. Slowly, I peeled my eyes open, thankful the room I was in was dark. There was a cloying scent of disinfectant hanging heavy in the air and the low chatter that only came with hospitals was reaching my ears, almost as annoying as the fucking beeping machine.

Right—I got fucking shot trying to save Anatoly’s ass.

I hoped whoever shot me got to meet Rurik because this was going to put me out of commission for a while, and the goddamn medical bills were going to be a pain in my fucking ass. Add rehab on top of that—because I knew I would need rehab for my shoulder—and I was looking at hundreds of thousands of dollars since I didn’t have health insurance.

Mother fuck .

With that kind of debt, maybe Anatoly should’ve just let me bleed out in front of that restaurant.

“You’re awake.”

I turned my head, watching as Rurik rose from the reclining chair against the far wall, tucked into a corner. His clothes were rumpled, and he hadn’t shaved, a light stubble

coating his jaw that usually wasn't there. And his hair was shiny with oil from lack of washing. It was a bit alarming to see him so disheveled, especially when he always had his shit together.

"How long was I out?" I rasped.

"Few hours," Rurik told me as he came to stand by my bedside, his hands in the pockets of his slacks. "Long enough for you to undergo surgery to dig the bullets out of your shoulder and chest. I wasn't here for that though."

I grunted as I shifted, trying to get more comfortable. Immediately, despite clearly being pissed, Rurik began to help me, raising the bed a little with a button on the railing and adjusting my pillow for me. Once I was comfortable and my pain levels had gone down some, I looked back up at him, hating the sheen of sweat that'd formed on my skin.

"Where were you?" I asked. I wasn't upset he hadn't been here. What the fuck was he expected to do—sit in the waiting room and twiddle his thumbs while he waited for me to come out of surgery? If he had done that, I'd be pissed. All that time could've been used to find who the fuck did this to me.

Because fuck knew if he'd been on the receiving end of these bullets, I wouldn't stop until I found the mother fucker and stole the life right from their fucking eyes.

"Taking care of business," he said, leaving it at that. I nodded, knowing what he was getting at. Whoever shot me was taken care of. But then, I paused, realizing something was around my neck, and my good arm slowly raised to touch my throat. When I felt the chain there and the small padlock holding it together, my muscles froze. Tension rode my body hard, and for a moment, I couldn't fucking breathe.

"What the fuck is this?" I growled, tugging at it. But I wouldn't be breaking it. I knew

that much.

“Your new collar,” Rurik supplied. Something in me loosened knowing he’d been the one to put it on. His lips quirked in amusement. “What—you really thought I’d let someone else put a fucking collar on you, baby?” He scoffed. “Fucking think again.” Reaching forward, he fingered the padlock. “There’s a tracking device in here. Every sixty days, I have to change it out.” His eyes met mine. “But I’ll always know where you are.” He gritted his teeth, his mask slipping, that monster he hid peeking through. “When Anatoly called me to tell me to come to the hospital, I felt... lost. Untethered. Because I didn’t know where the fuck you were, and he wouldn’t goddamn tell me.”

“I was here... I think,” I said, wondering if I could remember. But all I remembered was getting shot. Everything after that was just gone.

“You were,” he confirmed. “But I didn’t know what room you were in. Didn’t know what hall or what part of the fucking hospital.” He gritted his teeth and tugged on the chain around my neck, lifting me just the tiniest bit. I grunted in pain, but he didn’t release me. “And you’re not off the hook for that stupid fucking stunt you pulled,” he growled, lowering his face to mine. His mask was completely gone now, and his eyes were cold yet somehow full of fire as he stared into my own. “When you get out of here, Malik, you’re going to pay for every bit of suffering I went through from the moment Anatoly’s call came through my line until you woke up a few minutes ago.”

I swallowed thickly, hating that his words had my dick hardening all while trepidation slid through my veins. “I’m injured,” I tried.

His lips curled up at the corner, but it wasn’t a kind smile. No, his smile was full of malice and the promise of sweet torture. “You think I don’t know how to punish you without injuring you further, Malik?” He pressed his mouth to mine in a kiss so hot and aggressive, my lips bled, and I leaked precum beneath my hospital gown. When he pulled back, his blue eyes were bright with mania, and his lips were stained red

with my blood. “I’ve been living in fucking hell since I got that goddamn phone call, Malik.”

“I’m sorry,” I rasped. And I was sorry. I never meant to make him panic like that. Or lose control of himself to this point. “I just... Anatoly has a family. A daughter and a wife. And he’s your best friend.”

“And you’re mine ,” Rurik snarled, tightening his grip on the chain until it choked me. I gripped his wrists, pain flaring through my shoulder as I did so. “Doesn’t that fucking mean something to you, Malik? I can survive losing my best friend. I cannot survive fucking losing you.”

With that, he released me, and I dropped back onto the mattress, gasping. My shoulder and chest were burning . Rurik stalked away from me, pacing to the window and staring out over the dark world outside, his hands in his pockets again as if he hadn’t just choked the absolute shit out of me. I mean, fuck, I was going to have bruises in the shape of his chain.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. I wasn’t used to apologizing. Wasn’t used to feeling guilty. But even though Rurik and I hadn’t always seen eye to eye, he’d given me freedom in my mind. When he was in control of me and I let him, my mind was free of all the millions of thoughts that constantly plagued me and left me feeling on edge. He left me feeling calm .

I couldn’t lose that. I couldn’t lose him .

He turned to face me, that mask of his carefully put back in place. An almost pleasant smile tilted his lips, and honestly, it scared the shit out of me. No one should be able to flip their emotions like that. No one .

“I know you are, baby,” he murmured, his voice like silk. I swallowed thickly. “And

once we get out of this fucking hospital, I'll make sure you don't make the same mistake twice."

Fuck .

21

Malik

I slowly peeled open my eyes, the drugs the hospital had me on making me feel a bit loopy. So when I saw Hiram and Chet standing at the foot of my hospital bed talking quietly amongst themselves, for a moment, I thought I was just seeing shit. But when Rurik gently squeezed my palm, I knew I was definitely awake.

“What are you two doing here?” I rasped. I coughed after, groaning in pain. Now that the anesthesia from surgery had worn off, I was in even more pain, despite being doped up.

Fuck, I never wanted to get shot again.

Hiram and Chet both turned to look at me. Rurik released my hand, and a moment later, he was pressing a straw between my lips. I greedily swallowed down some of the water, and when I turned my head, Rurik took the hint and set the cup of water back down.

“Heard you got shot,” Hiram said, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “Rurik thought you could use a couple of guards.” His gaze flickered to the hospital room door. “Seems to me that you’re protected well enough though. There are two Russian soldiers in front of your door, and they’re checking IDs and hospital credentials before anyone can enter your room. There are soldiers at every entrance to this hall, too.”

“Christ,” I growled, turning to look at Rurik, who was typing away at his phone. “Bit overkill, don’t you think?”

“No,” he said calmly, not bothering to look up at me. I sighed. “The only reason I don’t have this entire hospital on fucking lockdown and you as the only patient is because Anatoly talked me off the ledge.” I stared at him for a moment, trying to figure out if he was joking. But when he just continued to do whatever it was he was going, I knew he wasn’t.

“So, are you two a thing now?” Chet asked, pointing between me and Rurik.

I opened my mouth, then shut it. Because I didn’t know what the fuck we were. We fucked once and then Rurik went all psycho, possessive alpha on me. What the fuck did that even mean?

“Yes,” Rurik said calmly, still not looking up from his phone.

If my heart skipped a beat in my chest at his answer... well, I was going to pretend like it hadn’t.

Chet grinned. “I fucking called it.” He held out his hand to Hiram, making me narrow my eyes at him. “Where’s my money? Told you Malik would fold eventually.”

I sneered at them as Hiram pulled his wallet from his pocket with a heavy sigh. He counted out three hundreds and slapped them into Chet’s palm. Chet kissed the bills, then stuffed them into his pocket.

“You two fucking bet on me?” I snapped in disbelief. Didn’t know why I was shocked. I shouldn’t have expected anything less. Chet was an asshole that way. I just hadn’t expected Hiram to join in on the dick’s games. Usually, he ignored that kind

of stuff.

“I was at least on your side,” Hiram said, shrugging one shoulder. “I thought you’d have more willpower.”

Rurik snorted and finally looked up from his phone, his blue eyes meeting mine. He didn’t say a word, but he didn’t need to. His lips quirked up in that fucking cocky smirk, and my dick came to life beneath the blankets piled on top of me.

Jesus Christ . How did he affect me so damn easily?

I looked away from him. “Does my mom know about this?” I asked, referring to my hospitalization.

Hiram shook his head. “No. And she’ll be pissed she was kept out of the loop, but Rurik and I both decided this would be the better route until you could get back home. There’s no reason for her to rush up here when we don’t know what’s going on or if it’s even safe for her.”

I nodded in agreement, a bit relieved. I wasn’t sure if I could handle my mother’s overbearing nature right then, no matter how much I loved her. Chet pointed to his throat, that fucking shit-eating grin tilting his lips again. “What’s this, Malik?”

My good hand lifted to finger the chain around my throat. Rurik stood just as his burner phone began to ring. “That’s his collar,” Rurik told him. “And his tracker.”

Hiram frowned at Rurik’s back as Rurik paced to the window, lifting his phone to his ear. Chet was positively fucking gleeful . “A collar ?” he asked. “A fucking tracker ?” He whistled low. “Hot damn. Now I want one.” He looked at Hiram. “You think Will would collar me if I asked him?”

Hiram reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Jesus fucking Christ,” he growled as I quietly laughed. Chet was something fucking else. And it was no secret that he and William were into some kinky shit. I was honestly surprised Chet wasn’t sporting some kind of bruising around his throat or wrists. He usually was. William was extremely rough with him, but Chet loved it.

Rurik turned away from the window, lowering his phone from his ear. His eyes were cold and flinty, and the muscle in his jaw was ticking. He let his eyes meet mine, but he addressed the room as he spoke.

“The Savage Dreams ordered the hit on Anatoly. According to my contact, he thought if he took out Anatoly, he could begin dismantling the GBMC.”

“What the fuck,” Hiram growled.

Rurik slid his hands into his pockets, the perfect picture of calm, cool, and collected even though fury crackled beneath his skin. “Trying to take out Anatoly was their first mistake. Actually hitting Malik was their second.” He looked at Hiram. “War’s started.”

Hiram closed his eyes and sighed heavily. “I’ll get everyone on board at home.” He looked back at Rurik. “Get him home where he’s safe as soon as possible.”

With that, Hiram turned on his heel and left the room. Chet smiled at me. “See you in a few days, brother.” With that, he followed Hiram out of my hospital room.

I looked at Rurik once the door shut behind them. “What’s the game plan here?”

Rurik settled himself on the edge of my hospital bed, and he reached up, fingering the chain around my neck like it soothed him to see it there. Like something in him quieted when he touched my throat and felt the warm steel resting against my skin.

“We get you out of here as soon as possible, and I get you home.”

“And you?” I asked quietly. I hated how vulnerable my voice sounded. Now that I’d finally given in to him, I didn’t want to be apart from him. Even now, just with him touching my neck and fingering my collar, my head was blissfully quiet, and I didn’t feel so on edge.

“What about me, baby?” he asked, lifting his gaze to meet mine.

I swallowed thickly, forcing myself to be vulnerable for just a moment, even if it made my skin crawl. “Are you going back to Washington?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Nah, baby. I’m wherever you are, Shadow.”

22

Rurik

Denis eased the SUV to a stop as close to the front doors of the clubhouse as he could before shutting the engine off. I turned my gaze from my laptop and focused on Malik. He'd fallen asleep not long after we left the hospital, and he still hadn't woken up. The pain meds the hospital had him on had to be some good shit.

Silently, I closed my laptop and set it aside, then leaned over and brushed my fingers over the side of Malik's neck, slipping my index finger beneath the thick chain. He shifted slightly before grunting, his brows pulling low in pain, but he continued sleeping.

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to keep that other side of me locked down. I'd taken out the man who harmed him, and with time, the Savage Dreams MC would be taken care of, too. Until then, I just needed to wait patiently—something I prided myself on being able to do—and take care of Malik so he was healthy.

Eventually, I would need him to reach out to Kaleen and find out what the fuck happened and why a meeting hadn't happened, but not yet. Not until Malik was a little more healed and not constantly doped up on pain pills.

Despite Kaleen being part of the rival crew, I was damn sure he wouldn't turn his back on Malik. He didn't strike me as that kind of man. Hell, he'd gone against his club to meet up with Malik. And from what I knew of the man, I had a feeling he wouldn't be pleased that his friend had taken two bullets that had almost killed

him—bullets that had been issued by the SDMC.

“Malik,” I murmured, gently tugging on the chain around his neck. “Come on, baby. Wake up. We’re home.”

He slowly peeled his eyes open and lifted his head off the window. Reaching up with his good arm since his other one was in a sling per my instructions since he couldn’t just seem to keep it fucking still, he rubbed at his tired eyes. Finally, he turned his head to look at me, and I slipped my finger beneath the chain on his neck again, loving the weight there. “You good?” I asked, running my eyes over his face.

“Mhm,” he grumbled. “Tired. Fuck these meds.”

I chuckled. “You need them.” Abram, one of the soldiers, opened Malik’s door then, and I tugged on his chain when he angled to get out. “Wait,” I ordered. “Don’t move.”

He didn’t put up an argument. He did arch an eyebrow at me, but he stayed quiet and obediently sat still.

Good boy .

He was learning.

Denis opened my door, and I slid out before walking around to Malik’s side. Holding my hand out, I beckoned him to place his hand in mine. When he did, I helped him out of the SUV. Once he was on his feet, I laced our fingers together, then led him inside the clubhouse. Chet and William were sitting on the couch, and Chet was napping with his head resting on William’s shoulder. William tipped his chin up at me in greeting but didn’t say a word, ever the silent one.

Hiram was at the bar pouring himself a drink, and he lifted the bottle of whiskey in his hand in greeting. “Welcome home, brother,” he said, directing his words to Malik.

Malik grunted in response, still not awake enough to form anything coherent. Malachi was sitting in a computer chair in front of the TV, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees as he shot at a bunch of zombies. I wasn’t sure he was even aware we were there because he didn’t look away from the screen.

“Headset,” Malik told me. I looked at him, arching a brow in question. He gestured at Malachi. “He has a headset in his ears. Completely zones out when he’s got them fucking things in. Fucking building could collapse around him, and as long as that game didn’t turn off, he’d never know.”

I snorted. Nolan, who had served in the military with Konrad and Shaw, stepped out of the chapel, a tablet in his hand. He held it up and nodded once at us. “Come sit in the chapel. The guys and I have done some talking, and Hiram and I want to catch you guys up.”

Placing my hand on Malik’s lower back, I led him toward the chapel. Hiram followed us in, and once the four of us were seated, Nolan slid his tablet toward us. He had some kind of military-grade shit pulled up on his screen, giving us an aerial view of... something.

“What is this?” I asked as I began to zoom in and move the map around.

“SDMC’s territory,” Nolan explained. He rolled his chair back across the floor and grabbed some papers off the filing cabinet behind him, then handed those to me as well. “This is every business they own. I figured since they not only ordered a hit on Anatoly but also fucking missed and damn near killed Malik, we could start with hitting them where it hurts, too.”

I smirked. “I like the way you think.”

“If we’re going to do that...” Malik said, taking the papers from me and scanning through them, his voice trailing off. I watched his profile, waiting for him to gather his thoughts. Malik was smart, and he was cunning. He hadn’t survived all the shit he stirred in prison by luck alone. Even with my protection, people still tried him. He was a hothead and an easy target. But he’d survived numerous attacks. “We need to hit what’ll cripple them. I imagine they’re in some kind of illegal trade, right?”

“Guns,” I said. “Sometimes drugs, but mostly guns.”

He nodded. “And that money has to be filtered through a business. I’m sure they disperse it, but to cover their tracks, most of it is going to go through their top-earning business.” He placed his pointer finger on one of the pages. “Which would be their security business—Safe Dreams.” He looked at me. “And I know you’re good with tech. We wouldn’t even have to leave the clubhouse to fuck it all up.”

Goddamn .

“I’m so fucking hard right now,” I rasped as I stared at him. And it wasn’t a lie. Hearing Malik come up with a plan that was right up my alley and would let me destroy something in my favorite way was hot as fuck. And it’d get me my own retaliation against the club for what they’d done to my man.

“Jesus Christ,” Hiram growled. “Keep it in your pants, Tarasov.”

I looked at him, snorting when I found him pinching the bridge of his nose. “You really think I’m going to let anyone see Malik naked aside from me? Lost your fucking mind if you think that.”

Nolan shook his head. “Can we trust you to handle this?” he asked, bringing us back

on topic.

I nodded and leaned back in my seat. My gaze focused on the chain-shaped bruise on the back of Malik's neck, and I reached up to finger it, making him shiver. "Yeah," I said, still not looking away from that pretty bruise marring Malik's skin. "Give me a few days, and I'll have their company so fucking dismantled and their shit so screwed up, it'll take them months, if not years, to fix it all."

Nolan nodded once. "Good."

Malik turned to look at me, and I dropped my hand. "Can you stop playing with my neck?"

I smirked. "Why?" Leaning in, I let my lips brush his ear, and he shuddered, his eyes closing. His throat clicked as he swallowed. "Is it turning you on, baby?"

"Fucking hell," Hiram snapped. He jerked back from the table. "I'm out of here. Not listening to you two get all freaky."

Malik sighed, and then, his breath hitched in his throat when I flicked my tongue over his lobe. "I've got this urge to pierce your ear," I murmured. "Just another way for me to mark you and claim you, baby."

"I'm weirdly turned on right now," Nolan muttered.

Malik snorted, breaking the spell, and I leaned back. Nolan slid the papers and his tablet back to him and stood up. "It's good to have you back home, brother," he told Malik. "It was oddly weird not having you here."

Malik frowned but didn't say anything, like he didn't really know what to do with that confession. And maybe he didn't. I was fully aware he'd always felt like he had

to be here rather than anyone actually wanting him here. But this was his family.

It was another reason I'd ordered he be allowed in without needing to prospect. Sure, Malik had his mom, but he needed a brotherhood. A home. People who would have his back through thick and thin.

Malik turned to look at me once we were alone. "You really want to pierce my ear?"

I nodded. "Yeah, baby," I rasped. "I do. I want to mark you in every fucking way I can."

His teeth sank into his bottom lip, and my cock jerked behind the zipper of my slacks. But then, surprising me, he nodded. "Yeah—okay."

I grinned, and it was purely wicked. "Really?"

Malik's breath hitched in his throat, and his pupils dilated. "Yeah," he croaked.

I hummed and reached up to play with the lobe of his ear. "Then consider yourself pierced, baby."

23

Malik

I couldn't believe I'd fucking agreed to this. I blamed it on my dick. I always agreed to stupid shit when my dick was hard.

I blew out a soft, nervous breath as I watched Rurik sterilize the needle he would use to pierce my ear. He had alcohol wipes set out along with some kind of saline spray that he said I would need to use for a few weeks while my piercing healed. And sitting on the nightstand was the earring that would go in my ear—an R with tiny, glittering diamonds.

When he'd said he was marking me, he hadn't been fucking joking. While I'd been napping after taking more pain pills earlier, he'd apparently gone out and gotten all this shit. When I'd woken up, he'd been sitting in a chair beside my bed, his eyes on his phone. But he knew the moment I woke up because he'd set that phone aside and gave me his undivided attention, only asking one thing: "You ready?"

No... No, I was, in fact, not fucking ready to be goddamn stabbed in my fucking ear.

"Do you even know what you're doing?" I asked, frowning at him, tension bubbling in my gut. "Have you ever pierced someone before?"

"Nope," he said, even going as far as popping the P. And while that freaked me out a little, I also refused to look too closely at the relief that flooded me. While I was a bit terrified of being pierced by someone that had never pierced someone before, I was

also happy that he'd never touched anyone else like that.

He had me all fucked up... and dammit, I didn't hate it.

He turned to face me, and I sucked in a sharp breath when he suddenly straddled my thighs, though he didn't sit down. Instead, he gripped my chin with his free hand and turned my head so my right ear was facing him. I gripped his thigh with my one good hand and blew out a soft breath, hoping it would calm me.

It didn't.

"I swear to fuck, Rurik, you better know what you're doing," I muttered.

He didn't answer me. I listened as he tore open an alcohol wipe and began to sanitize my ear. Then, he was gripping my earlobe. My fingers tightened on his thighs, my grip no doubt leaving bruises. But I couldn't bring myself to care. He was about to stab me with a fucking needle, after all.

"On three," he told me. "One. Two."

"Fuck !" I barked when he stabbed the needle through my earlobe. "What the fuck happened to three?!" I shouted at him as he slid the earring into the hole he'd put through my flesh.

"You would've tensed," he said as if I was overreacting. I growled at him as I glared at the floor. He cleaned my ear and stepped back, a dark gleam glittering in his blue eyes as I turned my head to face him. "Fuck, you look hot as fuck, Malik."

I reached up to touch the earring in my ear, and my heart jolted all while my cock thickened. Before I could open my mouth to say anything, I suddenly heard my mom shouting from downstairs. My face paled a little.

“Oh, fuck,” I whispered, that sense of calm I’d found immediately leaving me. She sounded angry .

Rurik chuckled. “Man up, baby, and go face her. You’re the one who hasn’t called her. You think when you went silent for days, she wouldn’t find out what happened?”

“Malik fucking Quinn Carter!” Mom bellowed, calling me by my full name. I winced. Yeah, she was pissed alright. “You get your ass down these stairs right now !”

Sighing, I stood from the bed, hurrying to the door. Steeling myself, I made my way downstairs. Mom was standing in the middle of the main area, her hands on her hips as she glared at me. I grimaced.

“Hi, Mom.”

“ Hi, Mom ?” she echoed, her voice shrill as she raked her eyes over me, taking in my arm, which was in a sling. I hated the damn thing, but Rurik forced me to wear it when I was awake because otherwise, I moved my arm too much for his tastes. “That’s all you’ve got to fucking say to me after getting shot ?!” she shouted. “I think you took twenty damn years off my life, boy!”

I sighed and reached up to scrub a hand down my face. “Ma, I’m sorry. To be honest, I’ve been kind of out of it. The hospital kept me doped up, and the pain meds keep me really tired.”

“I don’t give a single fuck,” she snapped. “I should not have found out you were shot from Rurik.”

I spun around to face the traitor in question, who had one shoulder propped against the wall at the bottom of the stairs, his hands shoved into the pockets of his perfectly

pressed slacks. His lips quirked in amusement at my glare. “What, baby?”

“Oh, you fucking asshole ,” I growled.

His eyes lit up at my rage. “What? She called me asking if you were okay when you didn’t answer her calls. Did you think I would lie to my future mother-in-law?”

“Future mother-in-law?” I spluttered, my mind fucking spinning. “What the fuck , Rurik?”

He snorted. “You thought I put a chain around your neck, a tracker in your lock, and a piercing through your ear without every intention of turning you into a Tarasov, Malik? Sorely mistaken if you thought that, baby.”

I shook my head and stormed toward the bar. “I need a fucking drink.”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Mom snapped, jabbing her finger in my direction, making me halt in reaching for a Vodka bottle. I scowled down at the bar counter, feeling like I was crawling out of my skin. “One, you are on parole, Malik.” I sighed. Rurik would never allow me to get carted back to prison, especially not over something as stupid as drinking, but I didn’t dare open my mouth to argue with her. “And you’re on pain pills, boy.”

“Listen to your mom,” Rurik taunted. For a brief moment, I thought about punching him in his face.

Instead, I pointed a finger at him. “Shut the fuck up,” I growled. My head was spinning, and my shoulder was throbbing. My goddamn chest was aching. I drew in a deep breath, trying to steady myself. “I’ll deal with you in a minute.” Turning to Mom, I blew out that same breath I’d just sucked into my lungs. “I’m sorry, Ma. And I mean that. I really am.” I leaned heavily on the counter, suddenly extremely tired

and just wanting a goddamn nap. “Fuck.”

Mom was suddenly in front of me, and she gently led me to a chair to sit down. She pressed her fingers to my forehead. “You’re sweating, Malik.”

“Just not feeling good,” I told her honestly. I was in pain and tired and all of this was too much to handle.

“Here.” Rurik appeared behind her, holding a bottle of water and one of my oxys. “You’re due for pain meds.”

“They make me loopy, and Mom is here,” I told him, shaking my head. “I’ll take it later.”

“You’ll take it now,” Mom snapped at me before Rurik could open his mouth to probably tell me the same. Or force the pill down my throat. Who knew what choice he’d make. “The least you can do for me after scaring me half to death is take your medication and not be in pain. You’ll heal much faster if you keep your pain levels under control.”

I sighed. “Fine,” I grumbled, opening my mouth so Rurik could plop the pill in my mouth. Mom moved aside, and Rurik cradled the back of my head, holding the water to my lips. Once I had the pill down, he moved away again.

Mom ran her hand over my hair, her features softening. “You go on back upstairs and get some rest,” she told me, her voice much calmer now. “But—and hear me fucking clear, son—” she leaned in close to me, our noses almost brushing and making me go cross-eyed as I tried to focus on her, “if you get injured again and I have to hear about it from someone else other than you, I will take a belt to your ass.”

I gaped at her. “I’m an adult.”

She scoffed. “Then act like one, Malik.”

“Daaaamn, Mama Carter is a beast,” Malachi said, whistling low.

My mom swung her hard gaze to him, and he cringed. “Malachi,” she said calmly, and he looked at her, “shut your mouth, or I’ll take a belt to your ass, too.”

He nodded once, not daring to argue with her. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mom kissed my cheek. “Go upstairs,” she told me, her voice soft and soothing. “I’ll be back later tonight with your favorite casserole.” She looked at Rurik as I stood and wrapped my one arm around her in a hug. Immediately, she enveloped me in her embrace. “Take care of my son, Rurik.”

He nodded at her. “Always,” he promised her. He held his hand out to me once I released her. “Come on, baby. Upstairs.”

“I still haven’t forgotten about your mother-in-law comment,” I muttered as I gave him my hand, the pain medicine already making me sleepy and unsteady on my feet. I did not do good on narcotics.

He hummed. “Be mad about it all you want, Shadow. Just remember, I’ve got all the patience in the world when it comes to you, and I always get my way.”

24

Rurik

Malik's lips were softly parted as he slept, little snores leaving his lips. He'd been deeply asleep for a couple of hours now, and it was nearly five in the evening. It wouldn't be long before his mom showed back up with dinner, which he would need to eat once it arrived. He hadn't eaten near enough today for the pain meds he'd taken, which was one of the reasons he was so loopy and the oxys affected him so quickly earlier.

I fingered the cock cage in my grip as I stared down at my man, admiring the way the diamonds in his earring glittered under the soft, yellow light of the lamp. Just seeing that R in his ear and the steel, chain-link collar around his neck made me hard as fuck for him.

And I had a punishment to deliver him, too. He was in no shape to be having sex—not with his injuries still so fresh. But I knew how to torment him in other ways without having to fuck him like I had in that hotel room.

I carefully crawled onto the bed, being careful not to wake him. Malik was naked after I'd given him a sponge bath to clean the sweat off his skin, and I took a moment to admire how fucking beautiful his body was. He was all lean, cut muscle and smooth, unblemished skin apart from a few small scars he'd received from fights and the gauze covering his stitched-up gunshot wounds that I knew would leave nasty-looking scars.

Being extra careful and glancing up at him every few moments, I slipped the ring over his flaccid dick, then behind his balls. I stilled when he grunted and shifted a little, but then, he settled again, those adorable snores still leaving his lips. Smirking, I slid the cage over his cock, and then, I fastened the little lock into place.

Sitting back on my heels, I admired my handiwork, my mouth watering at the sight of his dick inside the cage. Fuck, he looked hot like that. All at my fucking mercy. And while I would have liked to have tied him to the bed just to torture him a little more, it wasn't possible. I didn't want to do more to injure him.

The cock cage by itself would have to do.

I slid my hand between his parted thighs, dragging a finger over his hole. His breath hitched in his throat, and when I slid my finger over the area between his balls and his ass, he moaned, his legs spreading further for me. I saw his cock try to rally, but it immediately deflated again, unable to get hard inside the cage.

And just like that, his eyes snapped open. He looked at my smirking face for a split second before his gaze dropped to his caged dick. He moaned helplessly, his head dropping back to the pillow.

“Rurik,” he growled.

“What, baby?” I asked, using that cool, calm voice I knew grated on his fucking nerves when he was feeling out of sorts. “Something the matter?”

“Why the fuck is my dick in a cage?” he snarled at me, his perfect face screwed up in anger. “Take it off, Rurik. This isn't comfortable.”

“It's not supposed to be.” Reaching up, I slowly began to unbutton my shirt. Malik's breathing grew heavier with every inch of skin I revealed until my shirt fell

completely open, baring my inked skin to his hungry, dark-eyed gaze. “Remember me telling you I was going to punish you for that shit you pulled?” His eyes widened. “It’s time, baby.”

“Fuck you,” he growled, his dick trying to rally once again, only to immediately soften once more. He snarled with impatience and anger.

Fuck, he was so beautiful when he was falling apart for me. This anger was different from his usual anger. This was him desperate to get off with me and for me, but he couldn’t.

Because I owned his pretty cock, and it was under my control.

I hummed as I uncuffed my sleeves and unbuttoned them. When my shirt pooled behind me on the bed, Malik’s breath hitched in his throat. Slowly, just to torture him, I undid the clasp on my slacks and slid down my zipper. When he saw I’d gone commando, he groaned and closed his eyes, his fingers twitching like he wanted to touch himself. But he and I both knew even if he touched himself through the bars of his cage, it’d be useless and would just torture him more.

Actually...

“Slide that hand on your cock, Malik,” I ordered, my voice low and gravelly. He opened his eyes, cutting his dark eyes to me, annoyance flashing in his dark eyes. I arched a brow at him. “Malik...” I warned.

Sneering at me, he did as I instructed, and a broken moan shattered the room as he touched his soft cock through his cock cage. I hummed and took myself in hand before straddling his thighs to keep them pinned to the bed. He groaned, his fingers pausing in their stroking.

“Did I say you could stop?” I asked. He bared his teeth at me but resumed stroking his fingers over himself, a tortured moan crawling up his throat that had my cock throbbing. He was goddamn breath taking when he lost himself like this.

Leaning over him, I grabbed the lube from the nightstand and used some to slick myself before tossing the bottle aside. Malik sank his teeth into his bottom lip as he watched me begin to stroke myself, and when I rubbed my thumb over my slit, gathering the precum there, he fucking whimpered all while he scowled at me, his fingers still working over himself through the bars of his cage.

“Mad, baby?” I rasped as I twisted my hand over my head before sliding my fist back down myself.

“Fucking pissed,” he growled before groaning, his neck arching. “This is torture, Rurik.”

A husky laugh spilled from my lips. “It’s supposed to be. It’s a punishment, remember?” Though, I wasn’t going to last long—not with him beneath me, skin flushed, pupils blown wide, teeth sinking into his bottom lip, and those wrecked moans crawling up his throat. But I wasn’t in the business of edging myself. I liked instant gratification.

And I knew it’d just agitate him more to see me get off so easily while he was trapped, dick soft and needy.

“Rurik, please,” he begged. “I won’t do anything stupid like that again. I swear I won’t. Just please take this cage off.”

“No,” I breathed. “I don’t think you’ve learned your lesson yet.”

A whine slipped from his pouty lips before he could stop it. His knees tried to bend

behind me, but with me sitting on his thighs, he couldn't do it without toppling me over. And I knew he wouldn't do that. Because even while he was angry and desperate, he didn't want to do anything to make this worse on himself.

My balls drew up tight as I watched him gasp and squirm, desperate and needy, and with a low groan, I spilled into my fist, some of my cum dripping between the bars of his cock cage. He growled, baring his teeth at me, rage and desperation burning in his eyes. Smirking at him, I moved, and he spread his legs.

“Rurik—what the fuck?” he snapped when I pushed one of his knees up and kneeled between his parted thighs. When my cum and lube-soaked fingers glanced over his rim, he moaned, parting his thighs even more for me. I pressed two fingers inside him, and he pushed down, forcing me deeper into his body.

When I curled my fingers, finding that sweet spot inside of him, he cried out, his back bowing off the bed before a hissed, pained breath escaped his gritted teeth. I pressed my free palm to his abdomen, pinning him to the mattress. And then, I began to toy with that spot inside of him, rubbing my fingers over it.

He trembled, and when a tear ran down his cheek, I grinned. “You going to come for me, baby?” I asked.

“Can't with this fucking thing on,” he managed to gasp out, his thighs shaking wildly now. “Please stop torturing me, Rurik.”

“You can,” I assured him. “It just won't be the orgasm you're used to.” He lifted his head, confused in his haze. I stroked my fingers over his stomach. “Relax and just feel, Malik.”

He gave me his middle finger, making me grin, but dropped his head back to the pillow. I continued toying with him, my cock rallying again as I watched him become

increasingly more desperate. He was moaning and whimpering like a whore now, and his cheeks were drenched in his tears as I tortured him so fucking sweetly.

And then, it happened. He gasped, choking on his next breath. His body jerked, and he managed to croak my name, his throat wrecked from how much he'd been crying for release. I eased my fingers out of him, then moved over his body, planting a hand on either side of him.

He opened his bleary eyes to look up at me, and I gently swept some of his tears off his cheek. "See?" I asked. "Told you."

"Fuck you," he muttered, giving me his classic comeback response. But his hand belied his words as he gripped my waist and tugged me down just enough that our torsos pressed together. "Can the cock cage come off now?"

I chuckled and pressed my lips to his in a soft kiss before I rolled off of him and got off the bed. "No," I said as I headed for the bathroom to wash my hands and clean my cock up.

"What?!" he barked after me. "Rurik, come take it off!"

I snickered. "Your punishment's not over, baby. You're wearing that until tomorrow morning."

"Oh, fuck you," he snarled.

I grinned as I flicked on the bathroom light with my clean hand. "In due time, Shadow."

25

Rurik

Malik's breathing was soft and deep as he slept, his snores barely audible. There was something about feeling his back rise and fall against my chest that settled me. In my arms like this, I knew he was safe. Knew no one could touch him.

Malik had gone to sleep pissed at me, but that hadn't stopped him from tucking his body into mine so I could spoon him. Even angry at me, he knew where he belonged. But honestly, the only person he could be angry with was himself. If he had just let Anatoly take those fucking bullets, he wouldn't have been tortured and had to sleep with his cock in a cage.

A cage he still had on.

But I was about to relieve him, just as I promised I would. I was nothing if not a man of my word, after all.

I turned onto my back and grabbed the key off the nightstand. I'd left it there as a way to tease Malik further. I knew, no matter how much he wanted to, he wouldn't grab it and free himself. As much as he hated this, he liked being under my control even more. I made his head quiet. Gave him freedom and peace from his brain.

I'd need to eventually find him a trusted psychiatrist so he could get on some anxiety meds, but until then, I was more than happy to keep being this for him. His rock. His quiet place amidst all the chaos that constantly thrummed inside of him.

Sliding my arm back around him, I carefully unlocked the little padlock, then slid it free. He groaned quietly as I slid the cage off of him, but he didn't wake. Once the ring was off, I set it all aside, then gripped his cock in my hand and lazily stroked him until he was hard. A soft moan crawled up his throat as he thrust into my grasp.

"Morning," I rasped when he slowly peeled his eyes open.

"Fuck," he hissed when I swiped my thumb over his slit, gathering the precum there. I stroked my hand back down his length. My lips pressed to his shoulder, and I nuzzled the skin there as I quickened my pace, wanting to get him off. Last night had been a punishment for him, sure, but I wanted to reward him for taking that punishment so fucking well.

"Rurik..." he breathed as he rolled his hips, repeatedly thrusting his leaking shaft into my fist. "Fuuuuck," he groaned.

"Come on, baby," I murmured, gently nipping at the skin of his shoulder. It was his injured shoulder, and I didn't want to do anything to hurt him more. But I also couldn't just keep my teeth to myself. "Give it to me. Come all over my fist, Malik."

His breathing quickened, and his hips moved faster, and within a couple of minutes, he was moaning my name and his cock was pulsing in my fist, his cum covering my fingers. When he shuddered from the sensitivity of my fist around him, I carefully released him, then lifted my hand to my lips and licked his cum from my fingers. Malik rolled onto his back and groaned as he watched me with pupils blown wide and his skin flushed.

He opened his mouth to say something, but then, his regular cell phone rang. Frowning, he pushed himself up with his good arm, then reached over and grabbed it. I rolled out of bed and headed into the bathroom to clean my hand up.

“Kaleen?” Malik asked incredulously as I washed my hands. I turned my head to look back at him. “How the fuck—Yeah, give me a minute.” I walked out of the bathroom drying my hands on a hand towel, arching my brow at him. Malik looked up at me. “I need your burner.”

I grabbed it off the top of the dresser and tossed it to him. Malik dialed a number, then raised the phone to his ear. “Hey, it’s me. What the fuck is going on, Kaleen? I thought you were supposed to be trying to work something out.”

“Speaker,” I quietly ordered.

Malik quickly followed my order, putting the phone on speaker. I sat on the foot of the bed, listening as Kaleen talked. “I tried, brother. But Prez lost his shit over the fact that I even met up with you. Fucking busted my nose, then ordered the hit. Took me a minute to be able to find your number. Someone has your details locked down tighter than Fort Knox.”

Malik raised his eyes to meet mine, already knowing who did. I quietly scoffed. “Obviously not tight enough if he found your number,” I muttered. Malik’s lips quirked in amusement.

“I appreciate you trying anyway,” Malik told him. “You know we’re at war now, right? I took those bullets for Anatoly.”

Kaleen sighed. “Yeah, I know.” He blew out a harsh breath. “For what it’s worth, Malik, I’m sorry this shit is happening. Hopefully I’ll see you on the other side of all this bullshit.”

“You, too,” Malik told him. He ended the call and set my burner phone aside before reaching up to scrub his good hand down his face. Finally, he looked up at me. “He tried. I’d appreciate it if you did your best to keep him safe during all of this.”

I dipped my chin. “I’ll do my best,” I promised him. It was the least I could do for the man who’d had Malik’s back in prison.

26

Rurik

“M an, fuck you,” Malik growled at Malachi, making me lift my head from where I’d been staring at my laptop. The two of them had taken to playing on Malachi’s gaming system to pass the time while I was eyeballs deep in planting viruses in Savage Dream MC’s security company, Safe Dreams. It wasn’t something that could be done quickly, which meant I’d been sitting here for a while, carefully planting a little virus here and a little virus there, which would eventually cause their entire system to fail. And planting little viruses like this would keep them from tracing it back to me.

“It’s every man for themselves,” Malachi retorted.

Malik scowled at him as Malachi worked to revive his character. “It’s a goddamn team game, Malachi.”

I let Malik out of his sling for a little while after he’d given me his word he’d take it easy on his shoulder. And he was. He was leaned back in the computer chair he was sitting in, and he hadn’t moved his arm all that much. Until the doctor gave the all clear for him to try to resume daily activities, I was keeping Malik and his arm on a tight leash. The last thing I wanted him to do was further injure himself more and set himself back in his recovery.

“Then play like we’re a team, Malik,” Malachi retorted. I didn’t know if he was being sarcastic or not, and the frown Malik was aiming his way told me he wasn’t sure

either. That was the thing with Malachi. Sometimes, none of us knew whether he was being serious or not. Some injury or another had scrambled his brain a bit; honestly, I didn't care enough to know what'd actually happened to him.

So long as I could rely on him to have Malik's back, that was good enough for me.

I focused back on my computer as the sound of gunfire ricocheted throughout the room from the TV. The noise was grating on my nerves, but I wasn't keen on being too far away from Malik. When Malachi started shouting at someone on their team, I ground my teeth together so hard, it was audible enough that Malik looked away from the TV to shoot me a questioning glance.

And his character promptly died.

"Oh, are you fucking kidding me," Malachi growled. "How are you down again?"

"Got distracted," Malik muttered, focusing back on the television screen.

I snorted. Yeah, he'd gotten distracted alright.

"Here," Hiram said, setting a mug of coffee and a set of earplugs in front of me. "The more Malachi gets into that game, the louder he's going to get."

"Thanks," I grumbled, opening the fresh pack of earplugs. I stuffed them into my ears. They didn't silence everything, which was good since I still wanted to be aware of what was going on around me, but they muffled it all enough that I could finally fucking focus again.

After taking a sip of the coffee Hiram had given me, my eyes widened a little in surprise. There was definitely alcohol in it—tasted like Baileys. Hiram grinned at me from where he'd dropped into a seat at the table I was occupying.

“You’re a God-send,” I told him, lifting the coffee mug in his direction.

He snickered. “Listening to those two go back and forth will drive anyone to drink.”

Malik lifted his good arm, giving Hiram a stiff middle finger before he quickly dropped it back to his controller, getting back into the game again. I hunched back over my laptop, getting back to work. If I could stay focused, I could probably get this done by dinner time.

“Done,” I announced just as Nolan and Chet walked through the door with pizzas. William, who’d been silently reading a book for the past hour, looked up as the scent of pizza wafted through the room.

At my words, Malik instantly forgot about the game they were still playing, and he smirked. “It’s done?”

I nodded. “Yeah, baby. In about forty-eight hours, their entire security system will crumble, and it’ll affect everyone who does business with them.” I yawned and stretched. My damn back was stiff, and my ass hurt from sitting so long.

“It’s weird how turned on I am right now that you’re a fucking geek,” Malik said, ignoring Malachi, who was currently bitching at him for giving up the game.

I smirked. “Yeah?” I rasped, my cock thickening. Didn’t take much to turn me on where Malik was concerned, and when he was open about wanting me? Fuck, that was even hotter. I liked toying with him and working for it, but there was something about him giving in to me so easily that fucking drove me wild.

“Keep it in your fucking pants,” Hiram growled as he made his way to the bar where Nolan and Chet had deposited the pizzas. “I swear to fuck, I got enough of that shit listening to Digg edge himself while listening to the other inmates jack their dicks.”

That was how Hiram had come to be tied into the Ghost Born MC. Digg, the mother charter's road captain, had landed his ass in prison as Hiram's bunkmate. It was also how Digg had come to meet Hiram's little sister, Frankie. Hiram had asked him to protect Frankie when Digg got out, and Digg took that so literal, he'd stalked her, essentially kidnapped her, and then wifed her up.

"Wait, what?" Chet blurted, a grin splitting his lips. "Oh, you got to tell us more, man. You can't say some shit like that and leave us hanging."

"I'm frankly good with not knowing more," Malik spoke up, making me snicker.

Hiram pinched the bridge of his nose, then pointed a finger at Chet. "No. I'm fucking scarred. I don't want to relive that shit." He then looked at me and Malik, who had come to sit in the chair beside me. "If you two could keep your nasty ass talking in the bedroom, you'd be doing me a wondrous favor."

With that, he plopped two slices of pizza on a plate and then stalked toward his office, the door slamming shut behind him. Laughing quietly to myself, I pushed back from the table and headed to get me and Malik some pizza. "I'm so texting Digg later for details," Chet announced.

Nolan snorted and shook his head. "You do that, man."

Grabbing two plates and plopping two slices of pizza on each, I walked back over to the table and set Malik's plate in front of him. "What do you want to drink?" I asked him.

"Water," he told me as he picked up his slice.

After grabbing us a bottle of water to share, I sat back down. "You need to take your meds after this," I reminded him.

He sighed. “I feel fine enough to not take those fucking oxys, Rurik.”

I shrugged. “Tough. If your pain levels get out of control, it’ll be hard to bring them back down. For now, you’re following my orders.”

His lips twitched with an aborted smile. “Just for now?”

I grinned at him. He and I both knew it wasn’t just for now. Malik had been mine to own and control from the moment he damn near killed one of Anatoly’s men. And he was mine for the rest of eternity. I found him in this life, and I’d find him in every single life after this one.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:54 am

Malik

“What the fuck is that?” I asked as Rurik accepted a package from the UPS driver. When the driver had buzzed the gate, we’d all been confused as fuck because none of us ordered anything online. If we needed something, we got it from the store. And if the store didn’t have it... well, we just didn’t need it.

Having the UPS driver show up at the gate had Hiram ready to put the whole place on lockdown. He’d thought the Savage Dreams MC had sent someone to either blow us all to pieces or shoot us all.

But nope. My fucking fiancé had ordered something because he was just the kind of man who shopped online.

“We don’t get shit delivered here,” Hiram growled at Rurik when Rurik drew closer, his stress levels through the roof. I could probably place money that if he were to take his blood pressure right then, it’d be sky fucking high. “Get a fucking box at the post office if you want shit delivered.”

“UPS and FedEx don’t deliver to post office boxes,” Rurik told him in a duh tone. “Chill out. You think I’d let anyone come close enough to Malik again?”

Yeah... several months later and Rurik still hadn’t chilled out on his overprotectiveness and his possessiveness of me. I was healed and was finishing up physical therapy. Things had been eerily quiet lately. Rurik’s viruses had taken root not long after he planted them in Safe Dreams, and nothing had happened since.

He kept telling us to be patient, that retaliation would come, but quite frankly, I didn't have patience. Hiram was the most patient out of all of us, and even his patience was wearing thin.

Hiram scowled. "At least clear shit with me before you go ordering shit and having it delivered here, Rurik." With that, he turned on his heel and stormed inside, muttering something about needing a drink.

"So, what's that?" I asked again, jerking my chin in the direction of the brown cardboard box in his hands.

"Tattoo supplies," Rurik said as we began walking into the clubhouse.

I arched a brow at him. "Tattoo supplies?" I pushed open the front door to the clubhouse, letting him in before me. The door shut behind me with a quiet shnick as he nodded his head, heading for the staircase. I followed him, nervousness filling my gut. "Why the fuck do you need tattoo supplies, Rurik?" I demanded. He never ordered shit like that unless it had something to do with me.

He opened our apartment door, then turned to walk backward, smirking at me. "What do you think, baby?"

I scowled at him. He had to be fucking kidding me. "You are not tattooing me," I growled. He'd already made me his fiancé, pierced my ear, had a tracker on me, and kept this chain around my neck. We both already knew as soon as he said so, we'd be at the courthouse tying ourselves together for life.

Now he wanted to ink my skin?

I shouldn't have been surprised, honestly. But for some reason, I was. The man was just unhinged when it came to me. I both loved and hated it.

“You’ve got some time to come around to the idea,” he assured me. “I’m going to practice on fake skin before I tattoo you. I wouldn’t just jump into tattooing you without some kind of practice, Malik. I need what I put into your skin to be perfect . I refuse to damage what’s mine.”

I scowled. “That doesn’t make this any better, Rurik,” I snapped, refusing to focus on the mine part of his whole wild ass idea. “What the fuck are you even going to tattoo on me? And where are you tattooing me? Because if it’s my dick?—”

“Not your dick,” he assured me. I blew out a soft breath of relief. Thank fuck .

He set the box on the desk he’d had moved into my office so he could work comfortably and not have to be downstairs with the rest of the guys. “If I tattoo your dick, that requires recovery time for you that I frankly don’t have the patience for.”

“Then where?” I snapped.

He beckoned me closer. Blowing out a harsh breath, I walked forward until I was standing right in front of him. He and I both knew I couldn’t truly deny him of anything. We both knew if he did actually want to ink my dick, I’d let him. I’d bitch about it for sure, but I’d let him.

Wasn’t much I wouldn’t let him do, honestly. Which was a terrifying thing to acknowledge about myself. He had me so tightly wrapped around his finger, I couldn’t fucking breathe without him.

He grabbed my hand and ran the pad of his index finger along the back of my hand. “I’m going to put my first name here,” he said. He grabbed my other hand, stroking the back of it as well. “Then, I’m going to put the date you took out that guard and fucking ensnared me here.” I swallowed thickly when his hand lifted and he wrapped it around my throat. “And then, I’m putting our last name here.”

“I’m still a Carter,” I rasped.

He smirked. “For now,” he acknowledged. “Not for long though.” He pressed our mouths together in a slow, hot kiss that wreaked havoc on my senses. “Don’t get all twisted up about it,” he said as he grabbed my switch blade where it was hooked in my back pocket. I watched as he began opening the box. He handed me the blade back, and silently, I closed it and clipped it back onto my pocket. “I think you’ll like it.”

I glowered at him. “You think a lot of things,” I muttered, but I couldn’t deny that I was hard at the thought of his claim on me being so blatant and obvious. The man had fucked me up, and... goddammit, I wasn’t even truly angry about it.

He smirked and raked his eyes over me. “And I’m usually right.”

I just scoffed before turning on my heel, heading for the door. “I’m going to get dinner. You want anything specific?”

“No,” he told me. “But make sure you take one of the other guys with you.”

I sighed. Here we went with his overbearing, alpha, possessive shit. “I’m safe, Rurik,” I assured him as I pulled the door open.

“Take someone with you,” he repeated, his tone dropping an octave. It was a sign of finality. He wouldn’t argue about this, and if I tried, he’d quickly put me on my knees and abuse my throat with his cock until it hurt to talk.

Been there, done that.

I rolled my eyes. “What the fuck ever,” I muttered.

“That’s my good boy,” he praised.

I scrubbed a hand down my face, then adjusted my dick in my jeans when I hardened from that damn ‘good boy’ shit. His snicker followed me out the door before he called, “Love you, baby. Be safe.”

My heart skipped a beat at his words, just like they always did. Sometimes, it was hard to believe a man as unhinged as Rurik could love anyone, much less me. I wasn’t even sure if he knew what that word actually meant. But I knew he loved me in the only ways he knew how.

Possessively. Obsessively.

“Love you, too,” I told him before I headed down the stairs.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:54 am

Rurik

“Rurik—Christ. Fuck,” Malik grunted as I rolled my hips just right, making my cock glance over his prostate. A broken whimper slipped past his lips, and his fingers wrapped tightly around the rope securing his wrists to the headboard.