



Stealing The Biker (Royal Bastards MC: Charleston, WV #17)

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Description: Wall Street Journal & USAT Bestselling Author Glenna Maynard weaves another gritty and twisted ride in her Royal Bastards MC: Charleston, WV World.

The moment I laid eyes on Kiesha, I knew she was pure trouble.

I should have been strong enough to resist the tempting little devil with pink hair. Everything I ever wanted was within reach. I'd just gotten my sponsorship to be a prospect for the Royal Bastards MC, and I had my girl by my side. There was only one problem. I was tasked with protecting the stepdaughter of one of the club brothers. Kiesha, a gorgeous girl with a wild side I wasn't prepared for. The moment we met, she stole my breath with her beauty, and I knew my life would change forever. Only not in the way I expected it to.

All I wanted was to make the cut.

All she wanted was to steal my heart.

One mistake. One lie. Three broken hearts. What a tangled web I find myself in.

I never meant to hurt anyone, but nothing is fair in the game of love.

Now I have a choice to make.

Embrace the outlaw life I've always wanted or walk away from it all.

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Chapter One

“Prospect,” Prodigy, the club’s road captain, calls me over to where he’s been in deep conversation with Link. Prodigy is intense in his own right, but Link downright scares the shit out of me. I’ve heard too many stories about how he earned his road name. People who get on his bad side end up with a chain wrapped around their neck while being dragged behind his motorcycle.

I swallow hard at the thought as I make my way over to them, trying to play it cool and like I’m not about to shit my pants. I never know what will land me on their bad side. I don’t intend to find out.

Whatever they ask me, my response is to answer with no problem, no matter what.

“What’s up?”

“We’ve got a special job for you.”

I try not to show my excitement. I’ve been looking for an opportunity to prove myself since I got my foot in the door of the Royal Bastards Motorcycle Club as a prospect. I’m the lowest man here. Their grunt for the next year or until they decide if I’ve got what it takes to become a patched member.

Starting out from the bottom, there’s only one way to go, and that’s up. I’ve been tasked with minor jobs and am hoping they are going to give me some real responsibility to prove I’m worthy.

“Anything you need. I’m your guy.”

“Right. Have you got a backpack?”

“No. What for?”

Link narrows his eyes on me. Shit. I didn’t mean to sound defiant. Fuck.

“You’re going back to school.”

“School?” I stare at them, my brows knitting together in confusion.

“Yeah, dumbass. High school. You’re young enough to pass yourself off as a student. You’ll fit right in.”

“What am I supposed to do at a high school? They’re going to know I’m not a student.” I shouldn’t be asking questions, but sneaking around a high school could land me in some serious shit.

“We need you to protect my niece. Kiesha.” Link pulls his cell phone out to show me a picture of this gorgeous girl with light pink hair.

I can’t stop the smile that crosses my face as I study the photo of Kiesha. She’s gorgeous. Hazel eyes with more flecks of green than brown peppered with hints of a yellow gold in them. Perfectly pouty bow-shaped lips.

Thwack .

Prodigy smacks the back of my head as Link growls at me in warning. “Don’t get any ideas. This is important. Just get to the school and stick to her side. Pretend you’re her boyfriend, if that’s what it takes. But if Zoe’s ex-husband shows up, don’t engage

with him. Just focus on getting Kiesha to a safe location.”

Zoe is Link’s sister and Prodigy’s Ol’ Lady. I guess her ex-husband is back in town and causing problems. Kiesha is her youngest daughter. I overheard them discussing the situation while I was sweeping the floor.

I rub the back of my head where Prodigy smacked my neck. “Yeah. Of course. I have one question, though. What do I tell my girlfriend?”

“We’ll make sure she knows to play along. She’ll be waiting for you.”

“No. I mean Sabrina. She’s got a jealous streak.” She’s going to lose her shit over this.

“Do you want to earn your patch or not?”

“There’s nothing I want more.” And I mean that.

“Then you tell her it’s club business. She can fall in line or move the fuck on.”

“Right.” I gulp. Sabrina is going to cut my balls off. There’s no way in hell she’s going to be okay with me pretending to be someone else’s boyfriend. Especially when the girl looks like Kiesha.

She’s fucking gorgeous.

The total opposite of Sabrina. Not that my girl isn’t pretty in her own way, but I know how she’s going to react when she finds out.

She won’t care that it’s for a job. Sabrina hates that I’m prospecting. The only reason she somewhat tolerates it at all is because it keeps her close to her best friend, Ember.

They've been attached at the hip since grade school. They do everything together.

Ember is Prodigy's sister and in a relationship with Smoke. A dude that's too damn old for her, but they make their relationship work.

My cell vibrates and I'm sure it's with a text from my woman, wondering if I'm meeting her for lunch.

This will be the third time in the past week that I've stood her up. I know her patience is wearing thin and that she's tired of hearing I'm busy with the club.

I don't have a choice, though. The alternative would be telling Link no and I can't do that.

My relationship may be doomed, but I'll do whatever it takes to make the cut. There's nothing I want more than to be patched in. Even if it means putting the club before my girl. It's a sacrifice I'm willing to make if I have to choose.

Growing up, I never fit in with anyone, but here in Charleston, with the club, is where I belong. I can feel it deep in my bones that this is home. I'm meant for this.

Sabrina's going to have to make her peace with the life I want to live if she wants to be with me.

As soon as I start my truck, as if she can sense I'm thinking about her, my phone blows up with notifications for missed calls. The last thing I need is her riding my ass again about putting the club before her, but I already know I'm going to catch hell from her no matter what I do.

I decline the call and fire off a text.

Can't talk right now. I'm in the middle of something for the club.

Are we still on for lunch?

Not today.

The text bubbles move, then stop several times. She's no doubt typing and deleting her response. I don't have time to wait or to argue. It's better to ask for forgiveness later than permission now. From what I've heard about this asshole ex of Zoe's, the guy is a real douche.

I get another message from Link telling me what high school to be at and where to meet Kiesha.

I didn't want to attend class when I was in school for real and I damn sure don't want to repeat my senior year. However, this is important, and I need the brothers of the club to see that I'm reliable. That they can depend on me for anything.

Clipping my phone back into the handless holder stuck to the dashboard, I rev my engine and leave the clubhouse. My first destination is stopping off at a drugstore to grab a few school supplies that will aid in making my cover believable. A couple of notebooks and pens, along with a basic black backpack.

Thinking of returning to school is like going back to my own personal hell. Boring as fuck classes, pointless drama, gross food, and even nastier bathrooms. Is there anything worse than being forced to attend school when you graduated three years ago? Bile churns in the pit of my stomach. I've not even had breakfast yet.

I swing through a drive-thru and scarf down a bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit on the way.

Maybe I should have grabbed Kiesha something, but I don't know anything about her other than what I've heard in passing, which isn't much.

School is the last fucking place I want to be, but proving myself to the club motivates me to do whatever is necessary.

After parking my truck a few blocks away, I lockup my truck and sling the backpack over my left shoulder, hoping I look like a student as I walk toward the school. Most of my tattoos are hidden by my leather jacket. I should have shaved. I meet up with Kiesha at the back entrance of the school. She's even more gorgeous in person, and I shouldn't be gawking at her when I have a girlfriend. Never mind the fact I graduated nearly three years ago.

I have no business being here, but I have my orders.

She gives me a once-over and rolls her eyes. "You must be Jimmy."

And you must be trouble. She's too cute for her own good and mine.

I take in her appearance.

Pure temptation that has me wondering Sabrina who.

She's wearing a cream-colored frilly dress that has tiny pink flowers printed on it with a denim jacket and brown boots and a baby pink ribbon that matches her dress tied in her hair.

"Guess that makes you Kiesha."

"I don't need a babysitter. I can handle myself."

“Yeah, well. Your uncle says differently.”

“My sperm donor doesn’t even remember what I look like. I’m the last person he’d reach out to. Link’s being overprotective.”

“I’m not going to be the one facing his wrath if something happens to you because I ignored his orders.”

She fingers the pearl choker that’s wrapped around her throat, seeming to think about what her uncle will do if I don’t follow through. “Whatever. Just make yourself invisible.”

Her bitchy attitude has me wanting to laugh. She looks sweet and innocent, but she’s anything but that when she opens her mouth. “No problem.” I follow her into the building as the bell for the next class rings, having no damn clue how to stay close and not be discovered. I follow her through the hallway surrounded by a loud crowd of teenagers living their lives obliviously, wrapped up in their dramas and aspirations.

They have no clue how good they have it right now. No idea what’s waiting for them once they enter the real world. Once they are considered an adult and no one is holding out a hand to help them navigate life.

I was forced to grow up young and fast due to the shitty circumstances I was born into. I’ve never known anything easy.

Kiesha doesn’t realize how lucky she is to have a family who gives a fuck.

“I have drama this period so you can hangout in one of the changing rooms backstage. No one uses them unless we have a costume fitting or a show. But if anyone asks, we’ll say you’re a cousin who came to visit this week or something.”

“Right. I wouldn’t want to cramp your style.” I shouldn’t be offended, but for some reason, I take the dig personally. Like she’s embarrassed to be seen with me. I’m not the best-looking guy in the club, but I’m damn sure not the ugliest.

Kiesha glances back at me once more, the golden flecks in her hazel eyes glittering like the embers of a fire that won’t easily be extinguished in the dim light of this dark and forgotten room.

I sit on the burnt orange colored couch that looks like it’s been here for three decades. I glance around the room at the mismatched props and musty smelling costumes that look like they’ve been here as long as the couch. I pull out my phone to doom scroll while waiting for the next hour to pass, biting my bottom lip in an attempt to resist lighting up a cigarette.

I didn’t even consider the fact that I’m not going to be able to smoke until I’m off school grounds.

My phone vibrates in my hand as I’m about to nod off from boredom alerting me to a slew of new text messages from Sabrina, her frustration and anger increasing with every unanswered question about where I am, who I’m with, and what I’m doing.

She knows I can’t tell her anything about what I’m doing. And even if I could, she won’t be understanding or forgiving.

I’m trying to work. Stop texting every five minutes. You’re distracting me.

I know the message is harsh, but it’s true. I can’t focus on her when I have to be on alert. When I have to concentrate on keeping Kiesha safe.

I can’t afford to be distracted by Sabrina’s petty arguments.

Not with my future in the club possibly at stake.

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Chapter Two

I can't believe this. I don't need some scrawny prospect following me around my classes like a guard dog. My father doesn't care about me or my sister. His choices since I was born have proven time and again how little he loves me. If he ever has, it would be news to me. I can't even remember the last time I had contact with him.

He walked straight past me like a stranger the last time I crossed his path. He looked right through me. Inconsequential. That's exactly what he is. I hate him. Sometimes I wish he would disappear forever. None of my friends understand what it has been like for me. I've always been in my sister's shadow. She's older and prettier. Looks like our mother and has her long legs. I was cursed with inheriting my father's genes. I'm short with wide hips and thick thighs. But she actually has some good memories of our father. I have none. Not even bad ones, really. He's never been present.

I stare at this goofball with thick brows, wondering how he got volunteered for my protection duty. He doesn't look that strong. He's tall and lanky, but he does have killer ink and nice brown eyes.

Not that I care. He could look like Hyunjin, one of my favorite K-Pop singers. I wouldn't be interested. Not when I've been working overtime to get Jonesy Ripley to notice I'm alive. He's the hottest senior and I've had a crush on him since he transferred to our school last year.

No one has been able to land him, and I've made it my personal mission to be asked to homecoming by him. I even talked Sam into nominating me for homecoming queen. Not that I expect to win against Lisa Nichols, the captain of the cheerleading

team. The only reason she's not on Jonesy's arm is because she's been dating Bobo Spradlin since freshman year and he's a monster in size. Dude could squish pumpkins between his thighs. He's been wrestling since he was a toddler.

This prospect had better not mess this up for me. I've been going to every game to cheer for Jonesy. Sitting by him and his meathead friends at lunch. Doing anything and everything short of throwing myself at him to catch his eye.

Of all the days to place me under club protection, my uncle just had to pick the day I'm hoping my number one crush will ask me out. That's not going to happen with Jimmy stuck up my ass. I know it isn't the prospect's fault. I know how the hierarchy in the motorcycle club works. My sister got with Navarro when he was prospecting and now our mom is dating Prodigy, another Royal Bastard club member. I've grown up around the motorcycle club since my Uncle Link is a member.

I'm not new to any of this. Danger and threats have always been a part of our lives by association. I just never thought I would ever be a direct target, and by my sperm donor at that.

Jimmy follows me into the auditorium, and I hurry him to the changing rooms before my classmates or Mrs. Bledsoe lay eyes on him.

"Lock the door and don't unlock it for anyone. Give me your phone number and I'll text you when it's safe to come out."

"Shouldn't I be the one protecting you? I can't keep you safe from a locked room."

"I didn't ask you to be here."

"I'm not happy about this situation either."

“Don’t care. Let’s just make it through the day so we can both move on with our lives. He’s not going to show up in the middle of my class.”

“Right.” He grabs my phone and types his information in. He snorts as a message from Sam flashes across the screen.

“Don’t read my text.”

“Kind of hard not to.”

“Ugh. Just stay out of my business.”

He hands my device back. “What’s your number? I’ll save it under brat.”

“Ha. Ha. There’s no time. I’ll message you. Stay put.”

“Why? Afraid Jonesy will see us together.”

“Yes. And never read my messages again.” I stomp off to class before I get marked absent.

Jerk.

Guys are the worst.

I take my usual seat at the back of the room to hide. I only took this class because I needed an elective. I’m only passing the class because I’ve been helping paint the set for the Christmas play. The only thing I enjoy about school is seeing Jonesy between classes. My daily routine hinges on passing him in the hallway. Yesterday he smiled at me. Today has to be the day he’s going to ask me to homecoming.

All my subtle hints are bound to pay off.

I spend most of third period daydreaming about him asking at the end of the day right before he has football practice. I made sure to dress extra cute today for the occasion. I wore the perfect fall dress that pairs with my sister's jean jacket she forgot about when she moved in with Navarro. I take my compact out of my purse and make sure my makeup doesn't need a touch up.

Sam thinks he's going to ask me.

It's destined to happen.

I pull out my phone and look at Jonesy's latest Snap. Man, the muscles on him. I wonder if the prospect has an account. I look him up using his phone number. He doesn't have a profile, but he does have an Instagram account. There's only one post. I can tell by the background of his selfie that it was taken behind the clubhouse.

What a dork.

The bell rings and I seriously consider leaving the prospect locked up in the changing rooms, but I don't want to catch hell from my Uncle Link.

I'm about to fetch him when Bethany shoves her way through the people attempting to leave class.

"Sooo are you going to tell me who the guy was who was walking you to class earlier?" She looks around me, as though she expects Jimmy to materialize out of thin air.

"What are you talking about?"

“Your biker hottie boyfriend.”

“Shh. Keep your voice down. You know how protective my uncle can be. It’s nothing. But seriously, don’t tell anyone he’s here. Pinky swear.”

Bethany makes the motion of locking her lips and throwing away the key. She knows better than to go blabbing about club business. She’s related to my Aunt Pam through marriage or something and thinks that makes us family. She’s super annoying, but I do my best to tolerate her.

“What is it you think you know, anyway?”

“Nothing. I saw the two of you and recognized him from the last cookout Pam let me go to. Is he your boyfriend?”

The easier answer would be to lie and tell her yes. One thing about news here is it travels fast, and I need to make sure she doesn’t go spreading gossip about me that could reach Jonesy. “You know how it is. I can’t talk about why he’s here.”

“Think you can introduce me? He’s so hot.”

“No way. He’s too old for you.” Bethany is only a sophomore. She has no business lusting after Jimmy.

“You like him.”

“Ew. No way. “

“Hmm,” she muses.

“Look. Just keep it quiet and maybe I’ll let you sit with us at lunch tomorrow,” I lie. I

doubt he'll be back tomorrow.

"Bet," she says and practically skips out the door.

Ugh.

Though I'd rather pluck my eyelashes out with the world's smallest tweezers than have lunch with this guy, I can't have him getting busted for lurking around the school, either. I find him sprawled on the worn-out sofa like he's at home, phone in hand.

I sniff the air, smelling smoke. "Were you smoking in here?" I accuse.

"No." he jumps up quickly, scrambling to shove his phone in his back pocket. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's perfect. Come on. It's lunchtime. Put this on." I grab him someone's forgotten hoodie hanging on the back of a chair. "Pull the hood up and stick with me."

Thankfully, he doesn't argue and hands me his leather jacket to put the hoodie on, even though it's at least a size too small and he looks silly.

I shove his leather jacket into my locker, noting it smells like his cologne. Spicy with a hint of smoke.

I secure us an empty table that sits farthest away from Jonesy Ripley and his buddies.

Jimmy plunks down in a seat, dropping his backpack on the floor.

"Watch my stuff. I'll get us a tray. And don't talk to anyone or draw attention to

yourself.”

“Yeah, babe. I’m aware.”

“Don’t call me babe.”

“Sure thing, brat.”

“Whatever.” I glance back at him to see him staring at his phone, tight faced. What crawled up his ass?

I’m not that difficult.

Okay. Maybe I’ve been a little rude, but no one would be happy about the situation I’m in. Having to worry that my father will show up and do something outrageous or hurt me to get at my mother while navigating my senior year.

I look over to where Jonesy and some of the other players from the team are seated and wonder if he’s noticed that I’m not sitting by them today. I hate how much I overthink every single thing.

I wish he would ask me to the dance already. I should have listened to Kimber when she said to make him chase me. But I don’t exactly know how to do that.

My phone buzzes and it’s a text from Jimmy.

Hey brat, grab me something to drink.

He’s got some nerve. How’d he get my number so fast? Probably my uncle.

I roll my eyes at his demand and reluctantly grab a can of Cherry Coke for him from

the vending machine and a juice for myself. I pay extra for a second serving of chicken tenders. I don't know what Jimmy's preferences are, but surely everyone likes chicken tenders and mashed potatoes.

I slide the tray onto the table and hold out the can of pop for him. "Do you like Cherry Coke?"

"Not really." He snatches my juice off the tray instead and pinches a corner of the roll to dip into the mashed potatoes.

"Everyone likes Cherry Coke," I grumble.

"Let me guess. Jonesy loves Cherry Coke." His voice comes out acidic, dripping with sarcasm. "Shouldn't you be having lunch with him and bringing him a Coke?"

"None of your business."

"Come on. Point him out. I need to see this kid."

I ignore him. There's no way I'm letting him know who Jonesy is. He'll probably do something to embarrass me in front of him on purpose. "You do know there's an extra fork you can use and don't eat all the mashed potatoes." I elbow him in the rib as I scootch in next to him to share my tray, temporarily forgetting my annoyance at his intruding on my day.

"Sorry, brat." He grins at me, twisting the tray around so that the mashed potatoes face me.

"You're such a slob." I laugh, handing him a napkin to wipe the food away from his mouth.

“You’re really not going to point him out? Is he even here?”

I shrug. “You know how it is for football players.”

“Not really.”

“Everyone always wants a piece of them.”

“Maybe you should go for someone less popular then.”

“That’s part of the appeal.”

He frowns at me like my answer disappoints him. “So, you’re one of those types.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The kind of girl who only goes after someone for their looks and their status. Doesn’t matter if the guy is a dickhead as long as he’s popular.”

Clenching my fork, I stab a chicken tender, aggressively. “What would you know about it? Jonesy’s nice. Mostly. I don’t care that he’s the captain of the football team. You wouldn’t understand.”

Jimmy shrugs. “Trust me. I get it more than you know. Gotta climb the social ladder or else you won’t get invited to the parties.”

“Let me guess. You never got invited.” I smirk. “I bet you would have loved to have been popular when you were in school.”

“I used to think so.”

“What changed?”

“I graduated and realized it didn’t matter what anyone thought of me. What mattered was what I think of myself, and I happen to like me.”

“Did you read that on a fortune cookie or read it on a quote somewhere?”

“Nope. Are you going to point this crush of yours out or what?”

Ugh. He’s so annoying that I almost miss Bethany.

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Chapter Three

“So that’s the guy?” I chuckle. I’m not sure what I expected Kiesha’s crush to look like, but this chump isn’t what I was picturing for her. Not that I care.

“Why are you laughing?”

“No reason.”

“You’re a shit liar,” she huffs at me, crumpling her napkin and tossing it onto the nearly empty tray.

“And what am I lying about? Enlighten me.”

“I don’t know. You just are.”

I look back to where Jonesy goofs off with his buddies. He’s a stereotypical jock. Wearing his jersey, hair gelled back, a shit-eating grin plastered on his face. Dude thinks he’s the cock of the walk. “Tell me something. What’s so great about him?”

“I don’t have to explain my reasons to you.” She shifts in her seat, her thigh brushing against mine. “He just. I don’t know. He notices me when others don’t seem to. He’s different.”

“That doesn’t tell me much of anything.”

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t. But I know his type. Full of himself. Thinks he’s God’s gift to everyone. Especially girls.”

“You probably can’t get a girlfriend,” she snaps and shoves an apple slice between her pouty lips.

“I’ve had no complaints.” Sabrina said she took one look at me and knew she was going to love me forever. Ember teases it’s because I was the only guy in our town Sabrina wasn’t related to. She’s not wrong about that.

I twist the cap off the bottled pineapple and mango juice Kiesha grabbed. I can feel the heat of her stare as I gulp down a drink. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing. Sure.” I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. Cocking my head to the side, I study her profile, wondering if she’s always so sassy.

Her brows knit as she catches me staring out the corner of her eye. “What?”

“Quit asking ‘what’ whenever I look at you.”

“I would if you’d stop staring at me.”

“You’re too pretty for a guy like that.”

Pink stains her cheeks. “You don’t know him. I...you...”

“I know the type. You forget, it wasn’t that long ago that I was a senior.”

“Right.” She sucks down half of her Coke.

“So, what’s the deal with your father?”

“Don’t call him that. He’s a sperm donor. Nothing more. I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to talk at all.”

An awkward silence stretches between us. Sabrina keeps texting and asking what I’m doing, and I keep ignoring her. I can’t focus on her being needy for attention and do my job.

I distract Kiesha and myself from our problems with conversation.

“What are your plans after graduation?”

“Sam and I are going to cosmetology school. I want to do makeup and nails, and they are studying to do hair.”

“They?”

“Sam is nonbinary and prefers they/them pronouns.”

“Noted.”

“Good. Don’t say her or she. Just call them Sam, but better yet, just be invisible.”

“I’m not happy about this arrangement, either. You think I don’t have something else I’d rather be doing?”

“Like what? Washing motorcycles in a skirt or scrubbing puke coated toilets?”

“Ha. Ha. I should be having lunch with my woman, but instead I’m stuck repeating my senior year to babysit a smartass brat.”

“Ouch.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“You meant it exactly like that. But I get it. My own alleged father doesn’t give a shit about me. Why should you?”

“Obviously, people care about you or else I wouldn’t be here.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be. I can look after myself. You can go. I won’t rat you out or anything. It’s fine. I doubt my sperm donor even knows where to find me. Not that he’d ever bother to come looking.”

“Kiesha.” I pause, trying to choose my words wisely. Teen girls can be ultra-sensitive. “Whatever his reasons, I’m sure your sperm donor cares about you and doesn’t want to do you harm. Not really, but addiction is a nasty beast and changes people. Takes them over. Makes them choose to lash out and be destructive. And trust me. However much you think you hate him. Deep down, he hates himself triple that amount.”

“What would you know about it?”

“I’m the product of two addicts. I’ve been through some bad shit. Trust me, he’s been doing the greatest act of love by keeping out of your life. The shit he’d bring with him.” I shake my head. “You don’t want any part of that. And yeah. He’s the one missing out on his beautiful and talented daughter.”

“You think I’m beautiful?”

“You know you are.”

Her cheeks color a deeper shade of pink as unshed tears glitter in the creases of her eyes. “You’re just being nice, but thank you.”

“Trust me. Lots of guys in this school wish they could get with you.”

“No, they don’t. I’m not popular. I’ve never been asked out. Guys don’t approach me.”

“They’re intimidated. Even your crush that keeps glancing over here.”

“Oh my God. Jonesy’s looking?”

“Yeah.” I grin. “About every two minutes.”

“Don’t stare at him, but what’s he doing right now?”

“Probably debating on coming over here or wondering why you’re not over there.”

“Shut up.” She shoves me in the chest with both palms and I nearly fall out of my seat. “What should I do?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“You’re a guy and have a girlfriend. How did you win her over?”

“I didn’t. She sort of just chose me when we were kids, and I’ve been with her ever since then.”

“Whoa. So you’ve only ever dated the same girl?”

“Yup.” I scratch the back of my neck, pushing the hood down.

Kiesha touches the tattoo on my neck. “You have her name on your neck?”

The muscle in my jaw pulses as I swallow, hard. “Stupid, right?”

“I think it’s romantic.” She smiles at me and quickly pulls her hand back to her lap.

“Careful. Your jock might get the wrong idea.”

“Is he still watching?”

He’s not. He’s flirting with some cheerleaders, but I lie. “Yeah. He looks jealous.”

“Really?” she brightens.

“Absolutely.”

“Do you think he likes me?”

“He’d be a fool not to, even if you are a brat.”

“Ugh.” She deflates.

“I’m only teasing you.”

“I know that.” She sits up straighter and pokes at the remaining apple slices with her fork. “After this I have anatomy, then art. You can hang in the library or chill in the bathroom until the final bell. I can meet you at the back door or at your truck.”

“You sure you don’t want to lock me up in a broom closet or the boiler room?”

“Uh no. That’s the make-out spot. You definitely will get caught.”

“How do you know it’s the make-out spot? Thought you said guys don’t approach you.”

“Everyone knows about it. I don’t know from experience or anything. It’s just a fact.”

I want to tease her further, but let it go. I don’t want her to get the wrong idea and think I’m trying to flirt with her, but she makes it too damn easy to get a rise out of her. “Library it is then.”

I grab a book off the shelf not really caring what it is and take a seat on the floor, hoping no one asks questions or even notices I’m here. I flip the book open to a random page and pull my cell out to let Link know that Kiesha is in class and fine, other than being a brat.

At the school. She’s good. Do you have a picture of this asshole I’m supposed to be keeping a lookout for?

Do a mugshot search and his latest will pull up.

I type in the website and after a few minutes I ping the fucker’s image. Seems like he gets arrested often. How do people like him continue to be released to repeat their same transgressions? My father was the same damn way.

Proved time after time how selfish he was. How he loved drugs more than he hated himself. I never gave up on him. Not even in the end, when he was on life support from his organs, giving out from years of abuse due to his continued drug usage. I sat at his bedside praying for a miracle. For him to wake up and turn into a new person overnight.

The reality was it was never going to happen. He was who he was, same as Kiesha’s father is who he is.

There's no changing or helping someone who can't see past the disease of addiction.

They eat, sleep, and breathe their next fix.

My mother wasn't much better. I had hoped my father's death would wake her up, but in the end, his loss had the opposite effect. She was determined to join him in death as soon as possible. And she succeeded, thanks to Cloud Nine.

I don't talk about my childhood much. Not even with Sabrina. One of the main reasons I wanted to join the club was because of how hard they work to prevent others from suffering the way I did. The way my parents did.

Protecting Kiesha from a man who will destroy her to get what he wants is personal for me.

If I can save her from that pain, I will.

No one understands what she's going through better than me.

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Chapter Four

Finally, the last bell rings and I dash to my locker, hoping to see Jonesy before he hustles off to football practice. I pretend to be looking through one of my binders as he struts down the hallway like royalty. He's the king around here and I'd give anything to be his queen.

I chance a glance in his direction, and our eyes lock. Holy shit, I think he's smiling at me. Shoving my folder back into my locker, I close the metal door and lean against it, pretending to act aloof. This is it. He's going to ask for my number or to add me on Snap or something.

"What's up?" He jerks his chin upward, coming to a stop in front of me, so close that the toes of our shoes are nearly touching as he towers over me.

I pull away from the lockers and glance up at him. "Hey, Jonesy." I bat my lashes, unable to stop myself. He's so hot with his blonde hair and baby blue eyes that twinkle when he smiles. Not to mention his abs that he loves to flash on TikTok.

"I've been meaning to ask you..."

"Yeah?" I do my best to sound interested, but not overly eager.

He starts to smile, but his expression freezes as he looks past me.

What's happening? Panic bubbles in the pit of my belly. Did I do something wrong? Does my breath stink? I popped a mint in my mouth at the end of class.

I clear my throat to regain his attention.

His lips turn down the second I feel the heat of someone standing behind me.

“You ready to go?” Jimmy questions as Jonesy walks away without another word.
“Grab my jacket from your locker, brat.”

This can’t be happening to me.

“I’m going to murder you.” I spin around and shove Jimmy as hard as I can, and he doesn’t budge an inch.

“What’d I do?” he laughs with a twinge of nervousness, wearing a dopey expression, playing innocent. He knows exactly what he did. He just ruined everything. I can’t believe him. I should tell Link he made a pass at me so he rips his balls off or something.

“Forget it.” I yank his jacket from my locker, drop it at his feet, and stomp toward the exit, knowing he’ll follow. Sam is waiting near the door, grinning at me.

“How’d it go? Who’s your shadow?” They stare at Jimmy with curiosity written on their face.

“It didn’t. I’ll explain it to you later.” I don’t have time to get into it right now. Today is the worst day of my life. I can’t believe Jimmy did that just now. He’s supposed to be protecting me. Not ruining my chances at a social life.

Sam grabs my wrist as I attempt to storm through the exit. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine,” I snap a little too harshly, instantly regretting taking my anger out on them as I twist out of their grasp.

Jimmy's long-legged strides make it easy for him to catch up with me. "Wait up. Where are you running off to?"

"Anywhere you won't be." I flip him off over my shoulder while increasing my walking speed, navigating the bus riders.

"What will Jonesy think?" he mocks, and I want to slap his stupid mouth.

I keep marching on, ignoring him, scanning the parking lot for Jonesy to see if I can salvage our conversation.

My heart catches in my throat and I stop in my tracks at the sight of him. He's talking to a JV cheerleader. A freaking freshman.

"Hey. You can't be running off on me," Jimmy says, coming up behind me.

"It's a free country," I mutter as my heart hammers in my chest. I wonder if this is what heartbreak feels like as I struggle to catch my breath. I ball my fist, digging my nails in my palm deep enough to make crescent-shaped grooves.

"You know what I mean."

Yeah. I know exactly what he means. He's my babysitter who can't let me out of his sight. I watch as Jonesy presses the freshman cheerleader up against the side of his car. That's supposed to be me right now.

"You ready to go?" Jimmy tugs my backpack off my arm as my tears threaten to fall, further adding to my humiliation and anger.

"I can carry my own stuff."

“Just trying to help.”

“Fine.” I turn sharply, changing my direction.

“I’m parked that way.” Jimmy catches my wrist. His touch is rough and warm.

“I hate you,” I growl at him as he keeps pace with me.

“Hey,” he says softly after a moment of silence. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Do us both a favor and stop talking.”

I do my best not to speak to look at jimmy, the jerk. I can’t believe he did that.

Face pressed to the passenger side window, I need as far away from him as possible. I’m afraid I’ll strangle him if he even breathes near me right now.

“Are you still mad?”

I glare at him.

“Come on. Make the guy sweat a little bit. I guarantee he’ll track down your phone number and be calling tonight.”

“Whatever.”

“Trust me. Everything has a way of working out.”

He fiddles with the stereo, turning on some alternative rock. I glance at him from the corner of my eye as he taps his fingers against the steering wheel, humming and smiling to himself.

What's he so happy about? Maybe it's that he's about to be off duty. I can't fault him. I wouldn't want to be stuck going to school if I had already graduated. I'm sure he's not being compensated for his time.

I should probably be nicer, but I'm pissed that he ruined my chances with Jonesy. What if he already asked someone else, and I missed my one shot? I can't even ask Sam to be my date to the dance. They're going to visit their dad. I'm going to be going alone as usual. Story of my life.

Jimmy parks in front of my house and I jump out, noticing he's getting out of his truck to follow me. Ugh.

I stomp through the back door, dropping my backpack on the floor as I kick my shoes off. "Dude. I'm home. You see my mom. You can leave." I wave an arm toward my mother, who is standing in front of the stove looking as if her day has been as craptastic as mine has.

"I've got my orders."

"He's got his orders," I mock. "Why do I need some biker following me around school like a bodyguard stalker? Do you have any idea how embarrassing that was to explain to my friends? And then Jonesy Ripley came up to me at my locker and I thought he was going to ask me to homecoming. Then this jerk struts up behind me, leans in and grabs my books to carry them, so Jonesy walked off without asking. He thinks I have a boyfriend now. My social life is over. Ruined. I might as well join a convent and become a nun."

"I was told to pretend I was her boyfriend and blend in. My girlfriend won't be happy about it either," Jimmy explains, like it changes anything.

"Great. Not only do I have to lose out on the hottest guy in school. I mean, he has

these abs that I just want to lick. Now I've gotta worry about biker boy's girl trying to kill me for fake stealing her man."

"Kiesha," my mom scolds. "The last thing a mother wants to hear is her teenage daughter drooling about licking some douche football player's abs."

"He's not a douche."

"I shouldn't be sharing this, and you best not repeat it, but he has a baby. You know how I know? Because his son is in my daycare while his teen mom works at a fast-food joint. And Jonesy, with the lickable abs, doesn't lift a finger. Because he's going to college on a football scholarship, and he doesn't have time for a job or a kid."

My mouth drops open as heat fans across the back of my neck. "Is that true?" I gape at my mother, avoiding Jimmy's stare. I'm sure he's gloating on the inside.

Mom takes a hearty sip of her wine. "Yeah, honey it is."

"That jerk."

"Told you."

"Ugh. This is why women become lesbians," I grumble under my breath. "What's for dinner? I'm starving and can Sam come over to do my hair?"

"What do you like on your pizza, Jimmy?" she asks, completely ignoring the fact that my life is over and I'm never going to get a date.

"He's not staying for dinner," I cry. I've suffered through enough cruel and unusual punishment for one day.

“Whatever you order is good with me. I’m not picky.”

“What about Sam? Will they be eating with us?”

“No. We’ll starve in my room.” I stomp down the hallway to my bedroom, intent on slamming the door to make my point, but think better of it.

I don’t need to add getting grounded as the sprinkles on top of the shit cake my life currently is.

In the safety of my room, I mourn the boy I thought I knew. What kind of jerk has a kid and doesn’t help to raise it? Someone like my father. That’s who. The thought that I was chasing after a guy like that makes me sick to my stomach.

Guess I’m more like my mom than I thought.

At least this time with Prodigy, she’s getting it right.

He seems to be one of the good ones.

There’s not many good men in this world. Even my Uncle Link did his wife dirty. I don’t know how she forgave him or stayed with him after something like that.

I crack my bedroom door open and look down the hall to the living room where Jimmy sits on the couch, being all polite to my mom.

I was so horrible to him today. I’m such a selfish bitch.

He was taking time away from his life to have my back and I treated him awful the whole day.

I should apologize, but Sam shows to do my hair before I get the chance.

“Okay. What gives? Who is the tattooed hottie who has been following you around all day?”

“You think Jimmy is hot?” I arch a brow at them.

“If I was into guys.” They shrug.

“His hotness doesn’t matter. My father is back in town and determined to ruin our lives.”

“You need protection from your father?”

Sam is lucky. They have an amazing relationship with their dad. When they came out to him as nonbinary and cut all their hair off and started dressing in unisex clothes, all he said was okay and hugged them. No questions asked.

Mine probably doesn’t even know my name.

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Chapter Five

Where are you?

Have you had dinner?

Are you ignoring me?

What time are you coming home?

I scroll through the missed text messages from Sabrina and know I'll catch hell from her the second I walk through the door if I go home, and I'm not looking forward to another tongue lashing.

I spy Kiesha watching me from the doorway of her bedroom.

"Do you need something?" I arch a brow at her.

"Yeah. A new life." She shoves away from the frame and goes back to her bedroom.

I grab another slice of pizza, knowing I should have left an hour ago, but there's something about getting under Kiesha's skin that gives me a thrill. She cracks me up with her constant sass. Guess you could say I definitely have a type. Not that I'd go there. Prodigy and Link would beat my ass, and I would never cheat on Sabrina.

There's nothing wrong with a little harmless flirting.

Judging by the jock Kiesha is into, I'd never be her type.

I excuse myself to the bathroom, prolonging my visit. I catch a glimpse of Kiesha and her friend Sam in her bedroom on my way out. She's seated on the floor, back to the bed as Sam brushes color onto her hair. I try not to get caught watching as she bites on the cap of her ink pen, staring at a page in her notebook, deep in thought.

I make my way back to the living room, dreading dealing with Sabrina when I leave.

"Be back here in the morning to drive Kiesha to school. Until I know where this bastard is, I want Zoe and her girls covered," Prodigy tells me.

I don't ask what time. Hopefully, she'll be ready by the time I get here.

"Sure thing." I take this as my cue to leave. I finish off the last swig of my drink. "Thanks for dinner," I tell Zoe as I rise from the couch.

"You're always welcome here." She shoots me a warm smile as Prodigy gives me a nod.

You know I can see that you've read my messages, Jimmy. Why are you ignoring me? Are you mad at me?

Fuck. After one last glance at the house where I think I see Kiesha watching me from her bedroom window, I climb into my truck and text Sabrina back.

Sorry. Been a busy day.

I just miss you and just want to snuggle up in bed once you get here.

Reading her last message, I feel like a total dickhead, but I've got to take every

chance I get to prove my worth to the club. It won't always be this way. All I'm asking is for one year of patience.

She's going to be even more pissed when I tell her that I'm planning to crash at Trenton's so I can be back at Zoe's on time to escort Kiesha to school in the morning. If I go home, it means waking up two hours earlier than necessary to make the drive. I can avoid it by sleeping on the other prospect's couch.

There's always staying at the clubhouse, but if I do that, then I won't get any sleep. The guys never miss an opportunity to fuck with me or put me to work. Last time I tried to sleep there, I woke up locked in one of the interrogation rooms in the basement buck naked with a dick drawn on my left cheek in black permanent ink. I had to pay one of the club girls to cover it with makeup for a week. Sabrina still doesn't know about it. Not looking for a repeat of that experience, or worse.

Can you stop and grab a carton of pralines and cream?

Oh and some caramel sauce?

Not tonight. I'm still working.

Seriously? What is so important that you're blowing me off again? Are you with someone else?

Of course not. Why would you think that?

Maybe because you care more about that stupid club than your girlfriend. Forget it. I don't want to see your face right now because if I do, I'll probably punch it.

You don't mean that. I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you. I swear.

You better.

She's still texting, which means she's not as mad as I thought she'd be.

Thank fuck.

I pull up at Trenton's, park in his visitor's space, and lock my shit up.

Thought the trailer I was raised in was a shithole until the first time I crashed here. He lives in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods and the only reason no one fucks with him is due to his ties to the club. His old man was Vice President before he was murdered.

Sabrina thought Trenton sharing that family history with me would turn me off being a prospect. Said it should scare me.

It doesn't.

I know what I'm signing on for. I'd rather die believing in something instead of standing for nothing and working a dead-end job somewhere. Waking up one day, having lived life with nothing but regrets.

I'm seeing this through until the end of my road.

I shoot off a text to let him know I need his couch for the night.

Hey man, is it cool if I crash at your place tonight?

I doubt he has anyone over. He's still hung up on Ember, Sabrina's bestie that is the sister of Prodigy and currently dating Smoke.

Even if I wasn't prospecting, Sabrina would still be around the club because of Ember. I don't know why she gives me so much damn grief for it.

Was about to go grab some grub. Want to go shoot some pool?

Yeah, sure. Why not? I'm parked downstairs.

All I was going to do was go to bed, anyway.

I start my truck back up and wait for him to drag his ass down here. After about ten minutes, he climbs in the passenger side. "What were you doing? Curling your hair?" I chuckle.

"Was trimming my pubes for your grandma later. Wouldn't want her to get a hair hung in her throat when she takes her teeth out."

"Fuck you." I shudder. "You're sick, you know that?"

He grins. "We all have our talents."

"Where are we going?"

"Bullseye on seventh avenue."

"Is that the new place they built where the vacant lot used to be by the car dealerships and Dollar General?"

"Yup. They have the best onion chips I've ever had and tonight they have two dollar beers."

"Now I see why you wanted to come here." I watch the pretty little blonde he's been

eye-fucking for the past ten minutes strut toward us with our beers.

He grins. “Shut up.”

“Hey. No judgment. I’m just glad to see you’re moving on from Ember because we both know that’s never going to happen.”

“Don’t.” he shuts the conversation down fast.

Can’t blame him with the whole bet thing he had with Smoke. I don’t understand how Ember forgave either of them for that shit, but she did.

The cute server places our beers on the table, flashing her dazzling smile at Trenton before spinning around to take another order from a nearby table.

All the girl’s working here are dressed in black booty hugging shorts and white tees with a bullseye on them.

I get another text from Sabrina while we wait for our onion chips.

Are you really not coming home tonight?

As much as I wish I could, I’ve gotta stick close to the club this week.

Are you saying you won’t be home at all this week?

I don’t know. Depends on how long this job lasts.

Seriously?!?!

I don’t know what she expects. This comes with the territory. What will she do when

I'm a patched member and have to go on a run that she can't know shit about?

I'm trying my damndest, Brina. I swear.

How many times have we had this same conversation? You're always making me promises you can't seem to keep.

Despite my frustration with her constant nagging, guilt pulls at my heart. Sabrina has every right to be pissed. She's not wrong. I've neglected her for the club. More than I ever thought I would.

I'd rather we continue this conversation in person. I'll take you to dinner my next night off.

Don't make any promises, Jimmy. You'll just end up ditching me like always.

Her doubt cuts and I feel even lousier than I already was.

I don't know what more explanation she wants. We've talked about how important the club is to me. No matter what I do or say, she only gets angrier with me.

I won't.

We'll see...

Her short response doesn't bode well for our future conversation, but at least I've bought myself some time.

Being torn between my love for the club and my love of Sabrina is tearing us apart, and I'm not sure how to stop this collision course.

I plant my phone on the table and drown my sorrows in my beer and onion chips while Trenton chats up that pretty blonde by the bar. At least one of us is having some luck tonight.

“Hey, man. I’m going to wait around and catch a ride with Leslie.” He hands me his door key. “Don’t wait up.” He slaps me on the back. “Wait. What crawled up your ass?”

“Shit with Sabrina.” I top off my beer. “Trying to keep her and prospect isn’t working out so hot.”

“It won’t be this tough forever. Hang in there. And buy her some flowers.” He winks.

“Flowers.” I snort. “This grovel requires more than some colorful petals and candy.”

“Trust me. She’ll appreciate the effort. I know what I’m talking about.”

“Yeah. Guess that’s why Ember’s with Smoke.” I wince as soon as I say the words.

“Ouch. Ice cold, man.”

“I didn’t mean it.” I’m pissed at myself and shouldn’t take it out on the guy letting me crash at his pad. Bringing up Ember is a low blow I’m not proud of.

“You need to let off some steam or get shitfaced until you forget all your worries.” He holds up a finger for me to give him a minute. He stalks back to the bar and comes back with some shots.

“What about the blonde?”

“Bros before hoes. Us probies gotta stick together.”

It's different for him. He's a legacy. Earning his cut isn't the same as it is for me. I don't hold it against him. We need every leg up we can get. Both of us.

The potent liquid burns a trail down my throat, warming my insides as it ignites in my stomach. Repeating the act until we're four rounds in the effects takes hold of me. Numbing the frustrating thoughts about Sabrina. Right now, she seems like someone else's problem. The patrons around us blur together as I attempt to blink away the fuzz of the hazy lights.

"What'd I tell ya?" Trenton jabs a finger at my chest. "All you needed was right here." He passes me another shot. "To freedom and pretty little blondes." He throws an arm around the girl from earlier.

"Yeah." I toss it back, slipping further into mindless oblivion, ignoring the way my stomach churns.

"All right. I think you boys have had enough." She slips out from his embrace.

"Whatta ya mean?" He slurs his words, his eyes completely glossed over.

"Party time is over."

"We can continue it back at my place." He tries to spin her around and knocks her into the table, sending our discarded glasses to the floor.

"You two. Pay your tab and get out," the bouncer tells us as Trenton continues to dance around the girl he was hoping to hookup with.

"Don't be a cockblocker, buddy."

"That's my girlfriend, you stupid fuck." He swings on Trenton, clocking him in the

jaw, and all hell breaks loose.

Trenton stumbles back, but the punch doesn't take him down. Quickly, he recovers his balance, swinging a haymaker of his own, missing his mark and hitting nothing but air.

Knowing better but too drunk to care, I throw myself into the fray. Fueled by liquor, I go for the bouncer, unleashing my own brand of ass whooping. I manage to deck him square in the jaw. "Fuck around and find out," I holler, grabbing a beer bottle off a table and smashing it over the short but stout man's head.

"Come get some." Trenton punches a random dude who tries to get between us.

His pretty little girlfriend screams while the bartender comes out from behind the bar wielding a baseball bat. I grab Trenton and we stumble out of the bar as they chase after us, hurling insults.

We make it to my truck, erupting in laughter as Trenton rubs his jaw.

Fuck. I needed this.

"We need steak and eggs." He slaps his palm against the dashboard.

"Turn that shit off," Trenton yells.

I roll to my side, falling off his shitty couch, knocking my shoulder on the corner of his coffee table. "Ow. Fuck." I pat my pants, looking for my phone to turn my alarm off.

I'm supposed to drive Kiesha to school today. All I want is to crawl back onto the couch and sleep for ten years. I flex my hands, catching sight of my busted knuckles.

I nearly forgot about our bar fight, but the way my head throbs at the temples is the only reminder I need. I hope Trenton has coffee and clean towels. I've got a change of clothes in my truck.

My fingers fumble with the button on my jeans. The pull to go back to bed is growing stronger by the second, but I have a job to do. I slip on a fresh t-shirt and stare at my reflection in the mirror as I brush my teeth.

Lines of exhaustion are etched around my bloodshot eyes, and the bruises and scrapes across my raw knuckles mock me. I could have been home with my woman instead of getting into a barroom brawl. As shitty as I feel, it was fun. Made me feel alive.

Trenton passes by the bathroom on his way to the kitchen for the coffee I brewed. "Stop staring at yourself. Nothing you do is going to help your face." He laughs.

I find him at the breakfast bar hugging a mug of coffee as black as asphalt.

The scent turns my stomach, but I force myself to take a few sips of the cup he poured me.

He lays his heads on the counter, slinging an arm across his eyes to block out the sunshine pouring through the window. "What the fuck did we do last night? My jaw hurts like a motherfucker."

"You got your ass kicked, that's what."

"Damn. Did I at least get that blonde's phone number?"

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Chapter Six

I don't know why I'm bothering trying to look cute for school. There's no one left to impress now that I know Jonesy is a total dud. Everything sucks. What teeny bit of a social life I was building is dead. I don't care that Jonesy has a kid. It's the fact that he's a deadbeat father that makes him so not worth the effort I've been putting in trying to get his attention. It pisses me off.

I finish curling my hair. At least the touch up Sam did on my color is as popping as my lip gloss. I grab the purple and black checkered flannel I stole out of my mom's closet and put it on over a black crop top with my cute flare leg jeans with the knees ripped out. A black choker and my Doc Marten boots complete my look.

Not that anyone will appreciate it, except maybe Sam, but they don't see me that way.

Shoving my stuff in my backpack, I follow the aroma of coffee into the kitchen, hoping there's something easy to grab for breakfast on my way out the door to catch the bus.

It's so unfair that I don't have a car yet. Sam lives close to school, so it'd be out of their way to pick me up. Normally they drive me home, though. Sam hates having dinner with their moms. Plural. Their mom remarried a woman not long after divorcing their dad or something like that.

"Do we have any Pop-tarts so I can eat on the bus?" I pilfer through the pantry, not finding anything but some granola bars. Not the good ones that are chocolate covered either.

“Just ask Jimmy to take you through a drive thru.”

“What do you mean, ask Jimmy?” She can’t be serious. Not after the disaster of yesterday. I’ve got to come up with a new game plan to find a suitable date for the dance. I can’t do that if I have to go through another day of having a personal bodyguard with me.

“He’s supposed to drive you to and from school.”

“It’s not fair. The dance is a few weeks away, and I don’t have a date. Sam is going to their dad’s, so I won’t even have them. This is cruel and unusual punishment. No guy is going to ask me with Jimmy up my ass all day.”

“Language,” she snaps. Mom hates it when I cuss.

“Mooom. Please. Let me stay home then. Write me a note saying I’m sick or that we’re going out of town. At least then I won’t look like a dateless loser.”

“Honey, no one is going to think that. And if they do, then why would you want friends like that?”

“You don’t have a clue what it’s like. My social life is ruined. You don’t underst-.” I cut off as Mom’s boyfriend enters the kitchen, tugging a shirt down over his torso. Dang.

“What?” he questions in a deep sleepy tone that says they definitely did the business last night.

I’d be grossed out at the thought of my mom having sex if I wasn’t so impressed by how good-looking Prodigy is for an older guy. Well, older to me. But I shouldn’t really be surprised. Most of the Royal Bastards are hot. Like zaddies for sure.

“All right, Mom.” I smile big and go in for a high-five.

“Put your hand down,” she says with a shake of her head, but I don’t miss the slight grin she has on her face as she turns to her man. “Sorry if we woke you. Kiesha is being a brat this morning.”

“You know there are police officers at school. I’ll be fine. Come on. You look like a reasonable man. Tell her I’ll be fine.” I go for the kill, turning on the pouty faced lip tremble.

Mom purses her lips. “Who do you think has Jimmy watching over you?”

“Traitor,” I mumble and fold my arms across my chest and mean mug him with my best impression of my mother’s resting bitch face.

“Only trying to keep you safe. I don’t know what all you know, but I’m going to be straight with you. Your father is a dangerous and desperate individual. Until I have confirmation he’s not a threat to your mom or you and your sisters, then you’ll have the club’s protection.”

I stare at him, wondering if I heard him right. “Did you say sisters?”

“Shit.”

“Mom? Are you pregnant?” What the actual hell? This is crazy. I had no idea things were this serious. How long have they been hiding their relationship? Like I knew Mom had a flirtation with him or whatever, but I thought they just started going out for real.

“Maybe I should write that sick note,” she tells me, completely avoiding my questions.

“What’s going on? Oh, my god. Are you guys like getting married or something already? Am I going to be a big sister?”

Prodigy moves off to get some coffee. But I want to know what’s happening right now.

“We’ll talk about it once Kimber gets here. But no. I’m not pregnant. We’re not getting married.”

“Yet,” I hear Prodigy mutter under his breath. He catches my eyes and winks at me.

He’s so into her. I love this so much for her. Mom deserves to be happy after all the hell she’s been through.

My sister and her man show up, followed by Jimmy. If he hadn’t come into my life, I’d happily be oblivious to Jonesy being a douche and I’d at least have had a date to homecoming and a cute guy to take pictures with. Now I’m in the know and single, with no desire to mingle. Though, seeing how Prodigy is with my mom gives me hope that maybe someday I’ll find someone. Maybe.

“What’s so funny?” Kimber slips into the chair next to mine at the kitchen table.

“Mom’s getting married,” I tell her.

“Oh my God! Seriously,” she squeals, grabbing my arm and giving me a squeeze.

Mom takes a sip of her coffee, taking a seat across from us. “I don’t know where to start. You know I sometimes hire on workers at the daycare who come from a women’s shelter that is run by Lily, Murder’s sister. Well, I recently hired a woman by the name of Marie. A single mom who was coming out of a bad situation, much like the one I found myself in with your father. When she brought her daughter to

work and with one look, I knew that the bad man they were running from had to be your father. She resembles Kiesha so much at that age. It's uncanny."

"So that's why he's in town?" my sister tenses up next to me.

I can't believe this. We have another sister. He couldn't bother to be a father to either of us, then went off to start a new family. To repeat his abusive behavior. He's a monster.

"I believe so. But that's why the club is looking after them and us. To make sure he doesn't hurt anyone else."

"He's such a piece of shit. Who knows how many other siblings we have? How old is our sister?" I press, wondering how much else there is we don't know. There could be others out there and we'd never know.

"Her name is Kieleigh, and I think she's four."

My mouth drops. Mom always said if she had another daughter, she would name her Kieleigh. Kimber, Kiesha, and Kieleigh.

"Does she know about us?" Kimber asks.

"I'm not sure. I don't have any information other than what I've told you. I wish I knew more, but I'm finding things out as quickly as I can."

I chew on my thumb, trying not to freak out that there's a little girl out there who looks like me. I have another sister. "Can we meet her?"

"Once it's safe to reach out. I will ask, but I can't promise. That's going to be up to Marie. Your father attacked her after he came after me. For now, her and your sister

are in a safe location.”

“And Dad? Where is he now?”

“Wish I knew,” Prodigy answers. “If he makes contact with you, don’t engage. You let me, Link, Nav, or Jimmy know.”

At the mention of Jimmy, I’m reminded he’s here. I bet he’s loving this. My life is constantly blowing up right before his eyes.

“Are you going to kill him?” I ask point blank. Might as well get everything out in the open.

“Kiesha,” Mom snaps.

“I’m not stupid, Mom. I know about the club and what they are capable of.” They kill people all the time. At least when warranted. I hear things. At school. At the clubhouse. Conversations between Mom and my Aunt Pam and my sister. She tells me stuff. I hear it all.

“No one is killing anyone.”

“Dad would. He’d kill us all for a dollar and not care.” Kimber states, coolly.

This is too much. I need to get out of here. I turn to Jimmy. “Can you give me a ride to school?”

“Straight home after,” Mom warns.

Climbing into Jimmy’s track, the last place I want to be right now is school, but if I don’t show, Mom will get a call. The last thing I want is to add more to her plate or

have her worrying about me. I'll be fine. I'm used to disappointment.

"Do you...are you okay?" Jimmy asks as he slides into the driver's seat.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I get that, but bottling it all up isn't good either."

"Not now. I don't need a lecture." I stare out at the window, not able to focus on anything as tears blur my vision.

Jimmy tucks the rough pad of his finger under my chin, forcing me to meet his bloodshot gaze. "Then what do you need?" Did he sleep at all last night?

We stare at each other in silence for a beat before the sound of my sister and Nav leaving breaks the tension. "Honestly?" I shake my head. "I don't know. Just drive me to school." My stomach burns and churns. All I can think about is my stupid father and the fact that I have a sister. And that now maybe, just maybe, I might have a crush on Jimmy. Which is the stupidest idea I've ever had. But the way he looked at me just now. Like he'd give anything to take away my pain, makes me see him in a new light.

Not that it matters. He's got a girlfriend, and my uncle would kill him if Prodigy doesn't beat him to it.

Jimmy starts his truck and gives me one last glance like there's more he wants to say but refrains before pulling out. I'm not sure if I appreciate his silence or if I'm annoyed at the lack of conversation.

Afraid of doing or saying something to further embarrass myself after the way I've behaved around him, I lean my head against the window, completely disconnected

from reality. I'm in a nightmare, living a life that isn't meant to be mine. My father's out there somewhere and he may or may not want to hurt me. Everything is spiraling out of control and there's nothing I can do about any of it.

Jimmy pulls into the same spot as yesterday, a little way from the school in the parking lot of a roofing business that closed up shop a few months ago. Idling the truck, he grabs my hand and I notice his busted knuckles. I want to ask what happened. Only it's none of my business. I doubt he'd give me a real answer.

"I know you don't want to talk about it. I just...if you ever change your mind, I want you to know I'm here." The sincerity behind his tone and in his softened expression has my heart fluttering like the wings of a butterfly. My belly goes all warm and gooey as he stares at me.

"Thanks," I murmur, glancing back down at his grip on my hand, soaking in his warmth, wishing that I could have a do over of yesterday. Wishing he didn't have a girlfriend. That we'd met under different circumstances.

Most of the day passes me by in a blur. Even lunch with Jimmy isn't enough to distract me from overthinking about my father and the news that I have a little sister. Jonesy Ripley is nothing but a distant memory. I push the greasy meat of my taco salad around with my fork, wishing I'd skipped. Mom would have understood with all that is going on.

"You okay?" Jimmy nudges me with his knee.

"No, I'm not okay," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

He doesn't push for me to talk about all the shit swirling in my head. Instead, he reaches out and takes my hand in his again, his thumb absentmindedly stroking the back side in soothing circles. What may appear to be a small and friendly gesture

means more to me than he realizes.

My face heats as he stares at my lips, and I wonder if he's feeling it, too. This magnetic pulse pulling us closer together with every passing second I spend with him. It's crazy and intense. The way I've come to depend on him in the past twenty-four hours.

And maybe that's all it is. Finding comfort in the one person who happens to be by my side. Would the connection be as strong if he were anyone else? Like say, Jonesy. Would he be holding my hand and giving me a shoulder to cry on?

"You should eat something."

I nod, forcing myself to take a bite of my now cold lunch.

"You sure you don't want to get out of here? I won't tell on you for skipping."

As badly as I want to take him up on the offer, I don't trust myself right now. Because every piece of me wants to be impulsive. Giving in right now would only lead to more heartbreak and I can take anything else going wrong. Not today.

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Chapter Seven

I don't know how Kiesha is making it through the day with all the family drama she's dealing with. She's stronger and more mature than I gave her credit. Not many people would take the news they have a little sister they never knew about as easily as she has.

I'd be losing my mind.

I stare down at my phone, playing a mindless hunting game, trying to pass the time.

Sabrina hasn't tried to call or message me all day. To be honest, I'm glad for the break from her constantly jumping my ass for every little thing. Being here for Kiesha today has been a nice distraction.

Deep down, I know I can't afford to get too involved. She's vulnerable now, and I can't take advantage of her situation. I can't grow too attached to her. This situation is short term. She won't need my protection forever. When this is over, we'll go back to being strangers. Back to our real lives. One where she's lusting after douche head jocks and my focus is solely on my own problems.

My thoughts drift to Sabrina, and the guilt gnaws at me. I shouldn't be here, comforting another girl while I'm still in a relationship, no matter how rocky it is. How would Sabrina feel if she knew? How would she react if she saw me holding Kiesha's hand, even if it was innocent?

At least that's the lie I'm telling myself. I'd be a liar if I said I don't find her

attractive. Link and Prodigy's warnings sound in my head, reminding me that she's off limits.

My phone chimes with a text from Kiesha.

Not to freak you out, but I think my dad is standing outside of the school.

Fuck.

I'm coming.

My top priority is getting Kiesha to safety. Then We'll call Prodigy.

I meet her outside of her classroom and pull her into a nearby supply closet.

"Are you okay?" She nods as I dial Prodigy and hand her my phone.

"Prodigy?" She calls out his name, her voice shaky and unsure. "I think I saw my dad."

I overhear him asking where.

"Outside of my school. I was sitting in fourth period when I had that creepy feeling like someone was watching me. Ya know? When I glanced out the window, I swear he was standing across the road waving at me."

I crack the door and look out into the hallway, but I don't see anyone.

"He wants to talk to you." Kiesha hands me my phone and I try to ignore the way her body presses against mine in the tight space. The sweet smell of her perfume washes over me as she clings to my arm.

I hate the fear I see in her eyes as she stares at me, on the verge of tears. Her bottom lip trembles and I swipe a stray tear from her cheek.

“It’s uh Jimmy.”

“No shit, sherlock. Did you see him?” Prodigy growls.

“No.”

“Where were you?”

“I was in the library.”

“What the fuck for?”

“You told me to blend in. I’ve had to get creative and can’t exactly hang out in the bathroom all day. I can’t sit in the classroom with her.”

“I’m sending someone to the school. Once it’s clear, take her to the clubhouse.”

“Got it.” I end the call and tuck my phone in my back pocket as I glance at Kiesha. Her face is devoid of any color, those gorgeous hazel eyes of her filled with uncertainty and unshed tears. “Don’t worry, brat. I’ve got you,” I remind her. “As long as you have me, no one is going to hurt you.”

“And when this is over, and you go back to your life...to your girlfriend, who is going to protect me, then?”

“Kiesha,” I whisper her name as we move closer to one another. So close that I can almost feel the drumming of her heart. I hold her gaze, unable to look away even though I know I should as my body trembles with a mix of desire and guilt. She

shouldn't be looking at me like I'm some sort of hero.

Right now, with the thoughts I'm having, I'm anything but a good man. She's only eighteen and I'm almost twenty-one. It's not that I'm that much older than her, but the fact that I'm supposed to be in a committed relationship that has me questioning my sanity. The way she's looking at me has me ready to cross a line. Ready to betray the woman I'm supposed to love.

"I won't let anything happen to you. Not now. Not ever," I swear, my voice laced with renewed determination.

"But what about when you leave?" she asks, her voice cracking under the weight of her emotions. "This will end and then you'll just be gone. Out of my life. What happens when I need you and you won't be here?"

I hesitate, knowing that I should be thinking about getting back to Sabrina and the life I promised to build with her and not this girl who is barely legal. There's something about Kiesha that draws me in, making me want to protect her at all costs. Making me wish I were someone else. That I didn't have a girlfriend.

"Then I'll be a call away." I shouldn't be making a promise that I don't know if I can keep.

"Things won't be the same. We won't be the same as we are now. In here. In this room. Where we can be anyone we want to be. We can pretend you don't have a girlfriend and that my father could want to kidnap me, or worse." She sniffles, tears watering in the creases of her beautifully sad eyes.

"Hey," I cup her face in my hands, gently wiping away her tears with my thumbs. "We'll figure it out. Don't cry."

She nods and before I can grasp the reality of what I'm doing, I press my lips to hers, desperate to soothe her. All I want is to take away her pain. To make her forget that her world is falling apart. In the back of my mind, I know this is wrong on so many levels, but nothing has ever felt righter. The taste of her sinful lips ignites a fire within me I can't control. She returns the kiss frantic and eager as her tongue dances with mine. The sweetest temptation.

In another life, I could make this girl mine.

She whimpers into my mouth, making me greedy for more. I kiss her harder and deeper, my skin growing more feverish with every stroke of my tongue against hers. I push her body against the door. One hand above her head, the other gripping her hip, wanting so much more than I'm willing to take.

I nip her bottom lip, slowing the tempo, wishing I could stay here with her tucked away in this closet forever.

The bell for the next period sounds, forcing me to remember where we are and the severity of what could go wrong if I'm not paying attention to our surroundings. Footsteps and voices echo down the hall, growing closer to our location.

Abruptly, I pull away, ending the stolen moment. "I'm sorry." I run a hand over my hair. "I shouldn't have."

"I wanted you to." She smiles at me, then rubs the soft pad of her thumb across my lips, wiping away her lip gloss.

The door suddenly swings open, and we're met with the surprised faces of Jonesy Ripley and some chick. "What are you two doing here?" he gives me a once over. "Are you even a student here?"

“Mind your own business, Jonesy,” Kiesha snaps. “You know, like the baby you don’t take care of.”

His face pales as I pull Kiesha out of the closet before this asshole draws anymore unwanted attention to us. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.” As we’re walking away, I get a text message that we’re clear to leave.

Kiesha reaches for my hand, and I don’t pull away, though I probably should. I shouldn’t have kissed her. I got caught up in the heat of the moment. I get her in my truck and start up the engine without addressing what happened between us. I don’t want to hurt her. She has enough to deal with, but what I did back there...I can’t allow myself to go there again.

“Do you need anything before we get to the clubhouse?”

“No.” She shakes her head, touching her fingers to her mouth, smiling to herself. Most likely thinking about our kiss.

I can’t stop thinking about it either, but probably for a different reason.

“You sure? No snacks? Nothing to eat? I’m sure there’s stuff there...” I trail off. “Milkshake?” I don’t know why I’m trying to prolong the time I have alone with her. I guess it’s only that I know once we get to our destination and exit my truck, we have to return to how things were before that kiss. I keep reminding myself that it can’t happen again and yet it’s all I can think about.

Not the danger she’s in. Not the possibility of Sabrina finding out, but the fact that I can’t go there again. No matter how much I want to.

Kiesha shakes her head again, so I stop making suggestions. At the next red light, I glance at her from the corner of my eye. She’s staring out the passenger window,

absent-mindedly still rubbing her lips. Lips I was tasting less than ten minutes ago. Lips that tasted like strawberry bubblegum.

Her gaze seems a million miles away. I can only guess how worried she must be on the inside about her father showing up at the school to taunt her.

“Look, we need to talk about what happened back there.”

“I really don’t want to talk about my father.”

“Not that. The other thing.”

“Jonesy won’t say anything about us.”

I try again. “Not Jonesy.”

She looks at me as I stop on the side of the road about a mile from the clubhouse.

“I won’t tell my uncle if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Thank you. I just. I shouldn’t have done that. I have a girlfriend and...I’m here to do a job.”

“And not get involved with me. It’s fine. Really. It’s not a big deal.” She shrugs it off, and I don’t have time to discuss it further.

“Okay. So we’re in agreement. It was a onetime thing that won’t happen again. And there’s no reason for Sabrina to find out.”

“Ah. So that’s what has you stressed out. I won’t tell her. I won’t tell anyone. It’ll be our secret.”

I nod, feeling like a lousy piece of shit asking her to cover for me, but the alternative would be telling Sabrina. The first person she'd blab to after ripping off my balls will be Ember, who will tell Smoke. Who will then tell Prodigy. Who will go on to share with Link after he kicks my ass first.

"Thank you," I finally say, my voice sounding murmured and weary.

Kiesha smiles at me, and I continue driving to the clubhouse. The closer we get, the more I feel the moment we shared in the closet slipping further and further away.

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Chapter Eight

The second I walk through the doors of the clubhouse, I go straight for my mom, needing one of her hugs more than ever. Not only did my dad show up at my school and scare the shit out of me, but Jimmy kissed me. The only downside is he regrets doing so. I could see it written all over his face.

He looked terrified. Afraid I would tell someone. Mainly his girlfriend. How in love could they be if he kissed me so easily?

Mom wraps her arms around me, and even though life is crazy, her hug comforts me. So does being here. The place is a fortress. Normally, I'm not allowed to come unless I get to tag along for a cookout. And even then, I'm only permitted to be in the picnic area out back.

I glance around the bar as Mom pulls back, taking in the scene. It's not exactly the party central I was expecting. The way Mom and Pam talk, there are usually half-naked women running around and lots of drinking.

There are a few club members hanging at the bar, but there's not any scantily clad women throwing themselves at everyone. I don't know if I'm relieved or disappointed.

"Are you okay?"

"Other than dad showing up outside of my school, I'm fine."

“He did what?”

“I’m fine. He waved at me. Like some creepy horror movie villain. Super weird. Don’t worry. Jimmy kept me safe.” I glance over to where he’s waiting for me by the pool tables. “Love you. Jimmy promised to teach me how to play pool.” I rush over to him before she can argue.

Jimmy’s gaze is transfixed on the felt-covered table as if he thinks it may open up and swallow him whole at any minute. I don’t have to think too deeply to guess where his thoughts are. “Boo,” I whisper in his ear, tapping him on the shoulder and he nearly jumps out of his skin.

“Don’t be sneaking up on me like that.” he chuckles under his breath.

“I’m ready for my lesson.” I bat my lashes at him, playing innocent.

“You’ve really never played before?”

“Nope,” I pop the p, tugging my bottom lip slightly with my teeth.

His cheeks redden as he grabs a stick from the rack mounted to the wall and rubbing the tip in blue chalk. “Take this.” Our fingers briefly brush as he hands me the cue stick. “Let’s go over the basics. This is your stick. This is the cue ball.” He holds up a smooth white ball before placing it at one of the ends of the table. “These are our balls. You have your stripes and solids.” I watch as he arranges them in order inside a red triangle shaped object. “This is racking the balls.”

I’m not completely clueless, but I don’t tell him that. I like that his focus is on me.

“Now what?” I ask as he sticks the rack back into a cutout at the end of the table, where he placed the balls.

“The object of the game is to sink your balls into the pockets before I do. But first you’ve gotta break them to see if you’ll be shooting stripes or solids.”

“How do I do that?”

“Easy.” He comes around to the end of the table where the cue ball sits. “You’ve gotta line up your shot. Like this.” He moves in behind me, hugging me from behind, showing me how to angle the cue stick. The scent of his spicy cologne and the leather of his jacket fill my senses as the heat of his body warms me down to my toes. “Now pull back and slide forward.” He steps away to allow me to do it on my own and I immediately miss the heat of him pressing against me.

“Do you think they’re talking about us?” he nods in the direction of my mom and my sister.

“Not you. They’re probably laughing about my terrible aim.”

“You’ll get better with practice. Try it like this. Nice...,” he wraps his arms back around me, guiding the stick, his fingers covering mine, “and easy.”

Jimmy pulls away quickly as the five ball sinks into the left corner pocket. I smile at Jimmy, but his face has lost all humor. I follow his gaze to the girl with strawberry blonde hair marching toward us with her face all pinched like a bulldog ready to go on the attack.

“So this is why I haven’t heard a peep out of you all day,” she screeches, getting in his face.

I place the stick on the table as she wags her finger in his face, chewing him out. I don’t want to eavesdrop on their conversation, but it’s kind of hard not to.

“I can’t believe you forgot. Of all days. Not even a text. I thought I’d wake up to flowers or at least a card. But nope. You completely forgot my birthday. Don’t even try to deny it.”

Guilt gnaws at my insides. Today’s her birthday and her boyfriend was kissing me. Jimmy and I are both lousy people.

I glance at Jimmy, who’s looking down at his shoes, his face flushed with embarrassment. I get how pissed she is, but even I know better than to pop off at the mouth in front of the club. Especially when Jimmy is only a prospect. It’s not a good look for him that she’s screaming the bar down.

I look around the clubhouse, wondering if anyone will intervene.

“I’m sorry,” he stammers. “With everything that happened today, it just slipped my mind. I’ll make it up to you.”

“You always say that, but never deliver. What was so important that you couldn’t be bothered to spare me a second thought? Have you even thought about me today? Huh, Jimmy?” She pokes him in the chest again and I want to slap her and tell her to shut the hell up, but it’s not my place. I’m not his girlfriend. Unfortunately for him, this crazy chick is.

Sabrina huffs and crosses her arms over her chest. “Well? Yesterday, you promised me we would have dinner together.”

“I know I did. And we will. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Don’t you dare say you promise, or you swear or so help me...”

Her friend Ember stalks toward us, and I take the opportunity to go sit with my mom

and sister before she picks up the tension between Jimmy and me.

“What’s going on?” Kimber asks me.

“She’s super pissed. Like yikes on bikes. Today is her birthday.”

“Oh shit. I’d murder Nav if he forgot my birthday.”

“You know what, Jimmy? Forget it. You obviously don’t care about me,” she screams and shoots me a nasty look as she stomps past us with Smoke’s girlfriend trailing behind her.

Jimmy follows suit, not sparing me a glance. I shouldn’t be hurt, but I am. Was our kiss really that cheap? That meaningless? I distract myself by talking to my sister about the little sister we never knew about.

“I hope her mom won’t be weird about us wanting to meet her,” Kimber prattles on, but I’m only half listening. My attention is focused on the door and watching for Jimmy to return.

Maybe he’s not going to. Maybe he left with his girlfriend, which is probably what he should do. Is he begging for her forgiveness? Has he confessed to her about the kiss we shared? My skin warms at the thought of his lips on mine.

“Hello. Earth to Kiesha.” Kimber waves a hand in front of my face. “Where did you go just now?”

“Hmm?”

“I was asking if you want anything from the kitchen?”

“Oh sorry. Guess I kind of blanked. I was just wondering if it will be awkward when—if we get to meet her.”

“What on Earth,” Mom mumbles as Prodigy and my Uncle Link come through the door. Jimmy slips in after them, but all I can focus on is the orange ball of fur poking its head out of Prodigy’s cut.

“Oh my God, is that a kitten!?” I hold my hands out ready to claim the cute little beastly as it meows. I take hold of the precious baby, ignoring the fleas, giving it a squeeze and scratches behind the ears. I glance back at my mother as she glares at her man. “Mooooom! Can I keep it?” I jut my bottom lip out, giving her a pouty expression that’s hard for even her to say no to.

She says to ask Prodigy, but he shrugs and looks at her like ‘that’s all you buddy.’

“Please. Look. She loves me. Please, Mommy.”

“You’ll be responsible for cleaning the litter box and feeding her,” she says, relenting.

“Thank you. Thank you. You’re the best.”

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Chapter Nine

Fuck. I've really stepped in it this time. Not only did I screw up by kissing Kiesha, now her and Sabrina are in the same room.

I avoid making eye contact with anyone, but especially Kiesha right now. I don't want to set Sabrina off any further.

"I know I screwed up." If she knew how much she'd be done with me.

"Do you think I'm a fool?"

"Of course not. I..." Bitter frustration eats at me as I glance back to where Kiesha is now sitting with her mom and sister. I should have never kissed her. This whole mess is my fault.

"Don't feed me another excuse. I don't know why I bother." Sabrina throws her hands up and stomps back through the bar as every head in the place turns to watch the show as she departs. Ember shoots me a yikes expression as she follows after her friend.

I've got about two seconds to get a handle on this before she ruins my chances with the club. I trail after her, determined to make things right. I don't think I've ever witnessed her being so pissed. Sure, we've had arguments, but never this heated and with an audience.

I'm sure we'll be the gossip of the clubhouse for the next week if I don't get kicked

out for the scene we just made.

“Sabrina, please listen to me,” I plead, reaching out to grab her arm.

She jerks away from my touch and spins to face me with narrowed eyes. “What is there left for you to say? You royally fucked up.” She keeps walking, her short legs moving quickly.

I catch up to her at her car. “Brina, let me explain.”

Ember peels off to give us some privacy. Not that it matters. They tell each other everything, anyway.

She cuts me with a look sharp enough to draw blood, arching her brows up as if to say, ‘well, let’s have it.’

“Happy birthday, babe,” the words come out sounding as hollow as I feel.

“Oh, save it. I don’t want your well wishes or your half-assed apologies. I go out of my way to make sure you know how much I care about you. To make you feel special and I can’t even get a fucking card or a text. I love you, but I don’t like you very much. You’re a real dickhead.”

Ouch. “You’re right. I deserve your wrath and more. I’ve been distracted.”

“Distracted,” she parrots. “Is that what you call her?”

“Who?”

“That pink haired bimbo you were all over in there. I thought you’d be a lot of things, Jimmy. But a cheater was never one of them.”

“You’ve got it all wrong.” The lie rolls off my tongue, smooth as whisky. “I’ve been an idiot. I should have told you what I was doing from the start. Kiesha.”

“Kiesha,” she grumbles. “Even her name sounds slutty.”

“Would you just stop and let me explain?”

She puts her hands on her hips, pursing her lips.

“Thank you.” I bend down to kiss her and she slaps me. “Jesus.”

“You think I want to stand here and listen to you tell me about the bitch you’re cheating on me with?”

“I’m not cheating on you. I was protecting her.”

“Oh, I bet you were.”

“She’s Link’s niece, and I was tasked with keeping her safe.”

“From what?”

“Her asshole of a father. He attacked Zoe a few days ago. Landed her in the hospital and they haven’t caught him. So there’s a chance he could go after Kiesha or Kimber and they needed an extra set of eyes to keep a lookout and today the guy showed up at her school. So yeah. I got distracted by work.”

“She looked pretty safe to me back there.”

“You know me. You know how much I care about you.”

“I used to. Now. I’m not so sure. I think I need some space.”

“Sabrina.”

“I’ll call you or not.” She shoves me back and gets into her car as Prodigy and Link roll through the gate.

“Just give her time to cool off. I’ll talk to her,” Ember assures me.

“Right.” I nod.

I watch the two of them drive off and head back into the clubhouse to drink myself into a stupor. That is, if I’m off the hook for the night with the club.

I’m conflicted. Part of me wants to chase after her, but the other side of me wonders if cooling things off at least until I make the cut would be better.

I slump down in a booth in the back like a wounded animal with my tail between my legs. That blow up happening in front of some of the guys is fucking embarrassing. I take a sip of my beer, but it tastes as wrong as my world feels.

Kiesha giggles from across the room.

I should be focused on what I’m going to do to win Sabrina back and yet the only thing on my mind is the addictive taste of Kiesha’s lips and how good it felt when she was in my arms. I shake my head and grip my bottle of Bud.

“Hey. Look what I got,” Kiesha drops down into the opposite side of the booth, nearly choking the life out of a kitten. “You can’t be down in the dumps in the presence of a kitten.”

“I’m all right.”

“That was...intense. Are you okay?”

“Don’t worry about it. That was nothing. She’ll get over it.”

“It didn’t look or sound like nothing.”

“I don’t want to talk about Sabrina.”

“So we can talk about my boy troubles, but not your girlfriend. Got it.”

“Don’t be cute. I’m really not good company right now.”

“Peach doesn’t want you to be sad.” She places the dirty cat on the table.

“What kind of name is Peach?”

“She looks like a Princess Peach.”

“Don’t you dare name him that.”

She puts her hands over the kitten’s ears. “It’s not a boy. It doesn’t have any balls.”

“Is it even old enough to have any?” I crack a smile and try to pretend that I didn’t just completely fuck things up with Sabrina.

“Kiesha,” her mom calls her over.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” She looks hopeful.

“Sure.”

“I hope you don’t regret earlier. I know it didn’t mean anything, but for the record, it was nice and took my mind off stuff.”

“You’re a great kisser, even for a brat,” I tease her, not having the sense or strength to tell her that it won’t happen again. Her cheeks bloom pink as she saunters toward the exit.

Crawl belches and slaps his palm on the table. “If I win, you’ve gotta show me your tits.”

“And if you lose, what do I get?” Angel, one of the whores who hangs around the clubhouse, coos at him.

“What do you want?”

“Hmm. Let me think.” She taps a finger to her chin. She’s a busty blonde who gets around and has no problem dropping to her knees for the members of the club.

I should have gone back to Trenton’s while I was still sober enough to drive. Instead, I got roped into playing cards with Crawl, Creed, and Angel. I already regret my decision to stay for the game.

Kiesha stopped replying to my texts about an hour ago. I guess it’s past her bedtime. I at least managed to convince her to name the kitten Fireball instead of fucking Peach. Sabrina isn’t even bothering to read any of the messages I’ve sent her. I push up from my chair, bumping the table with my knee, knocking over Creed’s beer.

“Wh-wh where you going, Prospect. No one said you get to quit.”

“I’m calling it a night.”

“The fuck you are. Drop to the floor and give me ten pushups.” Crawl laughs.

“Don’t listen to him. He’s drunk,” Angel tells me, running her fingers up my arm. “I know what I want now. If you lose, I want you to lick peanut butter off the prospect’s toes.”

I shake my head. I won’t want any part of this shit.

“I’m not drunk enough for this,” Creed announces. “I’m getting another beer. Prospect, you want one?” I shake my head, and he shrugs.

“How about I lick it off your tits? The prospect can film it.”

“How about you film while I lick it off the prospect’s dick?”

“Deal.” He grins like he just won big.

Angel winks at me. She’s gorgeous, but even if I wanted to take part in her weird fetish, I doubt I could get it up. I’m drunk and the last thing I need is getting involved with another woman when I’ve already got two I can’t juggle.

“Whatta ya say, Prospect?” she squeezes my upper thigh too close for comfort. “Aw, come on, don’t be shy,” Angel clucks, her fingers dancing dangerously close to my belt buckle.

Crawl hoots from the other side of the table. “He’s blushing. The prospect is blushing!” He points at me and chokes he’s laughing so hard.

“No, I...” I start to say, but the words seem to trip over each other as they tumble

from my mouth. "I'm not." I don't want to hurt her feelings.

"You're not what?" Angel teases. Her hair falls into her face as she leans closer to me, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "Don't tell me you don't find me sexy" She trails a finger down her chest, dipping it between the valley of her breasts. "You know I'm a sure thing. I won't give you any grief, unlike your mouthy girlfriend. Crawl likes to watch, but he won't touch."

"I'm not interested."

"I'm offering you a free pass at me."

Gently, I swat her hand away. "Tempting, but I'm already in enough shit with Sabrina. I think I'll pass."

She rolls her eyes but retreats, leaning back in her chair wearing a smirk. "Your loss."

Crawl snorts into his beer and looks at me like I'm a fool. Maybe I am. This is the time in my life when I should be acting reckless. Enjoying all life has to offer. I guarantee Trenton wouldn't have turned her down.

They continue playing their card game that I don't even know the rules of. They seem to be making them up as they go.

Creed hands me another beer, but I'm cutting myself off. My movements are already clumsy and I'm sluggish, and in desperate need of sleep. Consecutive late nights full of drinking are catching up to me.

"Hey," Angel whispers in my ear. "Let's have some fun." Her head morphs into two and I do a slow blink, trying to stay awake. "I'm bored and horny."

Her lips meet mine and for a second I return her kiss, forgetting my senses.

Crawl claps and I pull away from her, remembering I don't want anything to do with Angel and his game.

"Come on, lover boy. Let me see what we're working with." Angel slips my belt free and unbuttons my jeans.

"Knock it off," I grumble, rubbing my eyes. I need to find somewhere to crash before I'm falling face first into the table.

"Hey Prospect," Crawl says, barely able to talk he's laughing so hard.

"What?"

He slaps a smooshed peanut butter sandwich down on the table in front of me. I don't want to know where he's been keeping it.

"Ha. Ha. Funny. Fucker," I mutter, already pushing up from table and my pants fall down.

"Oh my God." Angel stares at my dick.

I forgot that I'm freeballing from not having a spare pair of underwear when I showered at Trenton's.

"It's so big." She licks her lips.

"Damn, man. I'm impressed." Crawl salutes my dick as I jerk my pants up.

I flip him off and try to sober myself enough to get to my truck and make the drive to

Trenton's apartment. If I stay at the clubhouse, I'm afraid I'll wake up to Angel and Crawl trying to measure the length of my cock.

Chapter Ten

Jimmy picked me up for school, but he's no longer coming into the building. Instead, he's parked near where I saw my father. I overheard Mom and Prodigy discussing me. Saying that maybe I made it up or saw what I wanted to. Like I need attention and am acting out because of the whole secret little sister situation. On the way here, Jimmy barely spoke four whole words to me.

He's wearing the same clothes as yesterday and smells like stale cigarettes and liquor. I guess he's hungover or something. I tried to talk to him, but he told me he had a pounding headache and could I talk less.

I knew our kiss was too good to be true. He doesn't want me. I was stupid to think there could be anything between us. I'll chalk it up to temporary insanity due to all the stress.

When lunch rolls around, I fire off a text to Jimmy.

Want me to try to bring you some food out?

I'm all right.

Are you mad at me?

Why would I be mad at you?

I don't know? You seem off today.

I'm tired. Been a long coupla days.

Because of me?

No.

Before I can text more, Jonesy takes up the seat across from me.

"Hey." He flashes his signature bright smile my way. Two days ago, I would have given just about anything for him to smile at me this way. Now I feel nothing.

"Do you need something?"

"Who was that guy yesterday?"

"A friend."

"Just a friend?"

"Yup."

"Is he your boyfriend or something?"

"Or something."

He laughs nervously. "Right, well. I was wondering who told you about...you know?"

"Your kid?"

"Yeah. That."

“I can’t remember.

“Was it that guy? Does he know my ex-girlfriend or something?”

“No. And no, I won’t blab it around to anyone if that’s what you’re worried about. It’s none of my business.”

“She lied to me.”

“You don’t have to explain. It’s really none of my business.”

“It’s not?” he cocks his head to the side. “Cause I got the impression that you liked me. That you wanted me to ask you out?”

“I did.”

“Great. I was thinking we could go to homecoming together.”

“No, thank you.”

“If you let me explain.”

“Let me stop you. I’m not interested in you in that way. I was. Sure, but now I know what kind of guy you are and, well, I don’t want involved in whatever it is you’ve got going on.”

“You want to meet me in the closet later?”

“You can’t be serious?”

“What can I say? I’m highly ambitious. When I see something I want, I go for it. And

well, let's just say I always get what I want."

"Yeah, you and me," I point back and forth between the two of us, "not happening."

"Was worth a shot." He leaves with a look of confusion and, for the first time since lunch started, I feel a bit better. I finish eating my meal before heading back to class, my mind still replaying every interaction I've had with Jimmy these past few days on repeat. I'm not stressing about my cracked out father or the little sister I've yet to meet. Nope. I'm as selfish as they come. All I can think about is the kiss with Jimmy and how I wish he'd break up with his girlfriend.

That's the fantasy.

Realistically, I know he's going to stay with her. They have a history I can't compete with.

When school ends, I find Jimmy waiting across the street, leaning against his truck, smoking a cigarette. A dirty habit, but he makes flirting with danger look damn good. His dark hair slicked back. His leather jacket fitting him just right. Tattoos slightly exposed on his neck. My mind flashes back to my fingers, tracing his girlfriend's name on his skin. I called it romantic. Now I find it stupid. He broke the golden rule of getting a tattoo. Never get anyone's name inked on you permanently.

I hate her and her stupid name.

Hate that she met him before I did. That she gets to kiss him anytime she wants.

Screw that.

I strut across the crosswalk, determined to remind him that when he kissed me yesterday, he loved it as much as I did, and he initiated it. That means he does like me

even if he doesn't want to admit it. He pressed his lips to mine and shoved me up against the door like he couldn't get enough. Like he could become addicted to the taste and feel of me.

He flicks his cigarette to the ground, snuffing it out as I approach him. I shove a piece of strawberry bubblegum into my mouth. "Hey," he barely gets the word out before I launch myself at him, giving him no choice but to wrap one arm around me while his other braces the door of his truck. I don't pause or give him a chance to push me away before I go up on my tiptoes and press my mouth to his in a soul searing kiss.

He tenses up, but he also doesn't deter me when I glide the tip of my tongue along the seam of his smoke tainted lips. His fingers inch up my side, clenching the purple and black checkered flannel with possession. My backpack hits the asphalt, and everything and everyone around us fades into a dull existence.

I pull away first, needing to catch my breath. "Hi," I whisper and grab my backpack as he stares at me with an amused smirk.

"Kiesha...."

I press two fingers to his lips. "Shh. Don't talk about her. I know."

"You don't know what I was going to say."

"Can you give me this for right now? Let me have this happy little bubble when I'm with you. One where my troubles and yours don't exist. The outside world can't touch us, and we can pretend."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"I know what I'm asking is a lot and that it could blow up in my face at any second. I

know the risk, but I'm willing to take the chance."

"Not here. If Link or Prodigy think I'm taking advantage of you, this won't just end badly. They'll kill me and my chances of making the cut." He opens the door for me, and I scoot to the middle, placing my backpack in the passenger seat.

The corners of his mouth twitch, but he doesn't tell me to move when he climbs in and starts his truck. He steers with one hand and places his other on my knee. I bite the inside of my jaw to fight the big grin trying to form.

"Let's get some food before I drop you off."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Cookout?"

"I do love their shakes."

"Text your mom and tell her so she doesn't worry. They're still doing roadwork on that street."

"Speaking of..." I glance down at my buzzing phone. "Hey Mom."

"How did school go?"

"Slow and boring. We're gonna go to Cookout. Do you want something?"

"No. Ask Jimmy if he can hangout for an hour or two until I get home, or your sister gets off work. Unless you want to come help out at the daycare?"

"No thanks. I'll ask." I mute my phone. "Mom wants to know if you can stick around

the house until someone gets there. Please say yes even if you can't. I don't want to go to her work."

"All right, but you'll owe me."

"I'm sure I can think of something."

I unmute the call. "Yeah. He says it's no problem."

"Great. See you soon. Love you. And Kiesha, keep the doors locked and don't open the door for anyone."

"I won't. Love you."

"Come on. You're hogging all the boosts." Jimmy bumps me with his shoulder, and I fall sideways onto the floor.

"You ass. You made me miss the ball. We're supposed to be on the same team."

"Hold up, there's someone by the door." I pause Rocket League and Jimmy shoves up off the floor to check it out.

Anxiety bubbles in my throat as I wait for him to peek out the window.

"Only the delivery guy with more shit for Fireball. You've only had her a day, and she has more toys than a toddler," he teases.

"That's all my mom's doing. She puts on like the cat is for me, but this morning she was all about some kitty snuggles. Just watch and see when she gets here. She will go straight for her before taking her shoes off."

“I mean, FB is pretty dang cute.” He pets her behind the ears, and she raises her butt up in the air, loving the attention.

“See. No one can resist her cuteness. Not even bad ass bikers.”

Jimmy smiles big. “You think I’m bad ass?”

“You gotta be, right? Or else you wouldn’t be my personal bodyguard.” I flick the tip of his nose, but all I really want to do is kiss him senseless.

“Is that all I am? Your protector?” He leans over and cups the side of my face, pulling me in close. Heavy breaths pass between us.

“What do you want to be?”

“Kiesha. I’m home,” my mom calls out from the kitchen and Jimmy jumps to his feet as if the floor is lava. “Where’s my little cutie patootie?”

“She means the cat. Not me,” I point out. “We’re in here. I was just kicking Jimmy’s butt at a racing game.” I stick my tongue out at him.

“You wish.”

I wish a lot of things when it comes to him.

Mom enters the living room right as I punch Jimmy in the shoulder. She’s already scooped the kitten up and is cooing at her. “Is that any way to treat our guest?”

“He started it,” I mutter, but her attention has already returned to Fireball.

“Who’s a sweet girl?” She scratches under her chin and the cat responds with loud

purrs.

“See. Told you,” I tell Jimmy. “My cat, my butt.”

He laughs as Prodigy yells for him to come help with groceries.

“I’m going to change. Do you have any homework?”

“Nope. All done.”

“You seem to have changed your tune about Jimmy. Is there anything you want to tell me?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. The two of you seem chummy.”

“Would you rather I be mean to him?”

“Of course not. I just don’t want you to get hurt. You remember he has a girlfriend.”

“It’s not like that.” It’s exactly like that but I’m not about to tell her that so she can complain, and I get stuck having someone like Crawl drive me around.

Chapter Eleven

I climb into my truck and let it idle for a minute before I head off to the clubhouse to check in and see if I'm needed before I make the drive back home. It's the weekend and I'm off Kiesha duty unless something else goes down. Prodigy will be with her and her mom for the most part. And it's not like I can't use the downtime to get my head on straight. When I'm guarding Kiesha, my mind gets clouded. It's easy to forget that I'm doing a job and that none of it is real. We're playing pretend, but the line is becoming blurred.

Then there's Sabrina. I've not gone home in days, and we've not spoken since our big fight. I can't leave things like this between us.

Glancing in the rearview mirror, I spot Kiesha in the window, watching me leave. My thoughts drift back to kissing her and liking the way she looks at me a little too much. Like I'm someone. That in her eyes I'm special. In a way, I thought Sabrina saw me. Thinking of her, my heart tugs in the opposite direction. I never thought I'd find myself torn between two women.

When I started getting serious about prospecting for the club, I was warned about the temptations. I just never expected my temptation to be a pink-haired brat. As I pull up under the familiar security lights at the clubhouse, I know I've got a choice to make. A future with the club or the path I was set on with Sabrina. It's becoming painfully clear I can't have both.

I step out of my truck and take a deep breath, knowing my choice. It's just not one I'm prepared to make. I've hurt Sabrina a lot these past few months. If we stay

together, I'll keep letting her down.

As I'm walking toward the clubhouse, the front door swings open, and Link is staring at me as if he wants to rip my arms off my body and beat me with them.

"Thought I made myself clear about my niece," he snarls.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about." He steps outside and shows me a picture on his cellphone of Kiesha and me kissing at my truck when I picked her up from school.

"You told me to pretend to date her. That's what all I'm doing."

"I never told you to make-out with her on the side of the damn street."

"Won't happen again."

"It better not."

"Understood."

"Good. Don't take advantage of her, is all I'm saying."

"Never would." I'm totally fucked and need to fix this. I've not been clear with Kiesha because the truth is, I like her. And now I've got to let her down easy. She's fragile and vulnerable and I completely took advantage, even if that was never my intention.

"Go home. Rest up. You've earned it."

“Hey Gran. Do you need anything? I’m on my way home.”

“You might think about some flowers and a card. Maybe a cake. You missed Sabrina’s birthday. I don’t know what’s going on between you, but she’s been crying for days. Won’t come out of the bedroom. Not even for my butter cookies, and you know how much she loves them.”

“All right. I’ll take care of it. Don’t worry. She’s upset with me, but we’ll work it out. We always do.”

I end the call, hating that my Gran is disappointed in me. She didn’t say as much, but the judgement was evident in her voice. She loves Sabrina and would love nothing more than for us to get married and have some kids. Hell, if we broke up, I’m certain she’d kick me out and keep Sabrina. She’s like a daughter to her.

I’ve been impulsive and irrational. Selfish even. I just need to find a way to get Sabrina to embrace the club and what it could mean for us. For our future.

I stop off and do as Gran said. I buy Sabrina a cake, flowers, a stuffed animal, a necklace, and a card. Driving home, I anticipate the worst. Each mile feels like a stretch of ten and my heart pounds with every passing light and street sign. By the time I reach my Gran’s place, I’m on the verge of puking. Sweaty palms. Soured stomach. Pounding headache. Racing thoughts. A cold sweat trickles down my spine.

Sabrina had always been the one chasing me. I’ve never had to work hard at our relationship, but then again, I’ve always pretty much gone with the flow. When I walk through the front door, she doesn’t come running to me. The place is eerily silent apart from the ticking of the wall clock. Gran must have gone on to bed to give us privacy. Not that there is much to be had living in a trailer. The walls are paper thin. The only reason it seems like we have some privacy is because the bedrooms are on opposite ends.

“Sabrina?” I call out tentatively, making my way through the living room towards our bedroom. The door is slightly ajar and light spills out, illuminating the short hallway. I knock gently before pushing it open.

She’s sitting on the bed, her back against the headboard with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her hair is a tangled mess and there are bags under her eyes. She glances up at me but doesn’t speak.

“Happy belated birthday.” I place the flowers at her feet along with the stuffed fox, card, and cake. “I’m a shit boyfriend and all I can say is I’m sorry I forgot your birthday.”

She sniffles and picks at some of the rose petals. “I don’t want to fight, but I’m not ready to forgive you.”

“I hate it when we fight.”

“You fucked up.”

I swallow hard. “I know.” I sit at the foot of the bed. “I’d like to promise it won’t happen again, but I can’t do that. If this is going to work, you’ve gotta come to terms with me being in the club. If you can’t, then we can’t be together. I can’t be half in. Doesn’t work like that. Not with the club. Not in a relationship. Don’t ask me to choose because the club will win every time.”

“That’s not fair.”

“It’s what I want. And if you tell me, you can’t be with me, I’ll hate it, but I’ll walk away from us. I was born to be a biker. It’s in my blood.”

“Answer something for me.”

“I’ll try.”

“I need you to be honest. Is there something going on with that girl from the clubhouse?”

“I told you. I’m doing a job for the club. She’s in high school.” It’s not a complete lie, but I can’t tell her that I’ve kissed Kiesha.

Her brows furrow as she stares at me, searching for some telltale sign of a lie. “You swear to me. You swear there’s nothing more?”

I hold her gaze, careful not to break eye contact. “I swear. Nothing more.”

For a long moment, she just studies my face, biting down on her lower lip as if contemplating my words, weighing them against what she feels in her heart.

“There’s nothing to be worried about.” I try to reassure her, forcing a weak smile onto my face. But deep down, guilt is clawing at my heart. Kiesha and her tempting kisses flash in my mind. Heat sears the back of my neck. Her memory calling me a filthy, lying bastard.

“So, you’re telling me there’s nothing between you and Kiesha?” She fixes her gaze on me, eyes sparkling with unshed tears.

“I swear on everything. It’s just club business.” The words taste bitter in my mouth. I can see that she wants to believe me, but she isn’t fully convinced. And why should she be? I’m not even convincing myself. I’m an asshole and she deserves better. Her and Kiesha both do.

She’s silent for a moment before she finally speaks up. “I don’t know if I trust you anymore.”

The words feel like a punch in the gut. I feel the air leave my lungs as I let the weight of her words sink in. I've earned her mistrust. My throat tightens, but I say nothing. I knew this was coming. The conversation neither of us wants to have but needs to.

"Jimmy. I love you so much, but you being in the club scares the shit out of me." Her tears break free, and I hate knowing her tears are because of my actions.

"It's okay. You don't have to explain. I understand. I'll just grab some of my stuff. You can stay here, and I'll crash with Trenton."

"Wait. Do you want to breakup? Are you breaking up with me?"

"I thought that's what you wanted."

"I'm pissed and hurt, but I'm not giving up on us, Jimmy."

I should be relieved at her words, but part of me feels as though I'm bobbing right at the surface of the ocean and have to choose if I want to sink or swim. Why does saying I love you feel like an anchor dropping on my head?

"Jimmy," she prompts, going up on her knees, crushing the roses. "You want to stay together, don't you?"

The word no hangs on the tip of my tongue and dies there as I meet her worried gaze. "Of course." I lean forward and kiss her tear-stained lips.

I knock the gifts to the floor and lay her back on the bed to prove to her and myself that she's the one I love.

Her lips meet mine, frantic yet unsure. A bitter reminder that she's not the only girl I want to hold in my arms. She's not the only one I'm hurting. And yet I am up the

affection I'm giving her, lying to us both. My hands roam over her body as I whisper my apologies and more lies. What I can't convince her of with words, I try to convey with my touch what my mouth is failing to say.

Sabrina digs her nails into my back, drawing blood. Desperately seeking the connection we've always shared as she cries into my mouth and all I am is numb. There's no fire. Not on my end. I can't be with Kiesha, so why does this make me think I'm settling for what's easy? What's comfortable. I love Sabrina. I just need to remind myself. I continue going through the motions, peeling her clothes from her body. A body I know every inch of. I know what she craves. Her every desire. I know every secret thought. Every want. I should be able to lose myself in her and not think about someone else, and yet whenever I close my eyes, all I see is pink hair. All I smell and taste is Kiesha's strawberry bubblegum. Her innocence.

Laying here with Sabrina, I pretend that I'm back in that closet. That the heavy breaths filling my lungs belong to a pink-haired devil.

With every kiss, every touch, I try to convey my sincerity. Pleading with soft words of forgiveness against Sabrina's skin. She tastes salty from her tears and sweet from her lip balm, an intoxicating mix that makes my head spin because it's similar to Kiesha's strawberry taste and yet nowhere near as sweet. Sabrina tangles her fingers in my hair, pulling me closer as our bodies entwine in this desperate dance of regret and hope, love and hurt. Remembrance as she welcomes me back.

"I'm sorry, baby. So damn sorry," I mutter against her lips. My apology is barely audible over the thundering of my heart beating against my chest. She acknowledges every word. Even the ones I don't dare speak. Guilt continues to eat at me, but it doesn't stop me from reclaiming her and fantasizing I'm with someone else entirely. And if she knows there's someone else, she pretends there isn't.

Sabrina gives herself to me and I hope tonight that my lies are enough to save us.

Our bodies are joined, but there's distance between us. The lies I've been telling. My feelings for someone else. I'm disconnected from our relationship. And judging by the way she's staring at me, she senses the truth of it.

Silence stretches between us, our breaths mingling as I continue to dream of another while continuing to fuck her. Trying to convince myself that this is where I should be. Where my heart belongs.

Slowly, her fingers trace patterns on my back, sending shockwaves through my body that have nothing to do with pleasure and everything to do with fear. I could lose her forever. I could lose Sabrina completely if she learns the truth. I'm so damn selfish. Too damn selfish to let it happen.

"I love you. Only you."

"I believe you." There's doubt in her eyes as she looks deeply into mine.

"You sure?" I stroke her jaw, brushing her hair away from her face.

"I don't know," she whispers back, and that honesty hits me harder than any rejection.

"It's okay." I roll to my back, on the verge of confessing everything.

"Jimmy?" she hesitates.

"What?"

"I'm glad you're here."

I wrap my hand around hers, bringing her knuckles to my lips. "Me, too." Maybe if I

whisper the lie enough times, I'll believe it.

"All I've ever wanted is to be with you. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"And you want to be with me?" she leans over me, placing her palm over my racing heartbeat.

"You're the only one for me."

"Then that's all that matters." Her lips press against mine, accepting the lie. "All I wanted for my birthday was this. To be with you."

"I'm all yours the rest of the weekend."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

"Good. Nothing else matters as long as we're together."

"Always." I hug her tighter.

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Chapter Twelve

“How was your weekend?” I slide into the passenger side of Jimmy’s truck, noticing he has his backpack stuck in the middle of the seat, and wonder if it’s on purpose.

“Was all right.” he doesn’t even look my way as he pulls off from my house.

“Did you get the pictures I sent you of FB?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“So, what did you get into? Any craziness at the clubhouse?”

“Nope.”

“Oh.” I don’t say anything else. I wait for him to continue the conversation, only he doesn’t. He turns the radio up and ignores me completely. “Someone woke up on the wrong side of bed this morning,” I tease and get no response. He doesn’t even crack the slightest semblance of a smile. I turn the volume down on his radio. “So I was wondering. Do you think... would you consider being my date at the homecoming dance?” I twist my fingers together in my lap, watching him from the corner of my eyes.

The muscle in his jaw pulses. “No. It wouldn’t be a good idea and I’m too old. Besides, I’m sure they’ll find your father before then.”

“Right.” I shrink further away, pressing my body close enough to the door that if

someone opened it, I'd tumble out. "Are you mad at me or something?"

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"You seem different." Cold. Like you hate me. "Distant."

We idle at a red light, and for the first time this morning he looks at me. Our eyes lock, and I nearly crumble into a million pieces under his scrutiny. "Look, it's not you. I've got a lot on my mind." He returns his attention to the traffic light.

"Is it your girlfriend? Sabrina?" The question comes out more like an accusation.

His grip on the steering wheel tightens to the point his knuckles turn white. "Has nothing to do with her."

"Sorry. I shouldn't have asked. It's none of my business. I don't mean to pry."

"Don't stress yourself. It's nothing for you to worry about." His tone comes across like he means that. But his rigid posture and tight face says otherwise. "I just want to focus on doing my job." The way he says it is like a jab into my heart with a dagger.

Clue in. You're only a job. I don't really like you. I'm tolerating you. I love my girlfriend.

That's my takeaway from our conversation and what plays on my mind all day at school.

At the end of the day, he's not waiting for me outside of his truck like he was on Friday. He's pulled up first in the pickup line, ready to go. He doesn't talk, and he doesn't hang around when he drops me off with my sister and Nav at their house, even though he was invited in.

But maybe he has somewhere to be. Like with his girlfriend.

“How are you really?” Kimber questions as she slices some fruit to snack on while Nav tends to the steaks he threw on the grill.

I know she means with everything going on with our father and the fact we have a little sister. “As good as I can be considering. You?”

“I don’t know. It’s weird to think that we have a sibling out there and that he’s running around town like a creep.”

“Can we talk about something else?” Thinking about our father is depressing and I’m already down in the dumps enough as it is.

“You find a date for the dance yet? Did that one guy ask?”

“No, and I don’t want to talk about boys.”

“What about your friend...Sam?”

“Sam isn’t going to the dance. They’ll be at their dad’s that weekend.”

“Bummer.” She pops a slice of melon between her lips.

Kimber has no idea. In school, she was popular and always got asked out and invited to parties. I’m an outsider. Not popular but also not a geek.

“Maybe Jimmy can take you?”

“I don’t think his girlfriend would go for that.”

“I hear she’s a real bitch.”

“Well, you saw her the other day.” I shrug.

“Hmm. Let me think.”

“Don’t say Trenton. He’s too old.”

“There’s got to be someone.”

“Trust me. There isn’t. It’s fine. I’ll go with Bethany or something.”

“You two talking about me?” Nav asks as he brings the steaks in.

“Of course.” Kimber kisses him and I gag. They are so perfect it’s disgusting. “We’re trying to find Kiesha a date for homecoming.”

“The prospect can take her.”

My stomach drops. “That’s not an option.”

The next few days go by the same. No sightings of my father. Jimmy will barely look at me. Let alone speak to me. A week ago, life was good. Not great, but I was oblivious to all the crap that has changed everything I thought I knew. Jimmy hadn’t come into my life to break my heart. I didn’t have another sister. And my father... well, he was still a piece of shit but not trying to destroy our lives.

Now, Jimmy practically hates me. Jonesy is a douche with a kid he doesn’t take care of. The only good thing to happen is Mom and Prodigy are a thing. I’d go through this all over again for her to get her happy ending.

Only today I'm in my own personal form of hell. Jimmy is at my house with me until my mom and Prodigy get here. He's standing by the front door as if he's ready to bolt at the first opportunity that arises.

"I can't take this," I shout and throw my book at him. It drops at his feet with a thud.

He gapes at me with wide eyes. "What the fuck? Did you throw your book at me?"

"At least it got your attention." Tears well in the creases of my eyes, threatening to spill at any moment.

"Kiesha. Trust me. This is for the best. We were growing too close. Too comfortable. I can't fuck up with the club."

"Or your girlfriend," I snap.

"You're right. I should never have kissed you. I'm with Sabrina. It wasn't fair to anyone. I got caught up in the lie."

"So what? You didn't want to kiss me? None of it was real?"

"That's the problem. It was too damn real. And now I've hurt two people I care about. The last thing I want is to hurt you."

"Then why are you? You won't look at me. You won't talk to me. Is there something wrong with me? My father never wanted me. No one ever chooses me." The tears break free, and I don't want him to see me cry. I dash to my room and slam the door shut. I collapse on the center of my bed and bury my face in my pillow.

There's a gentle knock at my door. "Kiesha," he croaks my name, sounding defeated.

“Go away. Maybe if you do, my father will come and put me out of my misery.”

The door swings open. Jimmy’s tortured gaze meets mine. “Don’t say shit like that. Don’t ever wish for something like that. You hear me?”

I look away from him. “Everyone’s life would be better if I didn’t exist. Mom wouldn’t have to worry about me. You wouldn’t have to watch over me. My father could go back to pretending I was never born.”

“My life wouldn’t be better without you.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“I can’t look at you because when I do, all I want is to kiss you.”

“Why is that wrong?”

“Because I’m with Sabrina. Because you’re in high school. Because your uncle will kill me. I can give you a million reasons, Kiesha.”

“What about what I want? Doesn’t my feelings matter?”

“That’s why I’ve got to put space between us. I’m only going to hurt you.”

“Too late for that. You’re breaking my heart.”

“I can’t protect you like this.”

“Then don’t. You’re free to go. I’m eighteen. Technically, I’m an adult. I don’t need you to babysit me. But that’s right. You’re scared the club will reject you.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Lash out at me because you’re pissed.”

“Get out of my room.”

“I don’t want things to be like this between us.”

“If you were with me, it’d be so easy. I’d never ask you to choose.”

He rubs the back of his neck. His mouth opens but snaps shut at the sound of car doors closing.

“Better run and see who it is. Maybe it’s your girlfriend.”

“Don’t be a brat,” he says softly and leaves.

A second later, I overhear my mom asking where I am and Jimmy telling her I’m in my room. He reappears at my door. “Your mom is home and there’s someone she wants you to meet.”

“Tell her I’ll be there in a minute.” I sniffle and wipe the dampness from around my eyes with the sleeve of my shirt.

In the living room, there’s a little girl sitting on the couch. Oh my God. My little sister. Mom was right. She looks like someone took one of my baby pictures and cloned me.

Mom motions me into the kitchen before I get to say hello. Jimmy is crouched to her

level, squatting in front of her, asking her who her favorite princess is.

“Hey. Have you been crying?”

“No.” I fake a smile. “I fell asleep. Jimmy just woke me up.”

“You sure?”

“Yup. Promise,” I lie. There’s no way I’m telling her about the drama with Jimmy. She’s obviously dealing with enough as it is.

“I’m sorry to spring this on you like this, but Marie is missing, and I didn’t know what else to do. The club’s searching for her and your father. It’s possible they’ve taken off, but I don’t think Marie would leave her behind.”

“So her mom is just gone?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. Can you and Jimmy entertain her while I make some calls? Your sister and Nav are swinging by in a bit with dinner.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

I can’t believe my little sister is here. Crying over a boy isn’t exactly how I pictured meeting her, but here I am.

“Pick a color.” I line up my array of nail polish for Kieleigh to choose from.

I’ve spent the past hour letting her play in my makeup and braiding her hair. Now it’s Jimmy’s turn to be a customer in our beauty salon.

His face goes ashen when she points to the hot pink shade with glitter.

“Don’t worry. I have polish remover.” I smirk at him. “Lay your hands flat on the table, Sir.” I tap the paper towels Mom insisted we put down on the coffee table, so we don’t get any polish on the wood.

“I think it’d go better on my toes.”

“Ew. We don’t want to see your crusty toes.” I giggle and Kieleigh makes a disgusted expression.

“My toes aren’t crusty. See.” He pulls his socks off and wiggles his toes at us.

I pinch my nose and wave my free hand through the air, implying his feet stink.

“Boys are gross. Especially ones named Jimmy,” I tell her, and he frowns.

“Are you going to paint my nails or what?”

Chapter Thirteen

I fire off a text to Sabrina, telling her I'll be home as soon as I can. Things between us aren't what they once were, but I'm trying to do better. I've put as much distance as I can between Kiesha and me. Which hasn't been easy, considering it's my job to protect her.

Link isn't a man who makes empty threats. The last thing I want is to piss him off when he's already itching for a fight. The whole club is keyed up and ready to be done with this Adam fucker and him attempting to make Zoe's life hell. Like Link said, he should have killed the dickhead years ago.

For years, he's been toying with Zoe and her daughters. It's no wonder Kiesha has daddy issues. I watch her as she plays with her little sister. Teaching her how to properly hold and pet the cat without squeezing too tightly. She's not stopped smiling since she got here, but I've noticed the sadness in her eyes when she thinks no one is watching and I know that I put it there.

I don't know how to make up for hurting her. The only thing I know to do is keep my distance. As soon as this is over, she'll go back to her normal and forget all about me.

My cell rings and I step off to the corner that veers to the hallway and to the kitchen, depending on which way you turn to take the call.

"Guess what?" Sabrina squeals.

"What's up?"

“Ember says that she thinks Prodigy will move in with Zoe soon and that means they will need a new roommate. If Smoke agrees to it, then we’ve got a place as long as we can cover our part of the rent. You’d be closer to the club, and I’d get to spend more time with Ember.”

“Sounds perfect.” The sound of glass breaking has me ending the call and rushing toward the source, followed by Kiesha and her mother.

I throw my arms out to keep them from entering the room any further. I’m the only thing standing between them and Adam, Kiesha’s father and Zoe’s ex-husband, as well as his gun. Blood drips from his knuckles where he punched the glass of the back door to gain entry inside the house.

Everything unfolds quickly and I don’t have time to think as Kiesha’s little sister barrels into the kitchen chasing after the cat. Before I can grab hold of her, Kiesha scoops her up.

I’m frozen in place. A shield between them and a gun wielding asshole.

One wrong move and any of us could be dead.

I can’t afford to make a rash decision. I stare Adan down, trying to anticipate his next move. There’s no remorse on his hardened face despite the fact that he’s aiming a loaded weapon at two of his children. The expression in his eyes is wild and angry. He’s unhinged and desperate.

I stand my ground, though on the inside I’m anything but calm.

“Let the kids go and you and I can talk about this,” Zoe attempts to reason with him.

“Shut up, bitch.”

“Don’t talk to my mom like that, asshole,” Kiesha shrieks from behind me as her sister cries.

Fuck. This is going to end badly. I’ve got a gun tucked into the back waistband of my jeans, but if he sees me go for it, the bastard will shoot me with no regard to anyone. Not even himself. If it were only the two of us, I’d take the chance. If I make one wrong move, I’m dead. Then who will protect Kiesha, her mom, and sister?

Someone behind me goes for either my gun or the phone, but I can’t take my focus off Adam.

“What are you doing, you stupid bitch? Let me see your hands.”

I take a tentative step back, hoping I can usher them out of the room, but he fires a warning shot into the ceiling. “You think I’m fucking playing with you? I’m here for my girls. Marie’s waiting in the car.”

“You’re not taking them anywhere!” Zoe screams at him, and he fires off another round.

“Next one will be between your eyes.”

The two of them continue to argue while I look for an exit that doesn’t involve him shooting at us. It’s gotta be fast. He’s out of patience and I’m afraid the next shot he takes will be at us. I’ve never been in a situation like this. Hell, I’ve only ever shot at deer out in the woods. I’m in over my head, but now isn’t the time to panic.

Zoe grabs my gun, stepping past me. “Jimmy, get the girls out of here.”

Damn it all to hell. If Zoe takes a bullet, I’m dead either way. I make a decision and pray it’s the right one as I retrieve my weapon from Zoe as a shot rings out. Chaos

erupts and I use my body as a shield for Kiesha and her sister As Prodigy enters the scene and goes for Adam.

Seconds later, I'm on the floor, blood oozing from the left side of my head, with Kiesha kneeling over me. I touch the side of my head, thankful I seem to be all in one piece besides a small nick on my ear that probably came from a shard of glass. "Thought he blew my brains out for a second." I laugh it off, earning me a punch to the ribs.

"You're an idiot," Kiesha says with unshed tears glittering in her eyes. Her lips press to mine in front of her family as they bicker about what to do with Adam.

"You did the best you could, given the circumstances." Prodigy clamps a hand to my shoulder. "Not bad at all, Prospect. My woman and her girls are safe. That's what matters most."

"Thanks, man."

"I'll give you two a minute." He walks back into the house as Kiesha comes out to my truck.

"Thanks for saving my life back there."

"All part of the job."

"It was more than that. You could have been killed." She shivers, likely from the shock of it all. It's not every day there's a shootout in her kitchen. Hopefully, it will be the last.

I don't know how Prodigy didn't put a bullet in Adam's head, but he said he didn't want that image burned into the girls' heads. Didn't want that to be how they saw him

or how they remember their father.

The police arrested him and took everyone's statements. It's late and I'm beat.

"Don't mention it."

"I know this means you won't be driving me around anymore or pretending to be my boyfriend. You have a life to get back to with Sabrina."

"It wasn't all pretend. You're a sweet girl, Kiesha. Any guy would be lucky..." I cap my palm over my fist. "You ever get into another hostage situation I'm your guy."

She lets out a soft giggle, her shoulders shaking with the relief of laughter after the tense and terrifying ordeal. "Remind me to get into more hostage situations, then."

"I'm serious, Kiesha." I grab her by the shoulders, pulling her in close enough to see the flecks of gold in her hazel eyes. "You deserve better than this. Better than your good-for-nothing father and better than some dirty biker who can't make up his mind whether he's good or bad. Who kisses pretty little brats behind his girlfriend's back."

A tear rolls down her cheek and I instinctively wipe it with my thumb. "I'll find better, eventually," she says softly, her voice barely audible above the crunching gravel as the cops wrap up their investigation.

Before I can say anything more, she wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me into a hug that feels like home. The kind of home I've been searching for all my life. "I'm going to miss you."

"I know."

She stares into my eyes searching for permission, but this time I make the first move

and kiss her goodbye, closed mouthed. “Stay out of trouble.”

“I can’t make any promises.” She disengages from our embrace. “Guess you’ve gotta go, huh?”

I roll my lips, tasting her there and craving more. “I’ll see you around.”

“You better.”

I force myself into my truck as she struts back inside, not looking back.

On the drive home, I replay the events of the evening over in my mind, dissecting every decision I did or didn’t make. I didn’t expect to miss Kiesha already, but I do.

The narrow and winding road leading back to my Gran’s place is nearly pitch black, with the sky being as cloudy as my mood. The silence of the cab of my truck only serves to amplify the buzzing thoughts in my head. A dull ache throbs from my nicked ear, a reminder of the close call with death and Kiesha’s teary eyes. At least she’s safe now.

Things could have gone down a lot differently. We could all be dead, but we’re not.

I park and kill the engine, then lean back against the seat, staring up at the ceiling of my truck. The events of tonight are too fresh on my mind to get out of this truck. I can still feel Kiesha’s lips on mine, the shock in her eyes when I kissed her goodbye. The taste of her is still on my tongue, strawberries and sugar.

Regret for things I did and didn’t say.

I’m not ready to face Sabrina and answer the millions of questions she’ll no doubt have. But It’s time to come clean. About all of it. I could lose her, but I can’t build a

future with her based on a lie.

That's not who I am. Not the man my Gran raised me to be. If my relationship with Sabrina is going to work, it has to be built on the truth. Even if it hurts. Forcing myself out of the truck, I mentally prepare myself for what I have to do.

Sabrina is waiting for me at the kitchen table, sipping on a mug of tea. Her tense expression meets mine, but her eyes brighten at the sight of me. "Hey. You scared me. Is everything okay?"

I toss my keys on the counter. "I hope so."

"What happened?"

"My current job for the club ended. We should talk. I wasn't completely honest with you before."

"I knew. Deep down I knew, but I swallowed your lies because I was hungry for you."

"I know. Sorry can't fix what I did."

"So what? Is this how it's going to be? You feeding me lies and me pretending that we're okay?"

"I got caught up in the job, but it won't happen again."

"Tell me exactly what happened."

"There was a kiss."

“Just a kiss or more?”

“One kiss.” The lies come all too easily, and I can’t stop.

“Do you like her?”

“No. It was a job. Nothing more. I went a little too far one time.”

“I don’t know how to trust you.”

“I swear to you. That’s all that happened. I’ll never see her again.”

“And what about the next job or the next skank?”

“Things will be different. I’ll be coming home to you every night. We’ll do what you said. Move in with Smoke and Ember until we can afford our own place. I won’t have to sleep at the clubhouse or crash at Trenton’s.” I take her hand and pull her up from her chair. “Come on. We can make this work.”

“I don’t know.”

“Think about it.” I wrap my arms around her. I’m a selfish bastard.

I should cut her loose, but I’m not ready to lose her.

Chapter Fourteen

“You look beautiful.” Mom hands me my corsage and I slide the elastic band over my wrist, admiring the pink roses that match my hair. “One more picture.” She presses her palms together.

“We’ve taken enough pics. I’m going to be late.”

“You’re picking Bethany up and going to the dance. Then, after you’ll be spending the night at her house?”

“Yes. I’ll video call you before bed.”

“No parties. No Jonesy with the lickable abs.”

“Ugh. As if. I have better taste than that.” My thoughts shift to Jimmy and my heart cracks a little further. I’ve been trying to forget about him, but it’s hard. I overheard Mom and Prodigy talking about how him and his girlfriend are moving in with Smoke and Ember.

It’s none of my business.

Things have changed since my father broke into the house and held us at gunpoint. Prodigy officially moved in with us and Mom has gotten even more strict with when I’m supposed to be home and where I go. One would think it’d be the opposite now that my sperm donor is rotting in a jail cell. Marie and my little sister are back living at Lily’s Hope. A place for abused women. I don’t really know the specifics. Mom’s

trying to help Marie, but she's also got her guard up. My father says they were working together, but Mom isn't sure.

Prodigy living with us has brought some good changes too. Like Mom is starting to give me a little more freedom, allowing me to drive her car sometimes, but she's keeping tabs on me more than she did before. She says at least if I'm in her car when I drive, she can breathe a little easier when I go out the door.

She snaps a few more pictures and hands me her keys. Picking Bethany up isn't that far of a drive. She lives two streets over from me. When I pull up, she's already running across her front yard, nearly taking a tumble when her heel catches on something.

"Oh my God. Did you see that? I would have died," she gushes as she climbs into the passenger seat.

"I only wish I was filming," I tease. "Don't tell me you've already been drinking?"

"Only a few sips. I had to bribe my brother with doing his chores for the next two weeks to get this." She opens her overnight bag, and I see three bottles of Snow Creek poking out the top.

So I may have told my mom a slight fib. I'll be with Bethany, but we aren't staying at her house. Her mom thinks she's sleeping at my house. Not exactly foolproof, but we're hoping neither of them calls the other to ask questions. Carissa Hodgins is having a party.

It's my senior year and I've not had any fun. Tonight is my chance to be a little impulsive.

"That was so boring. Did you see what Deona was wearing? Like I could almost see

her ass,” Bethany says, passing me a red cup full of cheap wine. “I can’t believe she beat out you and Lisa for homecoming queen.”

I shrug. “I don’t really care.” I was only trying to get Jonesy’s attention. Total waste of my time.

The dance was lame, so we left early, and we took turns calling our mothers to pretend we were in each other’s bedrooms when really, it’s Carissa’s guest room. I only wish Sam were here and that Jimmy could have seen me in my dress.

“Let’s get this party started!” Carissa turns on the stereo as more of our classmates squeeze into the living room.

Bethany elbows me. “Don’t look now, but Jonesy is staring at you.”

Warmth floods my face. I didn’t know he would be here. I figured he took the hint when I blew him off the last time. I’m not interested in him, but maybe I could use him to make Jimmy jealous. I still have his phone number.

I gulp down the piss warm wine and scan the room for Jonesy. He may not be boyfriend material, but he could be useful.

I find him leaning in the doorway between the living room and kitchen. One thing about him is that he makes not giving a shit look effortless as he gazes around the room wearing an easy smile until his gaze locks with mine. He’s heartbreak waiting to happen to some poor unsuspecting girl. At least I know the truth about him and there are no feelings involved. His smile spreads into a full-blown smirk as he raises his cup in a silent toast before taking a long drink.

“What are you waiting for? Go talk to him,” Bethany whispers, nudging me again with her elbow.

“He’s not really my type.”

“Are you crazy? He’s everyone’s type.” She makes a valid point.

If I didn’t know what a jerk he is, I’d have been his date to the dance.

“Okay. I’m going over. Wish me luck.” I finish off my drink and place it on the table as I shove up off the loveseat, pretending I’m going to the kitchen for another drink. I saunter toward him, pretending I don’t notice the way he’s practically undressing me with his eyes.

If I were any other girl, I’d be weak in the knees for that look he’s giving me.

“Looking good tonight, Kie.”

“Thank you.” I squeeze his arm as I continue into the kitchen, hoping he takes the bait and follows me. I make it to the breakfast bar where all the bottles of liquor and beer are lined up. I study the bottles and count to five before glancing over my shoulder. I don’t even make it to three before he slides in next to me.

“What’s your poison?”

I lick my lips. “I’ll have whatever it is you’re drinking.” I grab his cup and take a sip and am shocked there’s only water in it. I arch a brow at him.

“Don’t go telling anyone. I’ve got a rep to maintain and a scholarship to keep.”

“I’m already keeping enough of your secrets. Don’t you think?”

“Are you ever going to let me explain?”

“I’ll think about it.” I shoot him a flirty smile.

“Are you having fun?”

“That depends.”

“On?”

“If you’re going to make it fun.”

“Is that so?”

I pick up a bottle of liquor and give it a sniff. “Mhmm.” My lips screw up in disgust at the pungent smell.

“Don’t drink that,” he warns. “Try this instead.” He twists the cap off a hard lemonade. “Party rule number one. Never drink from an opened container that you didn’t open yourself.”

“Thank you.” I take a sip. “You know. You’re not at all what I expected.”

“Hope that’s a good thing.”

“So far, though, for someone who is supposed to be a bad boy...” I trail off.

“Maybe I’m misunderstood.” That smug smile returns, the one that would have other girls falling for his charm.

“I don’t know if I’d go that far.”

“But you’re thinking about it. About me.”

“Maybe.”

“Think about this then, Kie. You wanted me to ask you to the dance until you heard some partial truths about me.”

“Fair.”

“Why don’t we get that dance now?” He glances toward the living room where the furniture has been pushed back for a makeshift dance floor.

My mom’s warning about him flickers in my thoughts, but I’m supposed to be having fun. Being impulsive. “One dance.” He grabs my drink and places it on the counter before taking my hand in his.

Nervousness flutters in my belly as he leads the way.

The lights have been turned down and a slow song plays through the speakers. Jonesy pulls me to the middle of the room, putting his hands on my hips, holding me close. I wrap my arms around his neck and inhale his scent. Woodsy and fresh.

“What’s the deal with you and that guy?”

“What guy?” I play it off.

He smiles. “The one who was driving you to and from school.”

Jonesy was paying closer attention to me than I thought. “It doesn’t matter. He’s not here.”

“Did he dump you?”

“No. he’s got a girlfriend.”

“But he was kissing you?” He arches a brow at me.

“Long story.”

“I’ve got time.”

“You want to hear me complain about my love life?” Or lack of one, I should say.

“I’m trying to get to know you better. I find you...interesting. You’re not what I expected either.”

“And what were you expecting?”

“I thought you’d be a lot weirder.” He grins and twirls me around.

“Ha. I see how it is.”

Jonesy pulls me in close again. “Come on. Tell me what happened.”

“If you insist.” I lay my head on his shoulder and tell him parts of my complicated relationship with Jimmy, leaving out the bits about my father taking us hostage in my kitchen. “I didn’t expect to care or miss him this much after such a short time.”

“What a jerk,” he tells me.

“But he’s not. Not really,” I argue.

“Whatever you say.” He licks his lips and clears his throat as the song changes to something more upbeat. “Want to make him jealous?”

“I don’t know if that’s possible.”

“Oh ye of little faith. Trust me. I know what to do.”

Trusting a guy like Jonesy is a terrible idea. “I’m in.”

“Do you have his cell number?”

“Yeah.”

“Perfect. We’re going to take some pics for him.” Jonesy takes me out on the back deck.

He kicks his shoes and socks off and removes his shirt. “What are you doing?” I turn my head when he drops his pants to the ground.

“We’re doing this in the hot tub.”

“I don’t have a suit.”

“You’ve got underwear on. Same difference.”

“I don’t know. What’s in this for you?”

“Getting to kiss my crush.”

“You have a crush on me?”

“Kie, you know I do. And I get it. We’re not going to happen, but at least we’ll have tonight.”

His motive might be selfish but it's also kind of sweet. I did say I want to have fun.
"Turn around."

He rolls his eyes, but does as I wish. I slip my shoes off followed by my sparkly dress, revealing my ice blue lacy boy short style undies and matching strapless bra.

"Can I turn around now?"

I nod and realize he can't see me. "Yeah."

His cheeks redden. "Wow. You don't disappoint." He grins. "This is going to be so worth it if he beats my ass."

"No one will be beating anyone's ass."

"You aren't seeing what I am or what we're going to send him."

A gust of wind swirls around us and I shiver.

"Let's get in so you don't freeze." His rough hands rub up and down my arms to warm me.

"Okay." I let out a shaky breath. I've never done anything like this, but the thought of making Jimmy eat his heart out gives me a thrill.

"Bring your phone."

Jonesy gets in first. Once he's seated, I get in, taking a seat on the opposite side.

"Be hard to make him jealous if you're all the way over there."

“True.” I giggle and hope he can’t sense how nervous I am. I move next to him and he shakes his head.

“Your naivety is adorable.”

“What? Why?”

“Do you want to make him wish he were here or send him a selfie? C’mere. Straddle my lap.”

I lay my phone on the edge of the hot tub and slide over onto his lap, facing him. His pretty baby blues and bow-shaped lips are a breath away.

“Good. Put your arm around my neck and give me your phone.”

“Okay. Now what?”

“We kiss and I snap some pics. Then you’ll pick a few and send them to him.”

Sounds simple enough. “Okay.” I close my eyes and pucker my lips, and he chuckles. His breath tickles my nose.

“Kiss me like you mean it. Like you’d kiss him if he were in my place.”

Heat flashes across my face. I suck in a breath and exhale. I don’t know why I’m so nervous. This doesn’t mean anything. “Let’s get in a practice kiss, then we’ll do it for real,” I tell him, but I’m trying to ease myself into it.

I can feel his lips curving into a smile as they press against mine. His kiss is soft and sweet. Nothing to freak out about. I relax more, leaning into him on instinct. Parting my lips, I slip my tongue between his as they open for me. He slides a hand into my

hair and growls into my mouth.

He takes his kissing seriously. His tongue glides along mine and I nearly forget this is all for show. His other hand grips my hip, giving me a squeeze, and I feel him hardening beneath me.

I break away, pressing a hand to his chest to create some distance. “Um.” I roll my lips inward. “Did you get the picture?”

“Nope. That was the test run.” He grins at me and slips his arm around my back, pressing me forward. “I’ll get it this time.”

He snaps some pictures, but we don’t stop kissing.

Jonesy kisses me deeper with more tongue and I easily get lost in his touch as his fingers skim along the waist of my undies. “Let me touch you, Kie. I can make you forget all about Jimmy.”

I moan my consent. Right now, I just want to feel good and Jonesy is making that happen.

He touches me over my underwear, and I rock against his touch.

His teeth scrape down my neck. My skin is on fire. “You’ve got me so damn turned on. Feel.” He places my hand on his crotch.

Holy shit. This is moving fast. Maybe too fast, but part of me doesn’t want to stop.

When his mouth reaches my chest, I don’t pull away.

He hooks his fingers at either side of my bottoms. “Take your panties off.”

The vibration of my phone breaks our kiss. We pull away from each other, both a little breathless. I see Jimmy's name flashing on the screen. Guilt festers in the pit of my stomach.

I glance at Jonesy, who's already looking at me with a smug expression on his face.

"I think it worked." I stare at my phone, scared as if Jimmy will somehow materialize right in front of me.

"Told you so."

I pick up my phone and see that Jimmy has tried calling me more than once. I also discover a barrage of messages from him, asking what the hell I'm doing and who the guy in the photo is.

"Let me guess, he's blowing up your phone?"

I nod, still unable to speak. This was more fun than I thought it would be.

Jonesy leans back against the tub, looking pleased with himself. "And so, phase one of Operation Make Jimmy Jealous is complete."

"Phase one? I think we made our point."

"If you say so. But you want to take this any further. I'm game."

Chapter Fifteen

“I’ve got the next game.” I place a twenty on the ledge of the pool table.

“I’ll be happy to take your money.” Crawl lights up a joint and offers it to Trenton.

“You’re just trying to get me fucked up, so I’ll lose.” He waves him off and lines up his shot.

“Like you need my help to lose. You’re doing just fine on your own,” Crawl replies, grinning around the joint hanging out of his mouth.

“Ready for another round, boys?” Crawl’s flavor of the week, asks.

“Yeah, babe. Top me off.” He mutters, dropping ashes on the felt table.

Hound curses at him, muttering about how he probably can’t even hold his own dick when he takes a piss. Everyone knows Crawl is an asshole and doesn’t treat the women he picks up all that great. None of them last long with him. This Angie chick is the fifth one I’ve met. There’s probably not a woman over thirty in the tri-state area he hasn’t attempted to fuck.

For the first time in what seems like forever, I’m having a good time despite the nagging thoughts about Kiesha that try to push through. Tonight’s that dance she wanted me to take her to. The one she had originally wanted that football douche to be her date for. I shouldn’t be thinking about her or wondering if she found a date.

I made my choice.

My phone vibrates with a text. Probably Sabrina checking up on me. She's working her last shift at the gas station back home and I've just got off gate duty. I was supposed to call her when my shift ended, but I've been bullshitting with these sorry fucks for the past half an hour.

The message is from Kiesha. Shit. I doubt she'd be messaging unless it was important. I tap the notification to open the message. What the fuck?!?

Kiesha's shirtless and straddling some dude.

A sharp pain twists in my gut. Anger and jealousy fill me.

"What are you looking at?" Trenton glances over my shoulder, but I can't focus on anything other than what's on my screen. "Is that who I think it is?"

I stare at the picture of her making out with someone.

"Fuck, man. Did something happen between you two?"

I continue to ignore his questions as I get more messages.

More pictures load. Each one is more erotic than the last. Heat flashes across the back of my neck as I see nothing but red. What the hell is she doing sending me these pictures and better yet, why does the stupid little fuck she's with look like that Jonesy dickhead?

A video comes next, but I can't bring myself to watch it.

I check to see if she's still sharing her location with me. She's about a twenty-minute

drive from where I'm at. I snatch my twenty back off the table. "I've gotta go." I fish my keys out of my pocket and jump into my truck. I dial Kiesha as I start my truck, but she ends me straight to voicemail.

I don't know what I'm doing. I must be out of my mind chasing after her. If she's with that prick, I'll rip his damn hands off for touching what's mine. Only she's not mine. She can't be. Link will kill me and any chance I have of patching into the club.

I hit the gas, breaking the speed limit, not caring that I've probably earned a ticket or two as I blow through a stop sign and a traffic light.

If she was trying to get my attention, she's succeeded. I pull up to the house she's at having to park down the street. Guess she's at a party. I don't bother with the front door. I hop the brick wall to the backyard and there she is, shivering by the hot tub, wrapped in a towel and sitting by the fire pit alone.

"Where's your friend?" Her head snaps up at the sound of my voice.

"What are you doing here?"

"Got your invitation."

"I didn't think he'd really send them or that you'd actually come."

"You got what you wanted. Where is he?" I growl, clenching my fists.

"He left."

"You better not be lying to protect him."

"I'm not, and why do you care what I do or who I do it with?" She glares at me full of

defiance, daring me to say something I shouldn't.

"I don't."

She winces at my harsh tone. "Then why are you here?"

"Good fucking question. Get your shit. I'm driving you home."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

I grab her by her upper arm, jerking her up from the chair she was sitting in. "Did you fuck him?"

"What? No. We were just goofing around. I was upset and wanted to make you jealous."

"What goes through your head? Your mom told you he's bad news, so what? You don't get your way with me, so you run off to do something reckless. And with that guy, of all people. Are you stupid?"

"I hate you."

"I wish you did, Kiesha. Would make this a hell of a lot easier for us both." I loosen my grip on her. "Fuck, you piss me off."

"Yeah, well. That makes two of us." Her bottom lip wobbles like she's about to cry.

"Are you okay?"

"I messed up."

“Did he do something?”

“No. This has nothing to do with Jonesy. I fell in love with you, stupid.” She shoves at my chest, and I wrap my arms around her.

Fuck. I’m an asshole. “You don’t love me.”

“Don’t tell me how I feel.” She looks up at me with tears brimming.

What the fuck am I doing? I know I shouldn’t be here, but I can’t fight this pull to be near her.

“What are you doing to me?” I murmur, wiping away her tears with my thumbs on either side of her beautiful yet sad face. “Even gorgeous when you cry.”

“Do you even care? You broke my heart.” Her voice cracks and I soften.

“I care. Too fucking much. Get your stuff.”

“Okay.”

I get Kiesha in my truck, having no clue what to do with her now that I’ve got her. She’s next to me, head on my shoulder, one arm strung across my stomach, clenching my shirt in her fist.

My cell vibrates and I know it’s going to be Sabrina and I’m going to lie to her again after swearing I wouldn’t.

I answer the call. “Hey. Yeah. Sorry. Trenton left me hanging, so I’m going to be stuck here a while longer.” Kiesha gives me a funny look but keeps quiet.

“Bummer. I can swing by there when I get off.”

“I don’t want you driving in that fog. I’ll come home soon as I can.”

“Love you,” Sabrina says without hesitation.

“Ditto.” I can’t bring myself to say it back with Kiesha next to me. I end the call with her and dial Trenton. “Need a favor. Can I use your place for the night?”

“You’ll have to come by for the key.”

“I’ll owe you one.”

He should be the one on the gate tonight. If it’s anyone else, I’m fucked. I roll up with Kiesha and grab the key. Trenton gives me a knowing look but doesn’t comment.

Kiesha’s mom thinks she’s staying with friends tonight, so we should be in the clear. If anyone finds out I brought her here, I’m dead.

Kiesha looks around the small apartment. It’s nothing like the nice house she comes from.

“You should take a shower from being in that hot tub.” What I don’t say is I want you to scrub off Jonesy’s touch. “There’s some extra toothbrushes in the top drawer of the vanity.”

“Okay.” She shrugs my leather jacket off and I hang it off the back of a barstool.

“First door on the left.”

She mumbles something in return and shuffles into the bathroom. Only when I hear the water run does some of the tension leave my body. I'm losing my mind. She's got me so twisted up. It's taking every ounce of self-control I have not to barge into the bathroom to do the job myself. To make certain there's no trace of that prick left. The idea of her with anyone who isn't me makes me rage. Jealousy seeps from my pores.

I don't know what I'm doing. I'm in over my head with her, but I don't think I'm strong enough to walk away a second time. While she showers, I have a terrible yet genius idea. I don't know if she'll go for it, but right now it's the only solution I can come up with. A temporary hell.

While I wait for her to get cleaned up, I turn the television on, settling on some horror shit. Tits and gore splash across the screen.

"Hey." Kiesha pokes her head out of the bathroom. "Do you know if there's a hair dryer?"

"Doubt it."

She trudges into the living room, scrunching her hair with a towel.

"Feel better?"

"I don't know." She sits next to me, propping her feet on the coffee table. I smile at the sight of her glitter pink nail polish. The same shade her little sister painted mine a few weeks back. Most of it has worn off now. Sabrina was mad about that, too.

"Are you hungry? I can get delivery."

"Not really." She pulls the hem of her shirt over her knees then lays her head there.

“If you’re tired, you can sleep in the bed. I’ll crash here on the couch.”

“Is that why you brought me here?”

“Truthfully, I don’t know what I’m doing. But when I saw you with him, something inside me snapped. It was like I couldn’t breathe. Killed me.”

“Then why?”

“Why am I still with Sabrina?”

“Make it make sense. Because when you look at me, I can feel it. I can see it. You don’t love her.”

“I love Sabrina, but I’m not in love with her. Two very different things.” I lick my lips and run a hand over my head. The killer on the screen strikes someone in the chest with an axe and Kiesha screams and turns into my shoulder to hide her face.

“It’s just a movie,” I murmur, instinctively wrapping my arm around her shoulders.

She peers up at me, her eyes wide and glistening. “I don’t like scary movies. Not since...” she trails off and I don’t need her to finish her sentence. She means since the shit with her father went down.

“Why didn’t you say something?” I reach for the remote, killing the eerie music that fills the background.

“I didn’t think it would bother me.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to say.”

“You’ve had a lot happen.”

“I’d ask how you’re doing, but I heard you and Sabrina are moving in with Smoke and Ember.”

Chapter Sixteen

Jimmy swallows hard and avoids my gaze.

“You should get some sleep.”

“So you can lecture me about Jonesy, but we can’t talk about you and Sabrina?”

“That’s different.”

“You’re using her the same as I was using him. Just in different ways. But the reasons are the same. Because we can’t be together.”

“What if there was a way for us to be together?” His eyes are fixed on me now, intense and brooding.

“What are you saying?”

“You know your uncle is scary as fuck, right?”

“Link’s a teddy bear.”

“To you. You’re his niece. He’s not going to kick your ass if you mess up.”

“Did he say something to you?”

“Let’s just say he warned me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Told me not to mess with you if I want to earn my cut.”

“He doesn’t get to make that call.”

“He’s got pull and I can’t fuck this up. Making the cut means everything to me, but if we were careful. If I stayed with Sabrina until you graduate, and I get my patch.”

“Would Sabrina agree to be with you for show?” I stare him wondering what she would get out of it and I realize. “You’re not going to tell her.” I scoot away from him. “Wow. I don’t...”

“I know how it sounds, but think about it. Really think about it.”

“Would you be with both of us?”

“In a sense.”

“And I’d what? Be your piece on the side? Sneaking around. Lying to everyone?”

“Kiesha, I’m not asking you to be some side piece. Once Sabrina is out of the picture and I’ve got my patch, it would just be us. I promise.”

“And Sabrina?”

“She doesn’t need to know until then. I fell into something with her because it was easy and safe. Deep down she’s using me, too. I got her out of a bad home life. I’m not saying it justifies lying to her, but...”

“I can’t believe we’re even having this conversation,” I say, my voice shaky, my

stomach twisted in knots. “It’s crazy.”

“Is it?” he asks quietly.

The silence between us grows heavy as I wrestle with my thoughts. The muted picture on the screen freezes on a woman screaming for her life, and I can’t help but think about Jimmy’s girlfriend and her role in this scheme. “It’s unfair to her,” I say, grappling with the twisted logic of his proposal. In theory, yeah. It sounds simple enough, but Sabrina is a real person with real feelings.

“And it’s fair to us that we can’t simply be together?” He counters without missing a beat. His dark eyes, sincere and pleading, bore into mine.

“Is this really our only option?” I could try talking to Link, but I remember how he handled shit when he found out about my sister and Nav. That resulted in a brutal ass kicking.

“I wish it weren’t.” He sighs deeply. “But this is the world we’re in, Kiesha. There are rules. A code. Once I’ve got my cut and you’re out of school, I can do this shit right.”

“And if I say no, would you still stay with her knowing you want to be with me?”

“I’d cut her loose.”

“So why not break up with her now?”

“The second Link suspects we’re together. It’s game over. This buys us time.”

“But what if Sabrina finds out?” I ask. “What if she gets suspicious?”

“We’ll deal with that if it happens. Until then, we play it cool.”

I look at him, my heart weighted heavy in my chest. A part of me wants to say yes. To grab on to this sliver of a chance to be with him. But another part of me is terrified of the mess we could make. There’s a lot at risk. This is someone’s life and emotions we’re playing with as well as our own.

“You’re willing to risk everything for us?”

Jimmy grabs my hand. “I’d do anything for you, Kiesha,” he says softly, his heated eyes locked on mine. There’s a passionate intensity in his gaze that makes my breath hitch and my skin tingle.

When he looks at me, it’s hard to resist him.

Am I really going to agree to this? As I stare into his eyes, deep down I know the space between us is filled with beautiful lies. We’re going to destroy everything we touch, including each other.

“I’ll be your secret.”

His lips tip into a smile that repairs the fractures of my heart and holds the power to destroy it ten times over. “I promise the reward of what we can be will be worth all the pain and the pleasure.” His lips meet mine, greedy and eager to claim me.

Will I still be happy come tomorrow when I have to say goodbye and return him to her? Can I look at myself in the mirror knowing I’m living a lie? If I want to be with Jimmy, I’ll have to make my peace with it. If things were different, we wouldn’t have to go to such lengths to conceal our relationship.

“And Trenton will keep our secret?”

“He won’t tell. Don’t worry.” Jimmy kisses me deeper and I close my eyes, losing myself to him.

His kisses are sweet, holding so many promises. The key to my happiness. I’ll walk through any hell for this. For him.

“You should get some sleep. It’s getting late.”

“I don’t want to go to sleep. That means tonight has to end.” I take his hand in mine and lead him down the hallway to Trenton’s bedroom.

Jimmy stops just inside the room. “Goodnight, brat.” His hot breath caresses my ear.

“Come, lie with me. Until I fall asleep.”

“We both know if I crawl into that bed with you that neither of us is sleeping.”

“So let’s not sleep together. We don’t know when we will have another night together.”

“Kiesha.” The way he says my name is laced with pain and desire.

“Show me you’re not just fucking around. That you mean it when you say we’re going to be together.”

“I meant every word. I’ll do whatever it takes to make you believe me.” His lips find my neck igniting a spark that lights me up all over.

Here in the dark, it’s easy to pretend that I don’t have to share him. That tomorrow night when he lays his head down, it won’t be next to her. At least I know he’ll be thinking of me. One step, one day closer to being with me for real. No secrets. No

lies.

Until then, we'll have tonight.

Two fast beating hearts and heavy breaths.

There are a hundred reasons why this is wrong but a million more why it's oh so right. I yank my tee over my head, dropping it to the floor. We strip down to nothing. Bare to each other. And when he lays down next to me, he's all mine.

Only mine as he peppers kisses down the column of my throat. Every flick of his tongue worshipping the taste of my skin. If this is what being bad feels like, then I never want to be right. I want to be with him so bad I could cry. He goes still and I sense his eyes on mine.

"I want you to be sure, Kiesha. That being with me. Going through with this plan is what you want."

I surrender my innocence and my heart in this beautiful war that's waging between us. "You're all I want," I assure him. "All I need. I want to be with you."

With my words, he returns his lavish affection, touching and tasting me in places no one has ever dared. My heart beats wildly against my chest like the wings of a hummingbird as his rough hands roam over my body. Artfully, like my body is his canvas, and he's painting a masterpiece. Capturing one of my nipples with his mouth, he takes me higher.

"Kiesha," he murmurs against the taut yet sensitive skin, his voice husky with his desire. "You have no idea how much I want you."

I scratch my nails down the expanse of his muscular back. "I think I do." I give his

backside a gentle squeeze, becoming less shy with every passing second.

“I need inside you,” he whispers into the crook of my neck, the vibration of his voice sending me into a maddening spiral of pleasure. “Fuck, I want to feel you, baby.”

He thrust a finger into the heart of my fire, the first to ever do so. I let out a surprised cry at the welcomed intrusion.

“Tight. Wet. Fucking beautiful.” He sears me with the intensity of his gaze as he watches the waves of pleasure roll over me as I pant beneath him.

“You should know,” I whisper, pressing my fingers to his lips to get his attention. “I’ve never...you’re the first.”

“I promise I’m going to make it good for you, but it will hurt.”

“I know, but with you, I know it will be a beautiful ache.”

His lips tip into a goofy yet sexy smirk. “Everything with you is beautiful, gorgeous.” He kisses me and the warming sensation building in my lower bellow intensifies into a raging inferno.

Jimmy takes his time making sure I know with every lingering touch he’s utterly and completely devoted to me. We have the whole awkward are you on the pill and condom conversation. He fumbles with the condom between my giggles. “You ready?” He looms over my body, the tip of his cock pressed at my slick entrance. “I’ll go slow.” He sweeps my hair from my face, his lips brush against mine and he pushes forward, inch by painful inch.

Tears burn at the creases of my eyes.

“Are you okay?”

I bite my lip and nod. If this were with anyone else, I'd be embarrassed by crying, but not with him. With Jimmy I'm safe. The heat of his body presses into mine as he begins to move. It's uncomfortable at first. The full sensation throbbing between my legs, but the more he moves his hips the better it gets, and I relax.

Tonight started as one of the worst and strangest nights of my life, but has evolved into a dream come true. Nothing or no one will come between us.

Jimmy is mine.

I don't care what claim Sabrina thinks she has on him.

She might have been his first, but tonight he's all mine.

Hips rubbing against mine, he proves it with each thrust that moves in time with the beat of my heart. His lips glide along my jaw and his hand are everywhere as are mine. We explore one another and getting lost in the moment. Lost in each other.

I never want this night to end. Tangled sheets and limbs, mingled breaths, we roll from missionary position to my being on top. I cover my chest, not knowing where to put my hands.

“Don't be shy, brat. I want to look at you.” Gently, he tugs on my wrists, lips twitching into an amused smile. “Never hide from me. Not from anyone. You're beautiful, but especially in here.” He taps his finger over my heart.

My face reddens and I'm grateful he can't see me blushing in the dark. “You're embarrassing me.”

“Only stating facts.” His gaze lingers on my lips, then lowers to my breasts as he scoots up and back against the headboard, still inside me. “That’s better,” he mutters, reclaiming my lips and guiding my hips. I grind against him as he kisses me soft and sweet, teasing either of my nipples between his rough fingers. My breathing grows erratic and that inferno in my belly explodes.

“Even prettier when you come.”

I’m breathless and completely spent, but Jimmy isn’t through proving how deep his love runs.

He’s got me laid back, leg spread, kissing my most intimate spots. Said he needs to taste me. I grip the sheets between my fingers as he licks, kisses, and tastes. If tomorrow never comes, I’d happily die in this position. He continues to work his magic as I come completely undone.

I’m hot, sticky, and wet. Fevered by his every kiss. Stars dance behind my eyes and I’m sure I’m going to combust into nothingness.

Chapter Seventeen

I drop Kiesha off at her car, hating letting her go but knowing I have to. I'll have to keep my distance, but now she understands. Every move I make going forward is for us. For the future, we're going to build. I know I'm a shit person to string Sabrina along, but if I can help get her on her feet, then is it so wrong?

She wanted to be with me to get away from her shitty family. I've done that and more.

We'd both be lying to ourselves if we didn't admit that we are on two very different paths. I want a life with the club, and she wants...hell I don't know what she really wants. I'm not sure if she even knows herself. I tried to make it work. I did. I never expected to meet Kiesha and to fall so damn hard. The last thing I want to do is hurt her, but for once, I'm ready to be a little selfish. I've always done what everyone expects of me. She's never spoken about dreams and aspirations like Kiesha. Even when I ask, she avoids the topic as if it's a live snake ready to strike.

For now, I have to hold all my cards close to my chest. I need to protect Kiesha from any potential backlash. The club won't take kindly to my actions if they were to find out. Now, I've got to go home. Back to reality. The world where I smile at Sabrina as if everything is normal. Where I play house with a woman who used to mean something to me but doesn't anymore.

Every moment with Sabrina, every laugh, every touch, every conversation is going to seem like a betrayal to Kiesha. But there's no other way around it. At least not for now. If this plan is going to work, if Kiesha and I are going to be together, Sabrina

cannot have any doubt about my commitment to her.

As I pull up into my Gran's driveway, I can see Sabrina sitting on the porch steps waiting for me. She looks anxious, her hands fidgeting in her lap. Immediately guilt washes over me, but then the image of Kiesha surfaces in my mind and everything else fades away.

"Where were you?" Sabrina asks as I step out of my truck.

"With some guys," I lie, hating myself for doing so but knowing it's necessary for now. "Why are you waiting out here?"

Sabrina shrugs, her gaze not meeting mine. "I just wanted some fresh air. You said you would be here before I woke up."

"I'm sorry. I got caught up, but I'm here now."

"You're supposed to help me pack."

"I've got the boxes and totes. I didn't forget." Not that we have much to pack up. We've mostly only got to take our clothes. The house is already set up and we'll be moving into one of the upstairs bedrooms. We've stayed over a few times in the past. I know Sabrina is excited about living with Ember.

"It wasn't an accusation. I was worried."

I squeeze her shoulder reassuringly, hating the lie on my lips. "There's nothing to worry about, Brina."

"Promise?" Her voice is soft and hopeful.

“Promise.” I say, looking away from her piercing gaze. The slight tremble in my voice goes unnoticed by her. I’ve never been a great liar, but with each new one, it gets easier.

“Let’s get this packing party started,” I propose, eager to change the subject and busy my mind. All I can think about is how good it felt to be with Kiesha last night. How right. I wish things were different, but this is my reality.

“Okay. Let’s pack.” Sabrina says, standing up from the steps. She gives me a brief, hesitant smile before disappearing into the trailer. I follow her inside, my heart pounding in my chest. This is going to be difficult, but I keep reminding myself that it’s for Kiesha and our future together.

Moving to Charleston is another step closer to where I’m meant to be.

Gran is sitting at the kitchen table having coffee and cracks a smile when she sees me. “About time you rolled in. I made biscuits and gravy. Help yourself.”

“Thanks, Gran. You’re the best.”

“I know,” she grumbles. “But not good enough that you’ll stay here instead of moving to the city to be one of them outlaws.”

“Soon as I have my own place, you can move with me.”

She shakes her head. We both know she will never leave this holler. She was born in these mountains, and she’ll die in them. Leaving her here alone has a newfound guilt taking hold of me. What if she gets sick or falls and I’m not here? She’s always taken care of me, and I swore I’d always be here for her, but I’ve got a life of my own to live.

“I’ll come by every week to have dinner with you.”

“Hmm,” she grumbles like she’s not so sure.

After scarfing down a plate of her cathead biscuits and white gravy topped with bacon, I start bringing in the packing supplies. Sabrina has started pulling her clothes out of the closet and gathering our toiletries from the bathroom. Within a few hours, we have my truck loaded and say our goodbyes to my Gran.

When we get to the house, Ember and Sabrina unpack and I head off to the clubhouse to return Trenton’s key.

“You going to explain what you were doing last night?”

“Nope,” I tell him, taking a hard pull of my beer.

“Hope you know what you’re doing.” He shakes his head and lights up a cigarette.

“Not a damn clue.”

“Fuck. You must have a death wish.”

“Maybe I do,” I reply, leaning back in my chair and closing my eyes. Images of Kiesha’s face, her smile, the way she looks when she’s lost in pleasure flash through my mind. My heart aches with a longing for her. But I also know what the club brothers will do if they find out what I’ve been up to.

The brotherhood has rules, unspoken codes of conduct that everyone follows. One of them is extreme loyalty to each other. If there’s one thing the club hates, it’s a man who can’t be trusted, a man who lies and deceives his brothers. And that’s exactly what I’m doing. Going behind Link’s back. Going against his wishes to steer clear of

Kiesha.

I'm risking it all for her.

"If you two don't have anything to do but gossip, I can find you something to do," Sandman tells us.

"I was just leaving." Trenton flashes me a smile, leaving me on my own to be hazed by this crazy fucker that's married to a witch. When he met his ol' lady, he was convinced she had cursed his dick.

"Put your ass in a maid costume and make you wait on me all day."

"Marriage has made you lame. You need to find some new material," Viking tells him. "That punishment is as old as your boots."

"Fuck you."

"I think Andi might get pissed, but..." He grins and Sandman shoves him.

"Stupid ass."

"I was only here to speak to Trenton."

"No, for real, man. We've got a job for you."

"What's up?"

"Kiesha says someone's dealing to the high schoolers. You did so good blending in as a student. We're sending you back to go undercover for real. Slick's working on your papers to enroll you Monday."

Fuck. It's a great way to see Kiesha, but I don't want to go back to school.

"Look at his face," Sandman says, nearly doubling over with laughter.

No one thinks Sandman is as funny as Sandman.

"White as a damn sheet," East answers with a chuckle. "We're just fucking with you, prospect. Get me a beer."

I grab them a round and one for myself.

"Did he say to get yourself one," Hound says on a grunt, staring me down.

"No." I slide the beer to him.

"Thanks. Now you can get one for yourself."

Viking shakes his head. "Gotta grow some balls, boy. You don't have to take our shit all the time. You can give it back."

"Don't listen to him. He just wants to see you get your ass laid out," East warns.

"Leave that boy alone," Pam, Link's wife, tells them. "Come sit with me. I'll give you some dirt on them." She smirks and they all look a bit scared of her.

Can't blame them. She knows everyone's business and I need to stay on her good side. The second she suspects I have a secret, she will be on me like a dog with a bone.

"Heard you were the woman to see if I want to place a bet."

“Step into my office.” She smiles, pulling her little black book out. Pam likes to run what she refers to as a baby pool. Whenever a club brother takes an old lady, she takes bets on how long it will take for him to knock her up. “Should I put you and your girlfriend down?”

My stomach drops to my feet. “No. We aren’t that serious.”

“Aren’t you living together?” Her brows meet as she studies me.

I cap a hand over the back of my neck and avoid her gaze. “Yeah. We just aren’t that serious yet. I’m not ready to put a ring on it.”

“Fair enough. Right now, we’re on Smoke and Ember. But I’m afraid they are taking their sweet time. You’re rooming with them. Maybe you’ve got some intel for me.”

“Afraid I can’t help you there.”

“You’re no fun. What about your buddy Trenton? He seeing anyone new?”

“Don’t think so.”

“You prospects are boring.”

She has no idea how wrong she is. I’m in a secret relationship with her niece while fake dating my current girlfriend. She’d have a field day if she knew my secret and the lengths I’m willing to go to protect it.

Chapter Eighteen

Time flies when you're having fun. Jimmy and I have been seeing each other on the down low for months. We both get a thrill out of sneaking around. The danger, secrets, and lies are nearly as addictive as he is. Every time I see him, I get such a rush. Being with him is like a drug.

We see each other every chance we get. I even went as far as making brownies for the club brothers, so I could have an excuse to drop by the gate when he was on duty. But currently it's been over a week since we've been able to get a minute alone. Of course, he's always texting and calling when he can, but I have the niggling feeling that there's something he's keeping from me.

When I ask, he says I'm being paranoid, but I can't shake this uneasiness. Maybe it's because we've both been busy. Me with finishing high school and him with the club. He's been working a lot of late nights. It's hard not to think he's with her. What if he's playing us both?

At first, I didn't mind as much, but the longer this goes on, the more I suspect that he still cares about her.

I'll see firsthand tomorrow.

The club's renting out a local theme park for the day. Prodigy invited Mom and me and my little sister now that she's staying with us. Her mom backslid and is in rehab.

It's been different having her live with us. But she's been great for an excuse to get

out of the house and sneak off to see Jimmy. I take her to the park and for ice cream. Stuff that's fun for both of us and gives Mom a break. She's pregnant and over the moon to be starting a family with Prodigy. I'm happy for them. We all are. Sometimes I drop Kieleigh off with my older sister, Kimber. She knows about Jimmy. She doesn't agree with what we're doing, but she keeps my secret. If anyone understands sneaking around with a prospect, it's her.

I wish Jimmy and I could go together.

It's not like I won't get to see Jimmy at the park, but he's going to be with Sabrina and seeing the two of them together is going to suck. At least I'm graduating in a week and then he's breaking up with her and we can be together. I just have to tough it out a little longer.

I stare up at the neon star stickers decorating my ceiling, wishing this was all over.

Soon it will be. That's what keeps me going on nights like tonight when he's not even sent me a text.

My cell vibrates and I try not to get my hopes up. When I see his name on the screen, my heart blooms.

Call if you're awake.

I dial him immediately.

"Hey, brat," he croons, his voice deep and husky.

"It's late." I glance at the clock on my nightstand.

"I know, but I needed to hear your voice. I can't wait to see you tomorrow."

“I don’t know if I’m going to go.”

“Why?”

“You know why. You’ll be with her.”

“I’m going to end things this weekend. I’d do it tonight if I could, but she’s at work.”

That’s another thing. Sabrina took a job working for my mom at her daycare. I try to avoid seeing her as much as I can. I know she doesn’t like me because she knows we kissed. If only she knew the rest.

“Really?”

“Would I lie to you?”

I chew on my thumb, and he notices my hesitation.

“Kiesha.” He groans. “I don’t lie to you.”

“You lie to Sabrina all the time.” And everyone else, but I don’t vocalize that.

“That’s not fair.”

“You’re right, Jimmy. It’s not. It’s not fair that my boyfriend lives with someone else. It’s not fair that you sleep next to her at night. It’s not fair that I can’t kiss you anytime I want. It’s not fair that you’re probably still fucking her behind my back.”

“Is that what you think?”

“I don’t know.” I sniffle as tears cascade down my cheeks. “I don’t know what to

think anymore. I... I just want you. Only you, but I'm a dirty secret that you're hiding from everyone. It's not fair to anyone, especially not me."

"You're not a dirty secret, Kiesha," Jimmy says, his voice a whisper. "You're everything to me. You have to believe that."

He goes silent for a moment, and I can imagine him running his hand through his hair, frustrated. The echo of his words plays through my mind, filling the silence between us as I contemplate what he's saying. The sincerity in his voice cools my anger, but it doesn't erase my doubts completely.

"I want to believe you, I do. But you can't honestly tell me that there's not been moments between you. She wouldn't hold on this long unless you're giving her hope. I'm not stupid. I pretend it doesn't bother me. I pretend that you don't lie next to her at night and sometimes I wonder if you even think of me at all when you're with her. I want you so bad it physically hurts. Not being with you, truly being with you, is killing me. You're all I want, and I feel like I can't have you and am losing you at the same time." My voice is barely audible now, drowned out by the incessant beating of my insecure heart.

"You think I don't know that and want the same as you?"

"But just wanting isn't enough. Words are empty without action, you know?"

There's a pause on the other end and for a moment, I think he might have hung up.

"Fuck, baby." He exhales heavily into the phone. "I didn't mean for this to happen. For us to happen the way that we have."

I cut him off, "but we did, and now we're here. In what should be a dream come true. Only it's not. It's a nightmare I can't wake up from."

“Listen to me, Kiesha,” his tone softens. “I’m going to end it and soon I’ll have my cut. Once I do, it’ll just be you and me. I’ll get an apartment. Us an apartment, if that’s what you want.”

“Promise me you’ll tell her it’s over.”

“Give me the weekend.”

“Put the kitty down. Let’s get your shoes on,” I tell Kieleigh, trying to ignore the sourness churning in my belly. I’m anxious and feel like I’m on the verge of throwing my breakfast up at any minute.

I keep replaying my conversation with Jimmy in my head. I want to believe him more than anything, but that doubtful sensation keeps creeping up. Playing on my anxiety. Like something is going to go wrong. Like somehow the universe wants to keep us apart.

“You girls ready to go?” Mom waltzes into the living room, spritzing her perfume.

“Ready as we’ll ever be.” I plaster a fake smile on for her and tickle Kieleigh under her arms.

Today is going to suck for so many reasons, but I want to make it fun for my little sister. I know she’s missing her mom and maybe even our shitty ass father. She’s a victim of their abuse and I’m glad she’s here, even if it comes with challenges.

Once we get to Camden Park, I can’t stop myself from searching for Jimmy and Sabrina in the crowd of bikers and their families. I don’t see them, but that doesn’t mean they haven’t arrived. They could already be on a ride for all I know. Maybe I won’t see much of them since I know I’ll be delegated to help watch my sister and some of the other little kids in attendance.

“Hey,” Bethany shouts, coming up behind me and I’ve never been more grateful to see her. “Pam brought me. We can be on kid duty together.”

“If we’re lucky, we’ll get to sneak off and ride some rides.” And spy on Jimmy and Sabrina. I want to see how he is with her when he thinks no one is paying attention. I know when they are around the club members he has to pretend to like her, but what if he’s not pretending?

After some cotton candy and winning her blow up cartoon character, Kieleigh is passed out in her stroller. Mom gave me permission to hangout with Bethany and my sister promised to drop me at home later. Operation stalk Jimmy and Sabrina is underway.

Bethany has no idea that we’re following them from ride to ride. She’s just happy to be off babysitting duty. Jimmy hasn’t even spotted us, but I think Sabrina is beginning to notice that we’re always behind them as we move through the line for the water log.

She keeps glancing back at us, and I do my best to pretend not to notice her. After this ride, I need to keep my distance. The last thing I want is for her to confront me or make a scene. Not with more than half the club and their families in attendance.

“You know what? I think I’m thirsty. We should get lemonade and a funnel cake.” I tug on Bethany’s arm, pulling her out of the short line.

“Yeah sure.”

We take our time walking back toward the concession area.

“Are you okay?” Bethany reads me easily.

“Too much sun,” I lie. “I’ll feel better once I have some sugar in me.”

“Well, if you’re up for it, we should ride the Big Dipper again.”

“Sure.” I’ll do anything at this point to get my mind off Jimmy and Sabrina, but that’s easier said than done.

While we’re at the food court, they walk by, seemingly having an argument. Sabrina is practically storming toward the exit for the park and I feel guilty that the sight of her unhappiness boosts my mood. Could this be it? Is Jimmy finally ending things with her?

Chapter Nineteen

Today went about as well as I expected it to. I feel like such a dick. I treated Sabrina like shit all day, hoping I would push her to do my dirty work and breakup with me to save me from doing it. She didn't take the bait.

I promised Kiesha, but I'm a fucking coward. I don't like hurting someone I once loved and thought I would one day put a ring on their finger. But life happened. The club and Kiesha happened.

I'm hiding at the clubhouse, getting drunk and avoiding the inevitable when Smoke shows up, looking as lousy as I feel.

"I ended things with Ember," he confesses to me, his statement shocking the hell out of me since I live with them, and they seemed happier than ever today.

"Are you stupid?"

His gaze cuts me sharper than glass. "You should worry about your own problems. Sabrina's pregnant."

Time stops moving. My heart squeezes so damn tight I think it may rupture. "What did you say?"

"Ember told me today."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. This can't be happening. I was careful.

I'm going to be sick. There was one night a few months back I slept with her. It was wrong and I should never have gone there, but I did. There is no excuse I can make.

I drive to the house we rent with Smoke and Ember in a state of denial. Maybe Smoke is just talking out of his ass.

"I'm pregnant, Jimmy."

I stare at Sabrina, wondering how in the fuck this is possible. I've been careful. She's supposed to be on birth control. We agreed that having kids wasn't something either of us were ready for. Not by a long shot.

"Aren't you going to say something?" She holds my gaze, worrying her bottom lip.

Used to when I looked at Sabrina, my heart was on fire for her. Her brown eyes and dark curls were all I wanted. Now when I look at her, all I feel is guilt and regret.

My stomach drops to my feet, weighting them in place, like a cement block. Fuck. Fuck. "You're sure? Maybe you're late."

"I took a test. See." She shoves a plastic stick in my direction.

"Could it be a false positive? That happens, right?"

"I mean maybe, but I've been having symptoms."

Two pink lines, and my world comes crashing down. I want to break something, but I won't hurt Sabrina by reacting in that manner. This is fucked. So fucked. My mistakes aren't her fault. I never should have slept with her again, but I got jealous and in my head when Kiesha went to prom with Jonesy. I got drunk and slept with Sabrina. It was one time, and I didn't even enjoy it. I was thinking about Kiesha the

whole time.

Now look where that landed me.

“Jimmy,” she presses, twisting her fingers together.

I rub my palms over my face. “I guess we’re having a baby.” I muster a smile, but there’s no real emotion behind it. Life has the worst timing. I’ve been trying to figure out a way to break up with her, not tie myself to her for the next eighteen years. Fuck my life.

“I’m so happy.” She squeals, latching her arms around my neck. Launching herself at me to where I have no choice but to catch her as she wraps her thick thighs around my waist.

A year ago, maybe this news would have hit me differently. I didn’t see a future outside of our small-town life staying at my granny’s. That was before I started prospecting for the Royal Bastards MC. That was before I was assigned to protect Kiesha.

Just the thought of the pink-haired temptress has my blood humming and my cock twitching with desire.

We’re not that far apart in age. She’s eighteen and about to graduate from high school. Which means we wouldn’t have to sneak around anymore.

I feel like a lousy piece of shit. How the hell do I end things with Sabrina now? How do I look her in the eyes and confess that I’ve been fooling around behind her back? That all this time I’ve been using her as a cover. I thought I’d be able to end thing with her in a clean break, clearing my path forward with Kiesha once I make the cut.

“I can’t wait to have our own place and decorate the nursery,” she continues, but I’m not listening.

I’m wondering how I tell Kiesha that I chickened out, and that we got to cool things down until I get my head together. If she finds this out, she’ll not only want to murder me, she could very well go to her uncle and confess everything. Then I really will be dead.

Everything is completely fucked.

“Isn’t this great? Aren’t you happy?”

“I’m still processing.” My response isn’t what she wants to hear. It isn’t a lie. “Guess we’ll be needing a bigger place.”

“Your Gran is going to flip.” She kisses my neck and along my jaw. “God, thinking about you holding our baby makes you so much hotter.”

I fake another smile. “Timing isn’t exactly the best.”

“Well, no. But it motivates us to get started on making things happen sooner. I mean, I don’t expect an engagement ring right away.”

A cold sweat beads across the back of my neck. Marriage. Babies. I’m going to be sick. I know it’s a lousy response, but we’re too young for this much responsibility.

“I know you had your heart set on becoming a patched member. Maybe this is a sign that you shouldn’t. A motorcycle club isn’t exactly the best place to raise a baby.”

“Don’t start nagging me about the club. I’m not quitting.”

“I don’t want to fight. Let’s celebrate.”

I release her. “Babe, it’s late and I’m tired.”

“You don’t want to have sex with me?”

“Of course I do,” I lie. They keep coming. Every untrue word rolling off my tongue as natural as breathing.

It’s all I seem to do lately.

Lie.

Bend the truth.

Twist words.

Hide my emotions.

How can I hide this from Kiesha?

She’s going to hate me.

Though I hate myself enough for both of us.

How did I let it get this far?

Now I’m stuck. If I end things now, I’ll look like a coward who isn’t responsible.

“You sure you’re ready for this?”

“What do you mean? Are you asking me to terminate the pregnancy?”

“No.” I shake my head.

“I thought you’d be happy.” Her soulful green eyes glitter with unshed tears.

“I’ve just got a lot on my mind.”

“Talk to me.”

The last thing I want to do is talk. I’ll say something that will only hurt her. Instead, I press my lips to hers, trying to pretend that I’m good. That we’re great.

“I love you so much, Jimmy.” She kisses me deeper, and I try to return it but find myself unable to make the effort.

“What’s wrong with you? Are you upset?”

“I just worry that this will be more than we’re ready for.”

“You don’t need to worry so much. We’ll be fine. You’ll make a great dad. I just know it.” She kisses my cheek. “I really need to be with you. To feel close to you. We’ve been so out of sync since we moved in with Smoke and Ember. This is a good thing.”

I nod and force myself to go through the motions she expects. I wrap my arms around her and press my lips to the top of her head. “You’re right. This will bring us closer.” And tear me away from the woman I really love.

“I’m going to make you so happy, Jimmy.”

“I know you will,” I murmur against her lips.

We get ready for bed and as I lay next to her, all I can think about is Kiesha. Just because Sabrina is pregnant doesn't mean we have to be together. But what's the point of breaking Sabrina's heart when Kiesha will never forgive me?

Sabrina senses that I'm still awake, rolling to her side and propping her head up with her elbow. “If there was someone else, you'd tell me, right?”

“Where's this coming from?”

“We both know things between us have been bad. I really want us to work. To give our baby a family. A real one. A good one. Neither of us had that and I guess I'm saying if there were someone, I'd forgive you. It'd hurt to hear, but I'd accept it if you promised not to do it again.”

“Brina,” I whisper her name softly. The truth weighs on me. This is my chance to tell her everything, but as I lay here looking at her in the pale moonlight, I can't bring myself to say the words that will shatter her heart.

I do the worst thing I can do. I press my lips to hers and strip off her clothes. I pretend she's Kiesha as I yank my boxers off and put her hand on my dick. It takes some effort, but eventually she gets me hard enough to fuck her. If she notices that I don't even get off, she doesn't bring it up.

Lying to her is easy, but lying to myself is nearly impossible.

I don't love Sabrina, and I don't want a baby with her.

I turn my back on her, wishing I could go back to that night I slept with her and take it all back. Hell, if I could rewind time, I'd go back to the second I laid eyes on

Kiesha and end it there. Because one look at her and I knew I was in danger. I wanted her then and there.

And now I've ruined any shot of being with her. I was so close I could taste it.

I almost had it all.

Almost.

Chapter Twenty

Three days.

It's been three days since I've heard from Jimmy. I can't help but think he's played me for a fool. I drove past their house, but his truck wasn't there. I snuck a look at mom's schedule for the daycare and didn't see Sabrina's name on it. Did she quit? Did they move back home?

My texts are being delivered, but go unread.

I'm losing my mind. My graduation is tonight. I thought I'd be celebrating with him, but I thought wrong.

I don't understand it. I don't understand men. They get what they want, then never want it again. My stomach lurches and I rush to the bathroom, losing my lunch. I sit on the cool tile floor, lean against the wall, willing him to call. To give me an explanation that makes sense.

Was he using me? Was it all lies?

He promised me and he lied.

A knock at the door startles me.

"Kiesha?" It's my mother's voice, laced with concern. "Are you alright? It sounded like you got sick?"

I don't want to answer. I don't want to talk to anyone right now, but if I don't say something, she'll worry. "Just nervous about graduation."

"Well, get cleaned up and come outside. I want to snap some pics. Nini's here."

"Okay," I croak, sounding like there's a frog stuck in my throat. Nini was once married to my grandpa and kind of adopted us as her family after their divorce. She's over the top and fabulous. She also drives my mom crazy with how pushy and intrusive she can get.

I push off the floor, wash my face, and brush my teeth. I'm in no mood to go full glam, so I stick with mascara and lip gloss. Graduation isn't until later, but I go ahead and put on my dress for the pictures.

"There's my darling girl." Nini holds her arms open, expecting a hug when I step outside.

I embrace her, noticing the red Mustang sitting in the driveway. "Did you get a new car?"

"Something like that. Let me get a good look at you. Your mom says you're not feeling well." She twists my face, looking me over. "A little pale. Hmm."

"I'm fine." I plaster a smile on for her even though my heart is breaking further with every second that ticks by without a response from Jimmy.

"Good. I'd hate for you not to enjoy your graduation present." She dangles a set of keys in front of me and I look over at my mom and Prodigy.

Mom smiles big. "It's from all of us. Your sister and Nav kicked in on it, too."

“Are you guys for real?” Momentarily, my heartache is forgotten.

“It’s all yours, but you’ve gotta promise to come visit me more often.”

“Will do.” I snatch the keys and dart across the lawn to the car.

I open the door, breathing in the rich scent of leather. It feels so strange to sit in a car that is mine. Really and truly my own. Instead of sharing a ride with my mom when she isn’t using it.

“Thank you!” I shout across the lawn, laughing as Nini performs an exaggerated curtsy.

“Don’t thank me yet,” she calls back, grinning mischievously. “Wait till you see the insurance bill.”

We all laugh, but inside, my heart surges with gratitude. Despite the hurt that Jimmy brought into my life, I’m not alone. I have people around me who care about me, even if he doesn’t.

I fight back the bittersweet tears of regret. I don’t want to regret him, but I’m so confused and worried about him. Maybe something happened with the club. I’m jumping to conclusions, but his behavior is out of the norm. Even if he doesn’t reply to me straight away, he always reads my messages.

“Don’t worry,” Prodigy tells me. “I’ve got you covered until you get a job.”

“One step at a time,” I tease. My heart clenches in my chest. My first instinct is to text Jimmy and see if I can swing by the clubhouse to show him my car. As quickly as my sadness left me, it’s returned tenfold.

“Go ahead and take a drive. I know you’re dying to,” Nini tells me, and my mom nods her head in agreement.

“Be back by three. You don’t want to miss your graduation ceremony.”

“I’ll be back.”

“Famous last words,” Prodigy jokes and Mom elbows him in the ribs.

I drive all over the city looking for Jimmy’s truck. He’s not at the clubhouse. Or at any of the businesses that the club owns, I am aware of. I feel like I’m going crazy. It’s as if he’s simply vanished. Did my uncle find out about us and do something to punish him for disobeying an order?

I decide to drive by his house under the guise of showing my car off to my Aunt Pam.

“Hey girl.” She waves from her seat by the porch as her kids play in their sandbox.
“Sweet ride.”

“Thanks. It’s my graduation present.”

“Shit. I knew I was forgetting something. Watch the kids. I’ve got your card in the house. Do you want something to drink?”

“No. Thank you. I just wanted to show you my car.”

“All right.” She meanders inside and comes back quickly, the ice cubes in the glass clinking as she struts across the yard. “Here you are, sweetheart. Now do you want to tell your Auntie why you’re really here?”

“Um.” I roll my lips inward and pick at the corner of the envelope.

“Out with it. You know you can trust me. Whatever it is.”

“What can you tell me about Jimmy?”

She takes a sip of her tea, studying my face. “The prospect?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Do you know his girlfriend?”

“Sabrina. Mouthy and bitchy and not in the good way.”

“There’s a good way?”

She smirks. “Oh yeah. I’ll clue you in on that later. I don’t know her well, but she works for your mom and me at the daycare. Did you try asking her?”

“I can’t talk to Mom about this. She’s got enough going on with Kieleigh and Prodigy. And being pregnant.”

“Is there something going on with you and the prospect? Tell the truth. I won’t go to Link or your mom. I give you my word. You know I love you like my own and there’s nothing you can’t tell me.”

It’s not like no one knows about Jimmy and me. Trenton and Smoke know and I’m sure my sister has told Nav. It’s only a matter of time before we tell everyone that we’re together. “We’ve been dating in secret.”

“Honey.” She squeezes my hand, trying to hide the disappointment and judgment in

her tone, but I hear it. “That’s a lot and at your age.” She trails off.

“I love him.”

“Of course you do. Being a biker babe is in your blood. I’d be lying if I said I don’t want different for you than what I chose, but it’s your life. Your choice who you love.” She squeezes my hand tighter and releases her grip. “The club’s about to ride out to a rally in California. I don’t know if Jimmy is coming with us, but I’ll find out what I can.”

“You swear you won’t tell anyone.”

“Hell no. The last thing me and my babies need is your uncle going off and catching a murder charge.” She laughs, but there’s no humor behind it. Pam is nuttier than squirrel shit, but my uncle has one hell of a temper. “I know it’s hard to sit and wait. But be patient. I’ll call you as soon as I know something. It may be a few days or later in the week before I have something. Just trust me and be patient. I don’t know what kind of situation or deal you’ve got with Jimmy, but I promise it’s going to work out.”

After leaving Pam, I swing by and pick Bethany up. I can’t do anything about Jimmy right now, but I can graduate and take Bethany to project graduation with me. If anything, at least she will distract me with her goofy antics and trying to push me into dating Jonesy. That’s never going to happen. He’s got his own problems, and he’s off to Alabama in a month to train for his college football career. We would never work. Everyone has all these plans. When I told Sam that I wanted to stick around here to go to school instead of moving into the apartment her father is renting near his house, they got mad at me.

Maybe that was a mistake.

I know they were looking for a new roommate, but maybe they've not found someone. I've been so caught up in Jimmy that I've been an awful friend. I wouldn't blame them for dropping me completely. I can't count the number of times I've blown them off or stood them up to sneak off and Jimmy instead.

Look where that got me. Being played for a fool. But I promised Pam I'd be patient.

So I'll at least try.

Chapter Twenty-one

The past few days have been absolute hell. Smoke and Ember broke up, which fucked my plans up. I'd found an apartment for Kiesha and me out at Davis Creek, and now I'm living in it with Sabrina. I can't abandon her when she's having my child. I've been avoiding Kiesha's messages and calls. I've not built up the nerve to tell her about the baby. I went as far as skipping her graduation.

I don't know how to face her and what I've got to say can't happen over the phone or through a text message.

I'm barely hanging on. The only thing keeping me going is knowing that my one-year prospecting is almost up and if I don't fuck this up, I'll earn my cut.

Most of the club is riding out to Anarchy, California, to a rally held by Kings of Anarchy MC. I'm biding my time. Once I know that Link and Prodigy are out of the state, then I can approach Kiesha. Maybe if I explain, she'll understand. I never meant for any of this to happen, but I have to face the consequences of my actions. I just hope it doesn't cost me everything and then some.

I watch on as the club loads up to make their journey. I'm shocked to see Ember here and with Creed, of all people. Smoke rides up and the tension in the air is heavy between them. I figured he'd got back with Ember by now. He was ready to wife her up. I tried talking to Sabrina about it, but she got all weird when I brought Ember up.

I don't know which way is up anymore. Sabrina has been acting strange since she told me she was pregnant. I don't know if she knows about Kiesha and is waiting for

me to confess or if she had a fight with Ember, but they aren't speaking.

Nothing makes sense.

I see Angel climb on the back of Smoke's bike, and that's how I know everything is upside down. "What's up with that?" I ask Trenton or should I say T-bird. He patched in and has his official road name now.

"Stella told me that Smoke cheated on Ember with Angel, and I guess she's back with Creed."

"Fucking crazy."

"No crazier than your news. I hear you're going to be a dad. Does this mean you made your choice between her and Kiesha?"

"Shit," I mutter, dragging a hand down my face. T-bird doesn't know the half of it. "Look, help me keep this quiet for a while longer, all right? I need to sort things out first."

He gives me a curious look before shrugging. "Sure thing, man. You ought to know you can trust me."

"Appreciate it."

"You know I've got your back, but fuck me, buddy. You've got bigger balls than I do, Jimmy. You better handle your shit right or it'll be hell for you."

"I know, T," I reply, forcing a smile onto my face that comes off more as a grimace.

The rumble of motorcycles fills the air as the group readies to leave. One by one they

ride off down the road, disappearing into the distance, leaving me alone with my thoughts. The plan of confessing to Kiesha seems even more daunting now that everyone's gone. I can't keep putting her off.

Sabrina's supposed to be at work. It's now or never.

I head back inside the clubhouse, hating how eerily quiet it is with nearly everyone gone. Grabbing a bottle of liquor off the top shelf behind the bar. I go for the good stuff. There's no one to tell me no. I need some liquid courage before I see Kiesha.

I take a couple of shots and pull out my phone. I scroll down to Kiesha's name, my finger hovering over the call button.

"Hey," she answers midway through the second ring.

"Hi."

"Are you okay?"

"Define okay."

"I've been worried out of my mind."

"Can we talk?"

"Jimmy, you're scaring me."

"I just need to see your face is all," I lie.

"When?"

“Now. Swing by the clubhouse. No one else is here.”

“Right. The rally. Okay.”

“I’ll meet you at the gate.”

The call drops and I take a few more shots before walking back to the gate and lighting up a cigarette to wait.

Kiesha pulls up, driving a shiny cherry red Mustang. Dark circles ring her eyes, and I know they are due to me. All I do is hurt the people I’m supposed to care about. “Nice car,” I tell her as I open the gate and shut it once she pulls through. “Park by the garage.”

Once she’s out of her car, she doesn’t make a move to come inside. She leans against the driver’s side door, arms folded over her chest. “You see me.”

I nod, hating the suspicious expression she wears. “Let’s talk inside in the AC.”

“Fine.” She pushes away from her car, and I reach for her hand, feeling the bitter sting when she rejects me.

I lead her to the back booth and wait for her to slide in so I can box her in. It’s not fair, but I need her to hear me out. I’m afraid she’ll bolt before I can fully explain. I stare at her a beat before I speak, taking in all of her beauty and soaking up her sweet scent.

She rolls her eyes at me, her patience wearing thin.

“I’m sorry I went silent on you. There’s been a lot of shit the past few days that I had to handle. I’m still dealing with it.”

“What’s so important that you couldn’t let me know that you’re alive?”

“Smoke and Ember broke up, so I had to find a new place.”

“And Sabrina? Did you end it?”

“Not yet.”

“Let me up.” She pushes against me, but I don’t budge.

“Just listen. There’s more I need to tell you.”

“You’re still with her,” she says with a shake of her head. I lift my hand to brush her pink tendrils back from her face and she jerks away from me as if my touch burns her. “Don’t touch me.”

I deserve her coldness, but it still cuts me to the bone.

“I fucked up. The night of your prom. We had that fight about you going with Jonesy and I got drunk and I slept with Sabrina.”

“I’m going to be sick. You fucked her, then lied to my face. I guess it’s what I get for doing it to her. I can’t be mad at her but you. You knew that would hurt me.”

“I wasn’t thinking.”

“Yeah, you were. You just weren’t thinking about me. God, you are so selfish. So what? You’ve decided that you want to get back with her. Or I guess stay with her.”

“No.”

“Then what? Did she find out about us and threaten to tell me?”

“No.”

“You’ve got about five seconds before I punch you in your balls if you don’t spit it out.”

“Sabrina’s pregnant. She’s pregnant, and it’s mine.”

“Fuck you, Jimmy. Fuck you.” Kiesha slaps me and punches at me as thick tears roll down her cheeks.

I grab hold of her, clamping her arms down. “I’m sorry.”

“I never want to see you again.”

“You don’t mean that,” I murmur into her hair.

“Please let me go.”

“You’re too upset to drive.”

“Don’t tell me what I am. You’ve got no right. You can’t keep me here.”

“Just until you’re calm.”

She goes slack in my arms.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Kiesha.”

“Did she...did she move with you to your new place?”

“Yeah.”

“Does she know? About me?”

“She suspects there’s been someone.”

“Good. I hope the two of you have the life you deserve.”

“I know you’re mad.”

“I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at myself for ever allowing myself to fall for someone as big of an asshole as my father.”

“Don’t compare me to him.”

“Why not? He was a lousy cheater, too. I’m done being the other woman.”

“I’m going to tell her.”

“When?”

“Soon. I swear.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“I’ll do it tonight.”

“Why not right now?”

“She’s at work.” It comes out as a lame excuse, but it’s true.

“I’m out of here.”

“Never in a million years would this be what I wanted. I never meant for this to happen.”

“You mean you thought you’d never get caught? Have your cake and eat it too. Play me and Sabrina.”

“That’s not what I was doing. Not intentionally.” She pushes against me, and I loosen my grip. “Please don’t go, Kie. I want to fix this.”

“There’s no fixing this. She’s having your baby and I’m what? Supposed to play step mommy or continue being your side piece.”

“You have never been my side piece.”

“Then what would you call me? I’m damn sure not the woman you live with. The one that you’re loyal to. I will never forgive you for this. You’ve lost me forever.”

“Baby.”

“Stop, Jimmy. Just stop and let me go,” she whispers, her voice full of so much pain that my heart squeezes tight in my chest and shatters.

She’s right. I royally fucked up. “I love you, Kiesha.”

“No, Jimmy. You don’t love anyone except maybe yourself.”

“Kiesha.”

“No. I need some space. I need time to process this. I need you to let me go. I’m done

asking.”

“You’re right, you deserve that,” I say finally, releasing her from my hold before I slide out of the booth. She hesitates for a moment, looking at me as if she wants to say something else, but then shakes her head.

“I’m sorry, Kie.”

She shoves her palm up in my face, giving me one last hard look before walking away.

Chapter Twenty-two

My heart feels as though it's been ground up into nothing but pulp. Jimmy cheated on me. I'm not even sure if that's what I should be calling it. But he betrayed me and I'm so damn heartbroken. I don't know if I'm mad or just sad. I want to hate him and curse him out of existence, and yet I miss him. It's been a week since he told me that Sabrina is pregnant with his baby. I've tried keeping myself busy looking for a summer job and helping my mom out with my little sister.

Anything to keep myself from unblocking his number and telling him I don't care about the baby or Sabrina. I only want to be with him. I can't do that, though. I respect myself more than that.

If I wanted to be petty, I'd tell my mom, Prodigy, and Link everything. As hurt as I am, I don't want to ruin his shot at the club. They'd kill him if they knew that all this time he was stringing me along and filling my head with lies. I want to believe that part of what we shared was real. That he did love me or whatever he considers loving someone. If he even knows the meaning of the word.

Some days I think he just got in over his head and others I am back to hating him.

No matter what I do or where I go, I'm reminded of memories of him. Nowhere is safe. Not the park where I take my little sister. Not my favorite ice cream shop. Ordering a pizza. Everything is tainted by thoughts of him.

I hate leaving my room most days, but know if I sulk, my mom will ask more questions than she already has been. She thinks I'm sad about Sam being so distant

lately. I let her think it's true. It's safer than telling her the truth.

Even snuggling with my Fireball makes me think of him because he came up with her stupid name.

Another week passes me by in a blur.

Most of the club is back from their ride to California.

I overheard my mom say that Smoke and Ember got married. Jimmy told me they broke up, but maybe that was part of his lie also.

My phone buzzes with a call from my Aunt Pam. I almost send her to voicemail, but remember that she was supposed to call me if she found out anything about Jimmy. Maybe I'm a glutton for punishment. Hearing anything about him is only going to further break my heart, and yet I have to know. Whatever it is.

"Hello."

"Sorry, I'm just getting around to calling, but things have been crazy."

"That's okay. I hope you had a great trip."

"It was interesting and let's just say a little birdie told me that Sabrina's not even pregnant. She's lying to Jimmy. Do with that what you will."

"You're sure?"

"Oh yeah. Girl most likely stole Ember's pregnancy test and passed it off as her own."

“Thanks, Pam.”

“No problem. I also have it on good authority that everyone’s at the clubhouse if you were to go looking for Jimmy.”

I end the call with Pam, and I’m conflicted. If Sabrina is lying, Jimmy deserves to know the truth, but it also would serve him right for all the mess and heartbreak he’s caused. I don’t know what to do.

Will he think I’m just trying to screw with them? Though, if it were me, I’d want to know, wouldn’t I?

It shouldn’t matter what I look like, but I take extra care doing my hair and makeup. I want Jimmy to eat his heart out when I deliver the news. Yes, it’s petty. No, I don’t care. When I pull up to the gate, there’s a guy I don’t recognize. He must be new.

I’m not above using my Uncle Link’s status as a club officer to get what I want and that’s exactly what I do. I spot him coming out of the clubhouse looking ten shades of pissed. I don’t know if Pam mentioned anything to him or if he knows anything, but if I wasn’t so determined to do this in person, I’d cower and run away at the sight of his brutal face.

“What are you doing here, Kiesha?”

“I have something to discuss with Jimmy.”

“And what the fuck would that be?”

“It’s personal. It’s between him and me.”

“Any business you’ve got with anyone here is my business and Prodigy’s. You better

start talking.”

“It’s about his girlfriend. I just really need to speak to him.”

“Fine,” he grits at me as I spot Jimmy exiting the clubhouse with Smoke.

“There he is. I’ll just go talk to him.”

“You’ll stay right where you are. Prospect. Get your ass over here.”

The new guy, his jacket bearing the ‘Prospect’ title that marks him as a potential member of the club, quickly jogs over.

Link points to me. “Keep an eye on her. Make sure she doesn’t wander off.”

The Prospect nods, a determined look on his face as Link strides away towards Jimmy and Smoke. I cross my arms over my chest and glare at the guy whose name I find out is Tyler. He doesn’t say anything, just maintains his steady watch over me.

Standing here under his scrutiny makes me feel like a criminal awaiting punishment, but I’m not the one in the wrong.

I tap my foot impatiently, biting my lower lip as I watch Link pull Jimmy aside. They share a few heated words before Jimmy throws a glance in my direction. His expression is unreadable, but he doesn’t look happy to see me.

Finally, Link strides back to us, Jimmy following closely behind. Jimmy’s hands are shoved into his front pockets, his gaze focused on me with an intensity that steals my breath. Despite how much I want to hate him, seeing him makes me miss him. Makes me crave him in ways I shouldn’t. I have to remember that he’s the one who broke my heart and not the other way around. He ruined what we had.

“You have something to say to me,” he says, his voice strained.

I glare at my uncle. “Can you give us a minute?”

“You’ve got two minutes.” He motions for Tyler to give us some privacy.

Once they are out of earshot, I start. “I need you to listen. There’s something you should know about Sabrina. Supposedly, she’s not really pregnant. She used Ember’s test to trick you.”

“I know. Smoke told me.”

“Oh. Okay. As long as you know.”

“Does Link know?”

“About us?”

“Yeah. If he’s going to kill me, I’d at least like a head’s up.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Thank you.”

“Right. Well, that’s all I wanted to say.” On the outside, I try to keep a brave face, but on the inside, I’m dying. All I want is to fall into his arms and go back to the way we were, but I can’t forgive, and I can’t forget.

“Aren’t you going to ask?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“What I plan to do about Sabrina?”

“That’s none of my business.”

He stares at me for a long moment before pushing a hand through his hair. “Can we talk somewhere? Preferably not in front of the gate or your uncle?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” My voice cracks and I nearly burst into tears. I want to say yes, but I can’t give in. I can’t get sucked back in.

“I just want to talk. You can drive. We’ll go somewhere public. I miss you.”

“I miss you too, but I can’t. I need time.”

“How much?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re two minutes are up,” Link grumbles, interrupting our conversation.

“I said all I need to. Thank you.”

Link grunts and Jimmy stares at his shoes.

The second I walk away, I hear him grilling Jimmy, demanding to know why I needed to talk to him. I climb back in my car and lay my head back. I close my eyes and exhale. It was easier than I thought it would be—walking away from him a second time.

I drive around town aimlessly. I’m not ready to go home and have nowhere to go. I text my sister, but she’s at work and I’m not in the headspace to deal with the mall.

My mom and Prodigy took Kieleigh to watch a movie with another couple and their kids who are around the same age as her. I could have tagged along but would have felt out of place.

Eventually, I make my way home.

Fireball is sprawled across my bed, her furry body taking up far more space than it should. Her tail thumps against the comforter as she lifts her head to look at me, tawny eyes happy to see me.

“Hey girl,” I whisper, scratching her behind the ears. She purrs softly, nudging her head into my palm. “At least I’ve got you, huh?” I flop down next to her on the bed, scooping her into the crook of my arm to cuddle. She tolerates it for about one minute before she’s squirming and hiking her butt in the air to get away.

I pull out my phone and debate on unblocking Jimmy. Is he confronting Sabrina right now? Will he forgive her? Are they even together still? All questions I wanted to ask but couldn’t bring myself to vocalize when given the chance.

I need a clean break.

A new start.

I scroll down my contacts and hit call on Sam’s name. “Hey. Do you still need a roommate?”

Chapter Twenty-three

“What the fuck did my niece want with you?” Link stares me down.

“She found out some shit about Sabrina and thought I should know.”

“What the fuck is it to her?”

“I guess she felt like she owed me a favor after the stuff that happened last year with her father.”

“And that’s all it was?”

“Yup.”

“Keep it that way.”

“Of course.” I nearly choke out the words. He doesn’t have to worry. Kiesha hates me. I made sure of that by breaking her hurt along with my own.

“So, what was the information?”

“Sabrina lied to me. About being pregnant.”

“Fuck for real?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What I should have done months ago. Cut her loose.”

“Good. You’re doing the right thing. Just getting started with the club. The last thing you need is a bitch like that dragging you down. Go handle your business.”

“Right.”

I roll up to the apartment I share with Sabrina and park my motorcycle. I finally got it running. Just in time for summer. I was looking forward to taking Kiesha for a ride, but that’s not going to happen now.

I run a hand over my head after removing my helmet and hanging it off the handlebars. Time to get this over with. As mad as I am that she lied, part of me understands. I’ve done a helluva lot of lying to myself this past year.

I trudge up the stairs that lead to our door. Sabrina has it open and is waiting for me with a big smile until she appraises my ravished demeanor.

“You’re back early.”

“We need to talk.” I squeeze past her.

“What about?” She closes the door and follows closely behind.

I take up the recliner, leaning forward, elbows resting on my knees, head in my hands, forcing her to sit elsewhere. Normally, she sits on my lap. Not today, though. Not ever again.

“About us.” I look up, meeting her curious gaze.

Her smile fades, replaced by a look of concern. “What about us?”

“I know about the pregnancy, Sabrina,” I say, my voice cold and void of emotion.

She blinks at me, surprise etched on her features before she quickly schools her expression to one of confusion. “What... what do you mean?” she stammers.

“You’re not pregnant. You used Ember’s test to trick me.” The words come out harsher than intended, but I make no effort to soften them.

She flinches, her eyes widening as she desperately tries to maintain her deceit. “That’s not true,” she pleads, but I can read the truth in her eyes. The guilt.

“Save it, Sabrina,” I cut her off. “We’re done.”

Her face crumples as tears well in her eyes. “Jimmy, I love you.”

“I loved you, too,” I say firmly. “But we can’t build a relationship off lies.”

“I didn’t lie to you.” She twists her fingers into knots. “I may have been wrong about the timing, but I am pregnant.”

“Stop lying.”

“I’m not lying. I swear. Look.” She stomps over to the fridge and rips something from the door. “Here.”

I stare at the test results. She could have easily faked them like everything else. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You knew about Kiesha the whole time, and this was your way to get back at me.”

“Of course I knew. You didn’t do very good of a job hiding it. But this wasn’t a revenge plot. I want to be with you. I don’t want to lose you to her.”

“I don’t think you ever really had me, Brina. Not really. If I loved you the way I thought, I never would have looked twice at someone else. But I did.”

“You made a mistake. I told you I’d forgive you,” she retorts, her eyes spitting fire.

“No,” I reply coolly, “I’m in love with her and I fucked it all up.”

Her eyes well up again and she wipes angrily at a tear snaking down her cheek. “How can you say that? After everything we’ve been through together.”

“Everything we’ve been through doesn’t justify your lies, Sabrina. Love isn’t about deceit or manipulation. It’s about trust, respect, and honesty. You should have told me the truth. I should have been honest about everything. I’m not placing all the blame on you. I know what I did is inexcusable. You should hate me. Not be trying to manipulate me into staying with you based on more lies.”

“I’m scared,” she whispers, biting her trembling lip.

“Of what?”

Sabrina stares at me, a desperate plea in her eyes. But there is no room for negotiation, no room for unraveling what has already been done. “I fucked up. Really fucked up. I’m not lying about the baby, Jimmy. I swear. But you are right. I was trying to deceive you. I did something and I don’t know what to do.” Her shoulders sag and she shakes her head slowly, tears streaming down her face now. “I’m sorry. Please don’t hate me.”

A heavy sigh leaves my lips. “I don’t hate you, Sabrina. Now tell me what you did that’s so terrible.”

“If you don’t hate me yet, you will. I am pregnant, but the baby isn’t yours. I...I went to the clubhouse one night looking for you and I had a few drinks with Angel and the next thing I knew, I was in a room with her and that Crawl guy.” She buries her face in hands and bursts into tears.

“Be so fucking for real. You’re having Crawl’s kid and thought you could pass it off as mine? The dude is old enough to be your dad.”

“I was scared. I’m terrified.”

“Does he know?”

She shakes her head.

“You’ve gotta tell him.”

“I know. You’re right. I just thought if I could convince you that you’d never know, and we could be happy.”

“It would have been a lie.”

“I know that, Jimmy. You have no idea what it’s like to watch the man you love fall in love with someone else and feel helpless to stop it.”

“I don’t understand, but I know what it feels like to lose someone. I can forgive you, but you’ve got to tell Crawl the truth. He deserves to know that he’s going to be a father.”

“I know. I promise. I’ll tell him.”

“Now would be good.”

“Today? I can’t. Not yet. Can’t we talk about this? We could work through this.”

“No. We can’t. I don’t want to. I’ve said all I need to. I’ll be around tomorrow for my stuff.”

“Where will you go?”

“That’s for me to figure out. Take care of yourself. And tell Crawl or I will.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Nothing about any of this is fair. There are no winners.”

One Week Later

“Yo, Prospect. Prez wants to see you,” Bridger, one of the club members, tells me.
“Out back.”

“All right.” I follow him through the empty clubhouse, wondering what’s going on. Everyone’s bikers are parked out front, but there’s not a soul around other than Bridger.

“Do you know what he wants?”

He ignores me and when he opens the back door, I see all the guys standing around a massive fire. Shit. Did Kiesha tell her uncle about us? Are they going to burn my body after they kill me?

Bridger waits for me to step out and shoves me forward as the group parts to clear a path for me.

I gulp but keep walking until I'm at the fire pit where Prez stands waiting for me. Next to him are the club officers fanned out, forming a half circle around the blazing inferno.

"Prospect," Murder's gruff voice calls.

"Yeah, Prez."

"You've been with us nearly a year. The time has come to decide whether or not you're worthy of a cut. We've tested you. Pushed you to your limits. You've done everything we asked of you."

I glance around, noticing no one is wearing their cuts. This can't be good. I find Smoke and he looks away. Shit. He's my sponsor and likely means that this is it. I didn't make the cut.

Serves me right after all the shit I've done. The lies I've told trying to get here.

"Before I make my decision, there's some business we need to handle."

My heart pounds against my chest. This is it. He's going to confront me about Kiesha and let Prodigy and Link punish me.

I look around for them, but it's Crawl who steps forward. "No hard feelings about Sabrina." He holds his hand out for me to shake.

I haul back and punch him, aiming to hit him square between the eyes but popping him in the nose right on the bone.

“What the fuck, man?” he grumbles.

I stick my hand out. “No hard feelings.”

Crawl shakes my hand reluctantly with the one he’s not using to staunch the blood flow.

Prez chuckles and slaps me on the back. “All right then. Welcome to Bastard Sons MC, Knuckles.”

I look at him funny, not understanding the new club name as he hands me a leather cut, and that’s when I notice what’s burning. Everyone has thrown their Royal Bastards MC cuts into the fire. I stare at my cut and a sense of pride washes over me. This is what I’ve been working toward.

What I sacrificed everything for.

Prez starts handing new cuts and patches to everyone.

“You did it. Congrats, brother.” Trenton gives me a bro hug.

“Thanks, but what the fuck is going on? We’re not RBMC anymore?”

“I couldn’t tell you what was going on since you weren’t patched in, but yeah. A lot of the other chapters haven’t liked the direction shit was headed and have severed ties or disbanded. Prez and Kingpin met with some of the other Presidents while in Anarchy. Came to a decision to patch into a new club. From now on we’re proud members of Bastard Sons MC.”

The name isn’t important. It’s the men I serve with. The brotherhood and found family I’m now a real part of.

The party gets underway and after about half an hour, the women show up. I watch the brothers of the club mingling with their ol' ladies, and all I can do is think about Kiesha. The one person I want to celebrate with the most.

I pull out my phone and dial her number, but the call is rejected.

I'm still blocked.

"Hey," Sabrina says, her voice timid as she approaches me.

"What are you doing here?" She's the last fucking person I want to see.

"I'm here with Crawl. I just wanted to say I'm happy for you. That you got what you wanted."

Not everything. I keep the thought to myself. "So, are you guys a thing now?" I take a hard pull off my bottle of Budweiser.

She shrugs. "I don't know. I guess we're going to try for the sake of the baby."

I snort. "Good luck."

"I really am sorry, Jimmy."

"Yeah. Me too."

"I'll see you around."

I fucking hope not. I don't say it aloud, but she can sense how much I despise her with the look I cut her way.

“Or not,” she mutters and returns to Crawls’ side, where she fucking belongs.

“Hey, Knuckles. Get your ass on over here,” T-bird calls from the other side of the fire. He’s got a wicked grin on his face and a bottle of liquor in his hand. “We’re gonna initiate you properly into the Bastard Sons MC, brother.”

I’m not sure what they have in store for me, but I’m ready for anything at this point. I don’t feel like celebrating, but I know these guys won’t let me wallow in self-pity.

“Man, he’s already got his initiation from Crawl.” Smoke chuckles. The others join him, and I force a laugh to keep up with their banter.

Fucking assholes. Like I need a reminder that my ex is here and is on her way to becoming another man’s ol’ lady. I’m not jealous, but I thought I’d have Kiesha on my arm when this night arrived.

“Who wants some new ink?” Roane announces, opening up his tattoo station.

“Time to get your first official ink,” Ember says, motioning me over. I don’t know if I trust her after she tattooed a cartoon bird on T-bird. I don’t know if she’s holding a grudge for Sabrina’s sake even if they are still on the outs. “What will it be?”

My mind flashes to Kiesha and the way she always tasted of strawberries. I settle on a skull with a strawberry coming out of its mouth.

Later on, Kimber approaches me. “You really did a number on my sister, you know?”

“I never meant to hurt her.”

“Well, you did.”

“Kind of hard to apologize when she has me blocked.”

“It wouldn’t matter. She’s gone.”

“What do you mean, she’s gone?”

“She moved to South Carolina with Sam.”

Damn. She didn’t even tell me or say goodbye. It’s what I deserve.

“Next time you talk to her, can you tell her I was asking about her?”

Kimber rolls her eyes and grabs another beer for her man.

“I’ll take that as a no, then?”

She saunters off without a response.

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Chapter Twenty-four

One Year Later

“I can’t believe you’re moving back home.” Sam hugs me tight.

“Well, I mean, you are getting married and moving out on me,” I tease. “Besides, I want to be around for my little brother. Keegan is only a few months old, and he’s already getting so big. I’m missing out on all his firsts.”

“Okay. You’ve got me there. He is cuter than me.”

“I’ll be back for the wedding, and I’ll come visit.”

“Yeah. Yeah.”

I grab my phone off the counter and smile at the text that just came through.

Drive safe.

“You’re talking to him, aren’t you?” Sam accuses.

“It’s only a text.”

“Mhhmm.”

“We’re friends.”

“Because that always works out for you,” they tease.

“I admit Jonesy got weird on me.”

“Dude is a creep.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing he’s in Alabama and I will be in West Virginia with a bunch of bad ass bikers who can kick his ass if he tries to get near me.”

Sam and I went down for one of his football games last fall and he was telling everyone that we were together and engaged after I made the mistake of hooking up with him. He was drunk when he was saying it, but it gave me the ick.

I had to threaten to tell my Uncle Link that he was harassing me and may have told him I have ties to Saint’s Outlaws MC. That seemed to be enough of a warning to deter him.

“If he hurts you.”

“I know. I know. You’ll cut off his balls and feed them to a bear or whatever. I don’t even know if he’s seeing anyone or if he wants to see me.”

“You know he wants all up in there.”

I scrunch my nose up.

“Don’t make that face at me. The walls between our rooms are thin. I know you’ve been having phone sex with him.”

“Sam!”

“Don’t try lying to me, Kiesha Marie.”

“Okay fine. We’ve been talking, talking on the phone and texting, but it’s been a long time since we’ve been around each other and people change. I could meet up with him and decide his breath stinks and never see him ever again.”

Sam laughs. “You’re so full of shit. Give me a hug and get out of here.”

“Love you, Sam. I’m going to miss our morning coffee chats and taco bars.”

“Me too.” They snifle. “Now get before I cry.”

I load up the last of my bags and strap Fireball’s carrier into the passenger seat. She’s not happy about another move, but I’m excited about going home.

Jimmy and I ran into each other when I was home for Christmas, and I don’t know. He was different. More mature and the attraction between us was as strong as it ever was.

We started texting here and there, but when I told him I was moving home, he asked if I thought I could give him another chance. Nothing is set in stone, but I’m open to seeing where things lead.

After seven hours on the road, it’s late when I arrive in Charleston. As promised, I fire off a text to Jimmy, letting him know I made it safe and sound.

I’m here. Heading to Mom’s to crash.

It’s late. You should come here so you don’t wake them.

I doubt Mom would care, but he makes an appealing offer.

Is this your way of trying to get me alone?

I'll sleep on the couch and promise to be on my best behavior.

What if I don't want you to behave?

Is that a yes?

Text me the address.

Fifteen minutes later, Fireball and I pull up to Jimmy's apartment building. He took over renting Trenton's apartment when he moved across the hall with Stella. I park in the guest parking spot and before I get the chance, he's opening my door for me.

"Hi."

"Brat," he calls me his nickname for me and my heart skips a beat at how it sounds in his gruff voice. He looks different. A good different. More muscles and tattoos. Thicker facial hair. Becoming a patched member of Bastard Sons has done him good. It's like an instant switch to a bad ass hottie when someone joins the club.

All he's missing right now is his cut, and he'd be picture perfect. He's not even wearing shoes. I laugh at the sight of him barefoot and think back about painting his toenails with my little sister. He wouldn't look so tough with pink glitter on his toes.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. I'm slap happy from the drive."

"Then I better help you properly stretch." He grins and I shake my head.

“Don’t start.”

“Baby, I’m revved up and ready.”

“You’re such a dork.”

“That’s not what you said last night.” He flashes me another smile, and it hits me how much I’ve missed him. I climb out of the car and throw my arms around him, taking him off guard as he takes a step back while embracing me.

“I think you missed me.”

“Maybe just a little.” I inhale his intoxicating scent that I can only describe as being him. Spicy with a hint of smoke and leather. Simply him. His arms around me feel like home. I hold him a little tighter for a minute longer before breaking free.

He helps me unload my overnight bag and Fireball’s carrier from the car, then leads the way down the sidewalk to his apartment. I hold Fireball’s carrier in one hand and follow behind him, taking in the broad expanse of his back. His worn-in jeans look good on him, and I can’t help but stare at the tattoos snaking up his neck, noticing that he covered Sabrina’s name.

I smile to myself, relieved that it’s no longer there as a permanent reminder of the past.

Once we’re inside, he flips on the lights, and I’m surprised at how cozy it feels. It’s not fancy by any means, but it’s clean and it has a homey vibe to it that I wouldn’t have expected from him.

“This is nice,” I remark, glancing around at the worn furniture that looks well-loved and comfortable. He sets my bag down near the couch and I release Fireball from her

carrier. She immediately starts exploring her new surroundings.

“Do you have her litter and stuff, or do I need to run out and grab something?”

“I have her stuff in my trunk.”

“Give me your keys and I’ll get it while you get comfortable.”

“Thanks. It’s in the pink tote with the white lid.”

“I’ll be back. Make yourself at home.” He grins at me again.

It’s good to see him after all this time. I pull out my phone to text my mom so she doesn’t worry.

Made it to Charleston. Staying over with a friend. See you in the morning. Love you.

When she asks what friend, I think about lying and saying I’m at Bethany’s, but this time I want to do this right. No lies. No sneaking around.

I’m with Jimmy.

Jimmy as in Knuckles?

Yeah. We’ve been sort of talking and I think I could really like him, Mom.

Okay. Be safe. Love you, Kiesha.

I smile at her text and grab my bag off the floor and take it down the hall to Jimmy’s bathroom to change into my pajamas.

By the time I'm finished, he's back and already has Fireball's stuff set up other than sticking her litter box in the bathroom.

"You hungry or thirsty?" he opens a beer, and I shake my head.

"I had a fountain drink right before I got here."

"You tired or want to hangout a bit?"

I let out a yawn. "I can hang for about ten minutes."

I flop down on the couch, and he turns the lights off and the TV on. He sits next to me and moves to slide behind me. I lay on my side, my back to his front. He slings a leg over mine and wraps an arm around my waist.

"This is nice," I confess.

"This is heaven," he whispers, brushing my hair back. "I'm glad you're here, brat."

"Me too." I twist slightly to look at him and his lips come down on mine. And as if we haven't spent a year apart, I melt into his touch as easily as I did the first time we kissed.

His lips press into mine, soft and warm, and I curve into his embrace, my body molding into his as if it was made for this very moment. His arm tightens around my waist and goosebumps rise over my skin at the feel of his fingers tracing patterns on my hip through the thin fabric of my t-shirt.

The kiss is slow and lingering, a testament to a year's worth of unspoken words and feelings. He tastes like beer and something sweet, and I can't help but deepen the kiss, my hand coming up to cup his cheek, the stubble of his facial hair prickling

against my palm.

His fingers find their way under my shirt, trailing a path up my back that leaves me shivering. But just as quickly as his touch ignited a fire within me, he pulls away. He rests his forehead against mine, both of us panting slightly from the intensity of the kiss. “Fuck, Kiesha,” he breathes out. “I’ve missed you.”

“Then why don’t you take me to bed and show me how much?”

I go to my feet, and Jimmy leads me down the short hallway to his bedroom. The second we enter the room, he’s yanking my shirt over my head. He stops and takes in the sight of my naked breasts. His mouth practically watering.

“Tell me I’m not dreaming and you’re really here.”

“I’m here. I’m not going to disappear again.”

“Never thought this day would come. I mourned the loss of you. Feels like a dream come true. I won’t fuck this up. I swear.”

“Good.”

His hands are on me and his tongue is in my mouth as I undo the button of his jeans, eager to be with him.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:40 am

“Fuck, Kiesha.” I gaze at my gorgeous woman laying in my bed and know that every second of hell I lived without her was worth it for this reunion.

I’d like to say I’d take it all back. Every fuck up. Every lie. Every wrong decision. But I can’t. All the good, bad, and ugly have shaped us into who we are today. I’m only human. Only a man who made mistakes that taught me a valuable lesson.

I won’t repeat the past.

I’m ready to move forward. Kiesha doesn’t know it yet, but her home is here with me. I’m not letting her go. Not now. Not ever, now that I have her forgiveness and, more importantly, her trust.

Her tortuous lips skim along my neck as she kisses her way down my body, eager to show me that she’s mine. All mine. Wrapping a fist around my cock, she begins to stroke, but I was hard the second I laid eyes on her in the parking lot.

Life couldn’t get much better than this. As if to remind me it certainly can, she puts her hot little mouth on me, taking my length between her lips to fuck me with her mouth.

I sink my fingers into her silky hair, biting my lip to suppress a moan.

“Right there.” I watch as she takes me further in her mouth. “You take my dick like a good little slut.” I pull slightly on her hair, encouraging her to keep sucking. Kiesha finds her rhythm, alternating between sucking, licking, and stroking me until I nearly blow. “My turn,” I growl.

My dirty girl pops me from her mouth and crawls up and over to sit on my face so I can devour her tasty cunt. Gripping her thighs, I punch my tongue in her sweet honey hole, tasting exactly how much she loves me and my cock. She grinds down on my face, her juices coating my face as she gets off.

She slides back down my body, taking every inch of my cock in her pulsating pussy to ride me. I slap her ass and pull her hair, bite her skin, claiming every piece of her.

We took a hard road full of curves to get here, but damn if the reward isn't sweet.

"I'm almost there," she whimpers, bearing down on me.

"Come for me, baby," I command through gritted teeth, my own release teetering on the edge.

She climaxes with a shuddering moan, her nails digging into my chest as she rides out her high. The tight clench of her around me pushes me over the edge, and I find my release in a rush, my body tensing as ecstasy overtakes me.

Breathless, we collapse together on the bed. Her sweat-slicked body is pressed against mine as our hearts race in unison. Her fingers trace lazy lines over the ink on my chest as she lays her head on my shoulder.

"I missed this," she whispers so quietly I barely catch it.

"Me too," I reply and hug her tighter to me. Having her here in my arms where she belongs, I know that every moment apart, every missed phone call and unopened text all seems worth it. "Is it too soon to ask you to stay here with me? Don't move in at your mom's. Be with me, Kiesha."

She lifts her head. "You're serious?"

“This is where you belong.”

“Just promise me one thing?”

“Anything.” I stroke a finger down her cheek.

“No matter how much you think it will hurt me, never lie to me.”

“I swear. Biker’s honor.” I smile and she leans up to kiss me.

“Okay.”

“Yeah?” My chest warms. “Fuck.”

“What?” She laughs at my sudden outburst.

“Link and Prodigy are going to kill me.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

“I feel much better now.” I grin and she slaps my chest.

“You better. I have you know that I am a perfect shot.”

“Why does the thought of you with a gun terrify and turn me on?”

Fireball enters the room, announcing her presence with a loud meow before she jumps onto the bed and curls up by my feet.

“You don’t mind if she sleeps with us, do you?”

“As long as it keeps you right here.” I kiss her lips once more. “Be right back.” I go

to the bathroom and get a damp cloth to clean her up.

“And who says chivalry is dead?”

“Get some sleep, brat. We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, first. I’m going to fuck you in every room and then I’ve got to face your uncle and your stepfather.”

She scrunches her nose. “We can put them off for a day or three.”

“Sounds good to me, babe.”

Kiesha went to visit with her mom and her siblings for a bit, so I came by the clubhouse for a beer to give her some time alone with them. One of her main reasons for moving back is to spend more time with them. As selfish as I want to be when it comes to her, I know I can’t smother her.

“We need to have a word.”

I turn around from my seat at the bar, seeing Link, Prodigy, and Nav. Shit. Guess they heard the news that Kiesha is living with me.

“Take a seat, brothers,” I say, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible, reminding them I’m their brother.

Link, the tallest among the three, is the first to move. He slides onto the stool next to me, his face a hard mask of scrutiny. Prodigy takes up a position on my other side while Nav remains standing behind them, arms crossed over his chest, looking every bit the formidable muscle he’s known to be.

“Before we get into it,” Link begins, his gaze unyielding, “We want to make sure you treat Kiesha right.”

I lean back and look at him with a raised eyebrow. “Is that a question or a threat?”

“Take it as you will,” Prodigy responds, his voice icy. “She’s been through enough already. She doesn’t need any more heartache.”

Don’t they think I know that? That I haven’t spent countless nights wracked with guilt over everything that had happened between us? That they haven’t watched me drown my sorrows in beer and liquor. Easy pussy on occasion.

“I give you my word. If I ever hurt her, I’ll hand over my cut.”

“Glad we understand each other.” Link slaps me on the back and Prodigy takes a drink of his beer. Nav moves off and I breathe easy.

I half-expected to be hauled into a fight by Nav, but he clearly got whatever reassurances he needed from Link and Prodigy.

I finish my beer and hang around shooting the shit with guys until Kiesha sends a text to let me know she’s back at the apartment.

I arrive home finding Kiesha curled up on my couch with Fireball purring in her lap. Her eyes move rhythmically across the pages of the book she’s engrossed in. I watch her from across the room, unable to tear my gaze away from the gentleness of her face as she loses herself in the story.

I slip behind her, wrapping my arms around her shoulders, and pull her back into my chest, placing a lingering kiss on the top of her head. She hums contentedly and leans back into me, marking a place in her book before setting it aside.

“Hi,” she murmurs softly and turns to give me a peck on the lips. “How’d it go?”

“I’m all in one piece.”

“I see that. Then again,” she continues, her voice low and sultry, “I haven’t had time to do my own inspection.” She winks at me, and it pulls a chuckle from my lips.

“Are you volunteering?” I ask her, quirking an eyebrow at her suggestively.

She giggles and nods before pushing Fireball off her lap and tugs me around to the front of the couch. “I think I’d better do a strip search.”

We head to the bedroom with our hands intertwined in one another’s so Kiesha can thoroughly inspect me for damages. It isn’t but a few minutes before I have her bent over the bed.

“You ready to go?” I call out for Kiesha. There’s a party tonight at the clubhouse. Our first as an official couple. I hope things go smoothly. Sabrina will be there with Crawl.

Surprisingly, they’re making their relationship work. I don’t see her often, but when I do, she looks happy. Despite all the bad between us, I want that for her.

There’s someone out there for everyone and for her it’s apparently him.

I’ve got Kiesha, and that’s all that really matters.

“Damn, baby.” I let out a low whistle and catcall my woman as she struts toward me in low cut jeans and a black top that shows off her midriff.

“You like?”

“Can’t wait to strip it back off you.”

We meet T-bird and Stella outside as they’re getting on his bike. Kiesha loves the shit out of his ol’ lady and her murder and makeup podcast. She made her day when she invited her to come on as a guest. Stella and her can spend hours talking about beauty shit.

The four of us ride out and arrive at the clubhouse together.

Our women break off from our group to go gossip with the other ol’ ladies, Sabrina included. I hold my breath as the two of them talk.

“Think Kiesha will claw her eyes out?” Pam bumps her shoulder against mine.

“Nah.”

“You know, Sabrina says Kiesha stole you. But I told her you can’t steal a man. They’re either loyal to you or they aren’t. Anyway.” She pulls out her black book.

“She’s been here two weeks,” I grumble.

“I don’t make the rules.” Her lips spread into a mischievous smirk.

“Yes, you do.”

Kiesha makes her way over to us. “Is my aunt giving you a hard time?”

“She’s trying to make money off us.”

Kiesha giggles and I wrap my arms around her as Pam slinks off to harass someone else. “Having fun?”

“Mhmm.”

“Was Sabrina nice?”

“Weirdly, she’s not as bad as I remember, but maybe that’s because back then she was your girlfriend, and I hated her.”

“And now?”

“You’re mine.” She goes up on her toes to kiss me.

“That I am, brat. That I am.”