



Torrent Strike (Royal Bastards MC: Newport, RI Chapter)

Author: *Heather Dahlgren*

Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Torrent doesn't flinch. Doesn't falter. As President of the Royal Bastards newest chapter in Newport, Rhode Island, he's calm under pressure, deadly when crossed, and loyal to the bone. He's a man who leads with his head, fights with precision, and never lets emotions cloud his judgment. Building this club from the ground up took everything he had, and he refuses to let anything or anyone derail it. Until her.

Tessa Levine didn't come to Newport looking for a man, and she sure as hell wasn't looking for a biker. Hardened by a brutal past and secrets that haunt her every step, she's built her life around staying invisible. But Torrent sees her, and worse, he makes her feel seen. Wanted. Safe.

They're fire and gasoline. Wild, intense, and completely unpredictable. Their chemistry is explosive, their nights together hot enough to scorch, and the feelings growing between them threaten to bring them both to their knees. But when they give in to what's building between them, Tessa's past returns with a vengeance. Secrets unravel. Blood spills. And the very club Torrent built becomes the battleground for a war he didn't see coming.

The Bloody Scorpions want to destroy everything the Royal Bastards have built, and they've taken Tessa to do it.

Now, with the woman he loves in the hands of his enemies, Torrent will unleash hell to get her back.

Even if it means burning the whole city to the ground.

Brotherhood. Blood. Redemption. In the world of the Royal Bastards, love isn't a weakness. It's war.

Total Pages (Source): 21

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:36 pm

Torrent

I never thought I'd sit at a table again, let alone one with President stitched across my cut. But here I am in Newport, Rhode Island, as President of Royal Bastards MC. And every damn chair around me is filled with a brother I hand-picked. Men I trust with my life.

I grip the worn wood of the table, letting the moment sink in. There's pride swelling in my chest, but underneath it, there's a fire. A hunger. Because this wasn't what I planned when I burned my bridges back in California.

I didn't leave Shattered Souls MC looking for power. I left because I was haunted. Waking up every night to ghosts I couldn't kill and memories that bled. I thought going nomad would clear my head, giving me a shot at peace. I didn't expect it to lead me here.

The East Coast was a coin toss. I'd never been, never cared to.

But when you're running from your past, distance feels like safety.

And then I ran into Jameson, the son of the founder of Royal Bastard MC, at a club wedding in Jersey.

We weren't tight, but we'd shared enough beers and battle scars over the years that I trusted him more than most. He's the one in charge now.

His father, a respected man whom we all knew, was killed.

Jameson took over the position like he was born for it.

And maybe he was. He has just as much respect as his father, and that's not something that is easily given in this world.

He looked at me, saw the change in my eyes, and didn't ask questions. He just listened. I told him everything. No lies. No bullshit. Just the truth about why I left.

When I finished, he leaned back, smirked, and said, "I'm looking to plant a new chapter in Rhode Island. Royal Bastards MC. What do you say, feel like wearing a new patch? With a President rocker?"

I won't lie, it punched me right in the gut in the best damn way.

President. My own table. My rules.

Hell, yeah, I was tempted. But I needed a night to think, because if I was going to do this, I was going to own it. No half-measures.

That night, I lay awake, staring at the ceiling of some shit motel outside Providence, thinking about every fight, every war, every decision I made for my brothers back in Cali. I wasn't just a soldier. I was a tactician. A voice of reason. A trigger man. A damn leader.

And for the first time in a long time, I felt something again. I felt like me.

The next day, Jameson and I sat down over coffee and plans. I told him I wanted to build it from the ground up. I wanted to choose every brother myself. He nodded and didn't blink.

"Good. Then you're already thinking like a president."

And now, here I am. Weeks later. The table is full. The cuts are clean. And the Royal Bastards MC: Newport is official.

But with every rise comes the storm. We didn't even get a chance to breathe before the Bloody Scorpions came sniffing around. Blocking our ports. Jacking our shipments. Testing our resolve.

They're not just looking to challenge us; they're looking to destroy us before we even plant our feet.

I push back in my chair and let my eyes scan the room. My brothers. My family. My war dogs.

They want to come at us?

Let them.

Because I've got a new chapter, a new cut, and nothing to lose.

Let the bastards come.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Torrent

Salt and diesel hang in the air like a warning.

I light a smoke, the orange tip flaring against the fog creeping off the bay. The steel shipping containers stacked high around us cast long shadows in the early morning light. This place smells like work, sweat, and blood waiting to be spilled.

Perfect.

The rumble of engines behind me is the sound of home. One by one, the bikes roll in, the low growls cutting through the mist. My crew, my brothers, circle up around the container we tagged for this morning's drop. Eyes sharp. Bodies ready.

Jude "Drift" Dunne is the first off his bike, as always. My VP, my second. Been with me since the beginning of this East Coast ride. He flicks his sunglasses down and gives me a crooked grin.

"Smells like someone's about to fuck around and find out," he mutters.

"Better them than us," I reply, exhaling a stream of smoke.

Next off is Atticus "Finch" Gittes, our Sergeant-at-Arms. Lean, quiet, and cold as winter steel. He's got the kind of stare that makes grown men question their choices. Doesn't say a word. Just nods to me and scans the perimeter. Always calculating.

Cyrus "Crab" Ward, our Road Captain, swings off his bike next, tattoos twisting

along his neck as he stretches. Grease under his fingernails. That's how you know he's been working. He handles routes, mechanics, and breakdowns. He's damn near a genius with an engine.

Miles "Ganges" Beck pulls in smooth, riding like he's cruising waves instead of pavement. Treasurer. Hustler. The man could turn a parking ticket into profit. His hands are always moving, cards, cash, or otherwise.

Rory "Riptide" Stone is already jotting something down in that worn leather notebook he never lets go of. Secretary. Keeps our business cleaner than it should be. The kind of guy who remembers everything, even shit you wish he'd forget.

Then there's Nico "Cetus" Kade, our Enforcer. Built like a damn tank and just as silent. If you're on the wrong end of a Cetus stare, odds are, your time's about up. He doesn't talk much, but when he does? People listen.

Last is the prospect, Gideon Barrett. Kid's got the scars of someone who's lived twice as long. New blood, but loyal as hell. He parks his bike and stands by, chin up, ready for orders. He knows his place. Knows he's got to earn that patch.

"Where's the shipment?" Drift asks, stepping up beside me.

I nod toward the container with the black RBMC tag scrawled on the side.

Finch steps forward, tapping his knuckles twice on the steel door. "If someone's in there, they're either dead or about to be."

Crab chuckles. "Hope it's the second one. I could use a little stress relief."

Cetus crosses his arms and shifts his weight. "I'll open it."

“No,” I say, tossing my smoke to the ground and grinding it out with my boot. “Let them come to us. This is our territory now. Anyone who thinks they can push us around needs to learn how deep this water runs.”

The boys fall silent. The kind of silence that tastes like adrenaline and smells like gun oil. Every one of them is ready to ride into hell if I give the word.

We didn’t come to Rhode Island to play nice. We came to own it.

And if the Bloody Scorpions think they can rattle us? They’re about to find out the hard way that

the Royal Bastards Newport MC doesn’t blink.

Finch raps on the container again. Once, twice, hard enough to echo down the line.

“Might be rats,” Crab mutters, cracking his knuckles. “Or a body.”

“I’ll open it,” Cetus offers again, already moving toward the latch.

I lift a hand, halting him. “Stand down. It’s empty.”

Ganges raises a brow. “Then why the hell are we guarding it like it’s Fort Knox?”

“Because I wanted eyes on it.” I glance around at the rows of containers, the open concrete yard, the silence. “That Royal Bastards tag? We don’t mark our containers. But that?” I point to the logo we sprayed across the steel. “That’s bait.”

The realization settles over them like a wave.

“You trying to start a war?” Drift asks, grinning like the lunatic he is.

“No,” I say coolly. “I’m trying to finish one before it starts.”

The sound of approaching bikes slices through the still morning like a switchblade.

Three Bloody Scorpions roll in, engines snarling as they park ten feet from us. Their cuts are filthy. Their expressions worse. One of them, with broad shoulders and a face like a sledgehammer, kills the engine and steps forward.

“We heard there’s new blood in town,” he says, voice slick with arrogance. “And we don’t like the way it smells.”

Drift and Finch both take a step forward. Cetus’s already shifted to my right, like a shadow with fists.

I exhale, slow and steady, and walk right up to the guy.

“You always introduce yourself with threats, or just when you’re overcompensating?”

He squares up, but I’m taller. Broader. Meaner. I see the hesitation flicker behind his eyes before he covers it.

“You marked that crate. That’s our turf. Our port. You don’t get to move product through here without paying up or packing up.”

I lean in close, my voice a razor edge. “See, that’s the problem. I don’t do well with warnings.”

His jaw tightens, but he doesn’t move. Doesn’t speak.

“And if you’re dumb enough to come barking at my door,” I continue, “then maybe

you're dumb enough not to know that the last time one of your guys tried pushing weight through Boston, I was the one who fed the tip to the feds."

That lands. Hard. His eye twitches. The two Scorpions behind him shift uncomfortably.

"Yeah," I growl. "You remember Hector, right? Your gun runner who went dark? He's sitting in a federal cell eating beans and snitching for dessert. Wonder what else he's given up by now? Like the name of your inside guy at the warehouse?"

His confidence cracks, and I see it, fear.

I smile, slow and lethal. "I'm not the guy you want to poke, brother. Walk away while you still have the knees to do it."

He sneers, but it's empty. He backs off with a muttered curse, signaling his boys to mount up.

As their engines roar to life and fade down the road, my crew closes in.

"Holy shit," Crab mutters. "You just bluffed your way into their nightmares."

"Wasn't completely bluffing," I say as I light a new smoke. "Hector's been singing like a goddamn canary for months. I just wasn't the one who gave it up to the feds. I'd never get mixed up in that shit."

Riptide whistles low. "You're really not here to make friends, huh?"

"Nope." I turn and start walking. "Let's move. The real shipment's three containers over. Ganges, get the van. Finch, take the others and secure the perimeter. I want eyes everywhere. We're meeting the pickup crew in twenty. No mistakes."

“You got it, Prez,” Drift says, already barking orders.

As I watch my brothers move, sharp and efficient, I let myself grin.

The Bloody Scorpions think this port is theirs?

Not anymore.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Tessa

“Your order will be right up. Would you like another cup of coffee?”

The elderly man at the counter gives me a gentle smile and lifts his trembling hand with the cup. “Sure, thanks, sweetheart.”

I steady the cup in his hand with my own and pour until the rich scent of dark roast fills the air between us. He gives me a nod of thanks before turning back to his newspaper, his hands still slightly unsteady.

I slide back to the far end of the counter, resting my elbows on the laminate surface, and stare out the wide front window.

The view of the water, just past the weathered docks and the rust-streaked shipping containers, always has a way of grounding me.

The waves are calm this morning, the kind of quiet that feels like it’s holding its breath.

The sun glints off the rippling surface, casting golden streaks across the port. It never gets old.

No matter what kind of chaos is happening inside me, that water? It brings peace.

“Tessa, what time do you get off?” Megan’s voice pulls me out of the silence.

I glance over at her as she pops a stick of gum in her mouth, her apron already stained from the morning rush. “I’m here till close.”

“I figured,” she says, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Would you mind if I took an hour later? I wanna grab dinner with Jake.”

“Yeah, go ahead,” I reply with a soft smile. “I’ve got it covered.”

“You’re the best!”

I wave her off and reach for the Reuben sandwich that’s been set on the window by the cook. The scent of grilled rye and pastrami makes my stomach growl, even though I know I won’t eat until way later. I bring it to the older man, setting the plate down gently in front of him.

“There you go. Let me know if you need anything else.”

He nods again and I return to my post behind the counter, the usual hum of the diner wrapping around me like a familiar song. The dishes clinking, coffee dripping, the low murmur of conversations. Being here feels safe. Like nothing from my past can reach me here.

Newport has been good to me. Quiet. Simple.

I’ve been here a few years now, and not much has changed.

I haven’t really made friends outside of work, but I think I like it that way.

It’s not that people are bad, it’s just that I don’t trust them to stay.

And if you don’t let anyone in, you don’t have to worry about them walking away.

I've had a couple of flings, guys just passing through. Port workers, truckers, once even a guy who claimed to be a Navy SEAL on leave. Nothing serious. Nothing permanent. I don't do ties. Ties become chains.

The truth is, I've been surviving on my own since I was sixteen.

Ran from the kind of home no one talks about over breakfast. Lived on the street.

Slept in shelters. Took jobs that paid in tips and meals, and just enough to scrape by.

I fought for every single second of this life, and I'm not about to let anyone come in and shake it up.

Working the counter is my favorite. You meet the most interesting people.

The locals, wanderers, men with rough hands and tattoos they don't explain.

I've heard stories here that would break your heart.

Others that had me crying with laughter.

It's like being a bartender without the booze.

People open up to me. Confess things they probably wouldn't even tell their priest.

But me? I keep my secrets locked up tight.

And today, like every other day, I tell myself that's exactly how I want it.

Alone.

Untangled.

Safe.

And yet, there's this ache I can't shake. Buried deep under my skin, pulsing in the quiet moments. It's not just loneliness, it's the yearning to be seen. For someone to look past the smile, the small talk, the coffee refills, and see me. The real me.

As if fate was eavesdropping, the door swings open, the bell above it jingling just before it slams shut. And in he walks, Torrent.

Trouble wrapped in leather and swagger. The kind of man every mother warns her daughter about. The kind I should have learned to stay away from a long time ago.

And yet, every time he walks in here, it's like my pulse goes hunting for his.

We've been playing this little game for months, him flirting like it's his second language, and me pretending like it drives me crazy. The truth is, I live for it. His attention is a high, I haven't found anywhere else.

And worse, he keeps me up at night. Not just the fantasies, God, there are so many of those, but the questions. What's he doing right now? Who is he when I'm not around? And why the hell does it feel like we've known each other longer than the walls of this diner allow?

My gaze tracks him as he strides to the counter, that signature smirk already forming on his lips like he knows exactly what he's doing to me. He slides onto the stool like it belongs to him.

I grab a mug and the pot of coffee and saunter over to him, grinning without meaning to. He brings that out of me, the effortless smiles I forget to guard.

As I pour his coffee, he reaches up and catches my hand in his, calloused, warm, and possessive, without squeezing too tight.

“You know how sexy it’d be waking up to you pouring me coffee every morning?” His voice is low, velvet over gravel, and it sends a shiver straight down my spine.

I arch a brow, tugging my hand back gently. “We open at six in the morning.”

He lets out a chuckle, something between amused and exasperated. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

I lean in just a little, close enough that I can smell the leather and smoke clinging to him. His grin spreads like sin.

“I don’t pour coffee unless I’m getting paid to do it,” I tease, giggling as I walk off to return the pot.

When I come back with my notepad, he’s still watching me like I’m the most interesting thing in the room. It’s a look that both warms me and sets my walls higher.

“Alright, Torrent,” I say, cocking a hip. “What’ll it be today?”

“The coffee’s enough,” he mutters, eyes down on the cup.

That’s not like him. He always pushes. Always plays. But today, there’s something under the surface, something heavier.

I set the pad down and lean forward on the counter, just enough for a hint of cleavage to show. Unprofessional? Maybe. But I know what I’m doing. And I know what it does to him.

“What’s got you so down today?” I ask, voice softer now.

His eyes lift slowly and trail from my chest to my face, then back again like he’s trying to memorize the route.

“Nothing brings me down, sweetheart.” He winks, but it doesn’t hit with the usual punch.

I rest my hand lightly over his, the contact sending a jolt through me. How something so simple can feel so intimate, I’ll never understand.

“Of course not. A big, strong guy like you.” I flash a grin, squeezing his hand before reluctantly pulling away. “But seriously, you know I’m a good listener.”

He grabs my hand again, this time bringing it to his lips. The soft press of his mouth to my palm steals my breath before he lets go.

“You’re sweet, Tessa. But I’m good.”

I step back, trying to hide the way my heart’s tripping all over itself. “If you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

He leans back on his stool, arms folded. “That’s it? I come in here looking for some Tessa time, and you’re just gonna walk away?”

I laugh, throwing my head back. “Tessa time? What the hell kind of line is that?”

His grin is lazy, smug, and devastating. “That laugh…” he says, tapping the counter like it’s a beat he’s chasing. “It’s become my favorite sound in the world.”

“Oh, please.” I shake my head, trying to keep the flutter in my chest from showing.

“What about ocean waves or birds chirping? Rain on the roof? All those cliché poetic things?”

He takes a sip of coffee, dark eyes holding mine with such intensity that I almost look away. Almost.

“Those might be your favorites,” he says, setting the mug down. “But you don’t get to tell me mine. Your laugh? It soothes me in ways I don’t even understand.”

That hits deeper than I expect.

Because he means it. I can feel that he means it.

And this is the part that messes me up. When the game slips, and it feels like something real is bleeding through.

I know who he is. I’ve seen that patch on his cut. The word President stitched across the leather like a warning sign. He lives in a world that turns good girls into ghosts.

And yet, if I didn’t know that, if I’d never seen that cut, I think I’d already be his.

Still, I try to brush it off.

“How many other diner girls have you fed that line to?” I ask, cocking a brow.

He leans forward, and for a moment, the teasing’s gone. His voice drops, rough and honest in a way that makes my breath catch.

“Tessa, sweetheart, you have no idea what you do to me. If you think I’m feeding you lines, then you haven’t been paying attention.

” He inches even closer, and my pulse races.

“You’re in my thoughts. You haunt my fucking dreams. I’m not giving you some rehearsed script.

I’m telling you my truths. One day you’ll see that.

Until then, I’ll take whatever time you give me.

Because you, sweetheart, you give me hope. Real fucking hope.”

I freeze.

Because no one’s ever said something like that to me. Not with that kind of weight. Not like it could change things.

I don’t know what to say. But I don’t look away.

Because deep down, I don’t want to.

He’s pulling me in.

And I’m starting to wonder if I should fight it or just let myself drown.

I watch him sip his coffee like he didn’t just drop a bomb on my entire emotional state.

Hope.

He said I give him hope. Not interest. Not fun. Not even lust, though I know that’s there too. He said hope, and it’s still ringing in my ears like a church bell I didn’t ask

to hear.

I swallow hard and turn away, pretending to wipe down the already-clean counter. My hand is shaking, but I make sure it doesn't show. Not to him. Not to the man who could ruin me just by looking at me like that one more time.

God, why does he have to be him?

Why couldn't it be some sweet, safe guy with a nine-to-five and a golden retriever? Someone who calls his mom every Sunday and remembers your birthday?

Why did it have to be a biker with a dangerous smile and a patch that screams run?

I glance at him over my shoulder. He's staring into his cup like it holds the answers to the universe, like if he stares long enough, it might tell him what to do next. Or maybe he's just letting me breathe. Maybe he knows he hit a nerve.

And the worst part?

He did.

Because everything I've built here, the walls, the solitude, the quiet life, I built it for one reason: to feel safe. After everything I left behind in Oklahoma, I needed peace. I needed space. I needed control.

And then Torrent walked in with his knowing eyes and his dark past, and this stupid, ridiculous way he makes me laugh when I least expect it.

And now?

Now, I'm spiraling.

Because the way he talks to me, it's not just lines. I've dated the smooth-talking type before. I know how to spot a player from a mile away. But Torrent? He says things that stick to my ribs. That live in the back of my throat like something I almost swallowed but never quite did.

And maybe I don't want to swallow it down.

I press my hands to the counter, grounding myself, trying to slow my breathing.

I'm not a girl who falls easily. I don't even let myself fall.

But today I feel the pull.

I feel myself inching closer to the edge of something dangerous and beautiful and completely out of my control.

"You good, Tess?" Megan's voice startles me.

I jump and nod too quickly. "Yeah. Yep. Totally fine."

She eyes me like she knows better but doesn't push. Thank God.

I glance back toward Torrent and find him already watching me, eyes dark and soft, like he's memorizing the shape of my anxiety and trying to soothe it from across the room.

And it almost works.

I grab a carafe and move down the line, checking on the regulars, forcing a smile and some half-assed small talk. But the whole time, my mind's spinning.

Because now I can't stop wondering...

What if I let him in?

What if I stopped pretending I don't care?

What if I let myself want?

What if he's telling the truth?

But more terrifying than all of that.

What if I do and he leaves anyway?

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Torrent

I stare up at the bold black and chrome sign above the door: Savage Steel.

It still hits me every time I see it. All the months of wading through red tape, jumping through bureaucratic hoops, kissing ass for permits while hiding what we really are behind a glossy business front and now it's real. Legit. On paper, we're just a high-end custom firearms shop.

But between those walls? We're so much more.

We run guns, and this place is our cover. A clean face for a dirty business. With Savage Steel, we don't just sell to the weekend warriors and collectors. We use it to move product in and out, hidden in plain sight. It buys us time. It gives us cover. It gives us freedom.

And it looks fucking killer.

The front showroom is sleek but gritty, masculine but polished.

There are glass display cases filled with some of the most beautiful, custom-built pieces I've ever laid eyes on.

Hand-engraved slides. Cerakote finishes.

Tactical builds that would make any operator weep.

The lighting's perfect, angled to catch the glint of cold steel.

One wall is dedicated to rare military guns, mounted like museum pieces.

Not just for show, either, every single one works.

The building was a shell when we got it, but now? It's a fortress.

Our clubhouse connects from a secure door at the back of the build room, where our crew assembles and customizes orders.

Private, off-limits, and armed to the teeth.

We've got a sprawling parking lot in front, and a huge concrete pad out back that is perfect for parties, bike nights, and whatever the hell else we want.

And this Friday? We open our doors for the first time.

And when we close for the night?

We fucking celebrate.

Drinks, music, chaos.

Brothers from Jersey are riding in.

It's going to be a wild goddamn night.

"Yo, Torrent." Drift claps a hand on my back as he steps up beside me. "Just got off the phone. Another shipment of parts is coming today. Crab and Ganges are already on it. They'll get everything unpacked and stashed before we open."

“Good,” I nod, eyes scanning the lot. “Security all set? Cameras online? Lock on the front working?”

“Riptide’s checking everything now. Cameras are running, motion sensors are live, and that lock could stop a tank. You went full-fortress mode, Prez. Nobody’s getting in unless we want them in.”

I nod, liking what I’m hearing.

I’ve spared no expense on security. The front door is guarded when we’re open and locked with steel when closed.

The windows don’t open, the glass is bulletproof, and every angle is covered by 24/7 surveillance.

We’ve got panic buttons. Backup generators.

Steel-shutter roll-downs if shit hits the fan.

I don’t do half-measures.

Not when it comes to my crew.

This club, my brothers, are my responsibility. Their safety. Their future. Their lives. I carry all of it, and I carry it willingly. That weight will never be too heavy. Not for me.

I’ve lost enough people.

More than I’ll ever say out loud.

I'm not losing anyone else.

Not on my watch.

The last customer leaves just as the sun dips low, casting a golden hue over the black-and-chrome sign that now defines us.

The day has been a fucking hit.

From the moment we unlocked the front door, people poured in.

Gun collectors, ex-military, off-duty cops, curious locals.

Hell, we even had a few out-of-towners who made the drive after catching wind on social media.

Drift had the posts up early, and word spread fast. They wanted custom builds, parts, engravings.

They wanted the experience. And we gave it to them.

"Bro, did you see that guy with the vintage M1911?" Ganges yells over the pounding bass echoing from the back lot.

"Guy was like a damn kid in a candy store," I shout back. "Said he's coming back next week for a custom suppressor build."

We sold out of half our display stock, booked consults for custom pieces through next month, and every single brother worked their ass off to make it happen.

We didn't just open a business, we planted our flag.

And now? We're celebrating.

The Jersey crew rolled in about half an hour ago. No matter how many miles separate us, when Royal Bastards show up, it's always like coming home.

I spot Aero first, President of the Jersey chapter. Broad-shouldered, cool-eyed, steady as ever. Grizzly, his VP, is right at his side with that half-smirk, twitching his beard, like he's already planning some kind of mischief.

I give them the nod as I walk into the yard. Aero walks straight toward me, arms out.

"Torrent," he says, voice rough with the road and time. "Damn good to see you, brother."

We clasp hands and pull each other in for a tight embrace. "Could say the same, brother. Glad you made it."

"Wouldn't miss it."

I spot Backdraft, with his ol' lady, Zoey, right behind him. They head toward the bar, and Ganges gives Backdraft a quick hug, and they get right to talking.

Surge, their SAA is here too, laughing with Crab about something loud and probably reckless. Emery, his ol' lady, is rolling her eyes fondly while nudging him in the ribs.

The air's different today. Lighter. We're not planning a raid or loading up for war. There's no blood on the ground or tension in the air.

But there are half-naked girls already dancing on the tables. Beers being chugged, shots slammed, and I've already caught two fights brewing in the far corner near the fire pit. Drift and Riptide are egging them on while Finch sits on the hood of

someone's truck, laughing his ass off.

Crab and Cetus are trying to rig up an old speaker to blast more music, but it's mostly just static and yelling.

It's fucking perfect.

But I need a minute. Just a second to breathe. To reflect.

I grab a cigarette and step around front, leaving the chaos behind me. The night air is cool and crisp. My boots echo on the pavement as I lean against the brick wall beneath the glowing Savage Steel sign, lighting up.

I take a drag of my cigarette and let it burn through me.

This is what we fought for.

A place to call ours.

A future that doesn't involve constantly looking over our shoulders.

We've still got danger breathing down our necks, sure, but now we've got a front.

We've got control.

I'm about to take another drag when I see her.

Tessa.

Walking down the sidewalk, alone.

Her head is slightly bowed, her hands stuffed in her jacket pockets. The light from the street lamps brushes against her skin, casting soft shadows on her curves. Her long hair tumbles down her back, and I feel that familiar punch to the gut.

She has no idea the effect she has on me.

The cigarette dangles forgotten between my fingers as I track her every step. She's just walking. At night. In this neighborhood. Alone.

My jaw tightens.

What the fuck is she thinking?

She should know better. This town isn't safe, even if it pretends to be. Not for someone like her.

My hands curl into fists. I want to go to her. Say something. Offer a ride. Walk her home. Anything but just let her pass by like we're strangers outside the walls of that diner.

But I don't move.

There's too much going on tonight. Too many eyes. Too many risks.

So, I just stand there.

And I watch her.

Until I can't see her anymore.

Then I lean back against the wall, run a hand down my face, and take a drag of my

smoke that tastes bitter now.

She's in my blood.

It's more than attraction. More than flirtation. It's the way her laugh gets under my skin. The way she pretends she doesn't care when I know she does. The way she sees me when no one else dares to look deeper.

And it pisses me off because it terrifies me.

I've got a past that eats away at me every night. People I've buried. Mistakes I still bleed for. But somehow, this girl, this waitress with the sharp tongue and soft heart, she's breaking through all of that.

I'm not a man who wastes time.

Not anymore.

Not after everything.

If there's even a shot at something real with her, I have to take it.

Soon.

Because life isn't guaranteed.

And I'll be damned if I watch her walk away from me one more time and do nothing.

I crush the cigarette beneath my boot, letting the last drag burn out against the pavement. The night feels heavier now with the weight of Tessa still hanging in my chest like smoke that won't clear.

But I head back anyway.

The moment I step into the party, I'm swallowed whole by the chaos.

The bass is so deep it shakes the ground.

Someone cranked the volume while I was out front, probably Cetus.

The backyard is pulsing with bodies and booze.

Lights strung across the fence give everything a low, golden glow, casting shadows over the concrete lot and the patched leather jackets that fill it.

I don't make it ten steps before two girls press against me. One blonde, one redhead. Tight jeans, low tops, lips glossed and ready.

"Hey, Prez," the redhead purrs, running a manicured hand down my chest. "You've been hiding."

The blonde leans in closer, her perfume thick and sweet. "You could've at least said hi to your favorites."

I offer a grin with absolutely no heat. "Didn't realize I had favorites."

They laugh and cling tighter, like I didn't just shut them down. Normally, I'd entertain it, let them flirt, throw a line or two back, but not tonight.

Not with Tessa still echoing in my head.

She's the only thing I see in the crowd.

The only thing I want.

And she's not here.

"Excuse me, ladies." I peel away from them without looking back, making a beeline toward the makeshift bar.

Drift's already there, leaning back in a lawn chair with a beer in one hand and a shit-eating grin on his face.

I drop into the chair next to him and crack open a fresh bottle. "Hell of a night."

He clinks his beer against mine. "We fucking did it, brother."

I take a long pull and glance around the yard. "Didn't think I'd ever see it like this. Not this soon."

Drift grins wider. "You see, Riptide almost get into it with that cop who bought the antique revolver?"

I snort. "I thought we were about to lose our business on day one."

"He winked at the guy's wife and didn't even deny it."

"That sounds about right."

Laughter rumbles low in my chest until a sudden shriek from the left draws both our heads around. Cetus, big, inked up, and already three shots past his limit, has a girl straddling his lap, grinding on him like we're in a damn strip club.

Their mouths crash together like they're trying to swallow each other whole.

Drift raises his beer. “To love.”

I shake my head, chuckling. “More like to stupidity.”

Just as I’m about to take a drink, a crash erupts to the right.

Ganges and Crab. Again.

The two idiots are rolling across the pavement, fists flying, laughing the entire time like this is foreplay.

“Who bet against them fighting tonight?” I ask.

Drift smirks. “Finch. Dumb bastard owes me fifty bucks.”

I lean back in my chair, let the noise soak in, and breathe.

This is ours.

The chaos. The brotherhood. The grind and the glory.

Savage Steel isn’t just a shop; it’s our fucking fortress.

I scan the crowd again, catching eyes, nods, slaps on the back. Everyone’s here. Everyone’s alive. And for a minute, I’m at peace.

But then my mind drifts back to her.

Tessa.

I take another drink and stare up at the stars.

I'll give her time. I'll give her space.

But I won't let her slip away.

Not without trying.

Not without making a move that counts.

Because I've waited long enough.

And so has she.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Tessa

The bell above the door chimes, and my heart does that stupid thing again.

Skips. Flutters. Flips.

Like it doesn't know how to behave when Torrent walks in.

He moves through the diner with a confidence that only he has, every bit of muscle and menace wrapped in leather and tattoos. Dark eyes scanning, jaw tight, that low buzz of power always trailing in his wake.

I wipe my hands on my apron and make my way over, already trying to calm the storm inside me.

“Hey.”

“You shouldn't be out walking alone at night.”

The words stop me cold. My smile falters.

He doesn't even let me speak first.

“What?” I ask, blinking. “What are you talking about?”

“Friday night.” His gaze sharpens. “You were walking in the dark. Alone. No one around. What the hell were you thinking?”

Wait, he saw me? When? How?

My pulse kicks up for a whole new reason now. I cross my arms and tilt my head, trying not to let him see how much he rattles me.

“Are you stalking me now? That’s kind of creepy,” I joke, flashing a teasing grin.

He doesn’t smile.

Not even a twitch.

Just that stare. Unblinking. Waiting.

I shift my weight and look away, suddenly flustered. “I walk everywhere. It’s not a big deal.”

“Why?”

I hesitate. Because if I tell him the truth, that I sold my car just to afford the first month’s rent and a tiny security deposit, then he’ll see too much.

“I just don’t have a car anymore. Decided to simplify things.”

He leans forward slightly, voice low and serious. “It’s too dangerous, Tessa. You know that, right?”

I bristle. “I’m not a child.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

“You’re acting like it.”

He holds my gaze, and there's this quiet, building tension between us. Not anger. Not exactly.

Worry.

Real, raw, unexpected.

I don't know how to deal with that.

No one's worried about me in a long time.

And now here he is, all brooding fury and protective heat, making my stomach twist and my skin hum.

"I'll be careful," I say, softer now.

He doesn't look convinced.

So, I shift gears because I need the air to change between us.

I lean in just a little, eyes locking with his. "Besides, if I get into trouble, I'll just scream your name. Big bad biker might come running to save me."

His mouth twitches.

A low chuckle escapes him, rich and unexpected.

"You're good at that," he says.

"At what?"

“Making me forget what I was mad about.”

I grin. “It’s a gift.”

The tension eases between us, like a stretched rubber band finally let go.

I pull my notepad from my apron and tap it with my pen. “So, what’ll it be today? Eggs? Coffee? Maybe something that won’t kill you?”

He leans back in the stool. “You hear about that new gun shop that opened in town?”

My brows rise. “Yeah, actually. Savage Steel, right? Heard the guys that run it are kinda intense.”

He nods. “You been?”

“Not yet. But it looks badass. I’ve always wanted to learn to shoot. Just never had the chance.”

There’s a flicker of something in his eyes, something that makes my skin prickle.

“I own it,” he says.

My breath catches. “Wait. You? What?”

“It’s mine. The shop. The name. The setup. All of it.”

I blink, stunned. “That’s kind of hot, actually.”

He smirks. “Come check it out sometime. I’ll show you around.”

My heart stumbles again, but I force a smile. “I’ll think about it.”

Because saying yes feels like stepping off a cliff.

And saying no feels impossible.

He nods like he gets it. Like he knows I’m scared and isn’t going to push me.

And that? That’s what makes it even harder to resist him.

Because under all that danger and dominance, Torrent is real. And I think he sees me, even the parts I try to keep hidden.

And maybe that’s the scariest part of all.

I bring him his food a few minutes later. Bacon, eggs, toast, and a tall cup of black coffee. He takes it with a nod, and I notice how his fingers brush mine for just a second longer than they need to.

“I’ll come check out the shop,” I say casually, like I haven’t been obsessing over it since he mentioned it.

His head lifts, eyes locking with mine, and that slow, wicked grin spreads across his face. That smile is dangerous. It makes my body react in ways it shouldn’t.

“Yeah?” he says. “When?”

“My only night off is Friday.”

He nods like it’s already set in stone. “Come by Friday night, then. I’ll be there. After we close, there’s a party, too. You should stick around. Have some fun.”

My lips part, and I swear my heart slams into my chest. A party. With him. With all of them. The Royal Bastards.

Trouble wrapped in a sexy leather package.

I shrug like it's no big deal. "I'll see."

He gives me a look, like he sees right through me, past the cool-girl front and into the storm inside.

"Looking forward to it," he says, low and rough, and then goes back to his food like he didn't just send my entire body into overdrive.

I get home late, lock the door behind me, and kick off my shoes. The apartment is quiet. Too quiet. The kind of silence that sinks in your bones and makes you ache in places you didn't know were empty.

I open the fridge, pull out a bottle of cheap vodka, and twist the cap off.

Just one drink.

Okay, maybe two.

I flop down onto my saggy couch, feet tucked under me, and take a long sip. The burn feels good. Grounding.

I stare at the ceiling, replaying the way Torrent looked at me. The way his voice dropped when he said 'have some fun.' The way my body reacted, like it already knew something was coming, something I might not be ready for.

A party with him. With all his brothers.

The thought alone makes me squirm, makes something tighten low in my belly, and something else clench in my chest.

I shouldn't go.

I should stay far away from that world.

From him.

I know better.

But I look around my tiny apartment. Peeling paint. Cracked tiles. Silence louder than any party could ever be.

I've been lonely for a long time. Longer than I want to admit.

Maybe just one night of letting my hair down wouldn't be the end of the world.

Maybe I need it more than I think.

Maybe trouble's not always a bad thing.

I lift the bottle to my lips again and whisper to the empty room. "I'm probably going to regret this."

But deep down, a little voice answers back. "You won't."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Torrent

It's been a hell of a week at Savage Steel.

When I first came up with the idea for the shop, it was supposed to be a cover. A smart front for the club's gun-running business. I figured we'd get a few sales here and there, move our product more discreetly, and that would be that.

I never expected the place to blow up the way it has.

We've been open seven days, and we've already pulled in enough cash to keep every one of my brothers and their families comfortable for the next few months.

That's not even counting the money rolling in from the shipments we're moving on the side.

It's insane. I've never had this kind of financial freedom in my life.

Never thought I'd be able to build something this solid for the club. It feels fucking good.

"Hey, Torrent," Crab says, tapping his thick fingers on the glass case in front of him, snapping me out of my thoughts. "I was gonna hit the liquor store for tonight. We need anything else while I'm out?"

I glance at the back room where a few of the guys are gearing up for the night. "Nah, I think we're good."

Crab nods and turns to walk away, but I stop him.

“Hey Crab,” I call out, folding my arms across my chest. “You guys finish up that Hellcat pistol?”

He pauses, turning back with a grin already forming. “You gonna tell us who it’s for?”

I narrow my eyes, smirking slightly. “A friend. You get it done?”

His smile widens, and he gives me a lazy salute. “She’s done and sitting in the safe. Clean as hell. You’ll like it.”

I nod and let him go, but my mind’s already spinning with the reason behind that gun.

It’s for Tessa.

After she told me she always wanted to learn to shoot, I couldn’t get the image out of my head.

Her delicate hands wrapped around the grip, eyes focused, lips pressed together in concentration.

She’s small, but strong. The Hellcat will fit her perfectly.

I had it customized, balanced, and engraved.

It’s not just a weapon, it’s a symbol. A promise.

She’s going to argue when I give it to her. I already know that. She’s an independent, proud, guarded as all hell woman. She thinks I don’t see through the cracks in her

armor, the shadows in her eyes, the weight she carries like it's part of her damn spine.

But I do.

I've lived with my own ghosts long enough to recognize another soul that's haunted. I don't know her story yet, but I will. And when she tries to push me away and tries to tell me that this is too much, that I'm too much, I'll plant my boots and hold the line.

I've seen what happens when a man doesn't fight for what he wants.

Before I left Shattered Souls MC, one of my brothers made that mistake.

Fell for his best friend's sister and let it simmer too long in silence.

When it all came out, it nearly tore us all apart.

I told him to fight like hell because sometimes losing everything is better than losing yourself in regret.

I've lost myself before.

Never again.

Tessa makes me feel things I thought were dead and buried. Real shit. Hope. Desire. Maybe even something dangerously close to love.

And I haven't even kissed her.

She stirs me up, makes me want to be the kind of man who builds a life, not just burns everything down. She's something different. Something special.

And I'm fucking done playing nice.

Friday night came fast, and tonight she'll be here. First time outside that damn diner. First time I get to see her in my world.

I plan to make it count.

I've had this date burned into my brain all damn week.

Not a date, not officially. Tessa wouldn't call it that. She probably still isn't sure she's actually going to show. But she said she'd come check out the shop. That's something. A foot in the door. And I plan on making sure she doesn't regret it.

The second I woke up this morning, I felt a low hum in my chest, a mix of nerves and something dangerously close to excitement. I haven't felt this way in years. Not since, well, not since her. And even then, it was different. This with Tessa? It's electric. It's unstable. It's real.

I spent the morning walking the floor of Savage Steel, checking every corner, every shelf, every piece of gear like it was a damn museum exhibit.

Crab and Ganges rolled their eyes when I made them dust the cases again, but they didn't argue.

They know when something matters to me, I don't half-ass it.

The shop looks perfect. Sleek. Clean. Dangerous in all the right ways.

The Hellcat pistol is locked in the safe, resting on a custom velvet lining.

Black and silver with a burnished slide and a small engraving on the grip of a single

rose.

Subtle. A nod to her. She'll pretend she doesn't like it, but I'll see it in her eyes.

I glance at the clock. Still hours until close. Still hours until I see her.

The club is buzzing, prepping for another party.

Fridays have become our unofficial celebration nights since we opened.

Word's gotten around, and people show up just to be near us.

To drink with the Royal Bastards, to flirt, to feel that edge of danger in their blood.

It's wild. Loud. Everything I should want.

But none of it means shit if she doesn't walk through that door.

"Yo, Prez," Drift calls from the back, stepping into the showroom. "You good? You've cleaned that counter four times already."

I toss the rag aside and roll my shoulders. "Just making sure everything's in place."

He smirks like he knows exactly who I'm expecting. "She's got you twisted, huh?"

I don't answer. Don't have to. He already knows.

"She's something," he adds after a beat. "Pretty. Smart. Kind of sad."

I lift my eyes to him. "Yeah. I see that too."

He nods and walks off, leaving me standing in the middle of the shop I built from nothing, waiting for a girl who still isn't sure she should let me in.

But she will.

Because I'm not going to let her walk through this world alone anymore.

Not when I know she's out there walking dark streets by herself.

Not when I see how her shoulders tense at loud noises or how she flinches when someone touches her without warning.

Not when she looks at me like she wants to believe I'm different, but doesn't know how.

I head into the back room, open the safe, and pull out the pistol. It's cool in my hand. Perfect weight. Balanced. Ready.

Just like me.

I run a cloth over it, check the chamber, and slide it into a slim case with a padded interior. I put it back in the safe and close the heavy door. She might not take it tonight. Hell, she might not even stay long.

But I'll be ready either way.

This isn't just about getting laid. It's not about claiming some girl to hang off my bike. Tessa's different. She's got roots in her soul and ghosts in her eyes, and I'm ready to walk through every shadow she carries just to earn a place beside her.

I've made mistakes in my life. Chose the club over everything for years. Watched

people I cared about die. Buried my heart under loyalty and blood and steel.

But tonight, when she walks in?

I'll be standing right here.

And I'll fight like hell to make her stay.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Tessa

My nerves have been on edge since I opened my eyes this morning.

I've vacuumed the floor twice, scrubbed my tiny kitchen until it smelled like bleach, and folded the same towels three times.

I even dragged myself to the grocery store, wandering aimlessly through the aisles, trying to remind myself this is just another day off.

But it isn't.

Tonight, I'm supposed to go to Savage Steel. I told him I'd stop by. Told myself I'd just take a look around, admire the shop, maybe ask a few questions about guns I'll never be able to afford, and then leave. Quick and simple.

But nothing about Torrent is simple.

He's not just some guy I serve coffee to.

He's the President of a motorcycle club.

The kind of man I've spent most of my life avoiding.

The kind of man who sets off every alarm bell in my head, but also the kind who makes my pulse race and my stomach flutter like I'm back in high school, crushing on the wrong boy.

I shouldn't go.

I shouldn't even be thinking about going. Stepping into that world? It's reckless. It's dangerous. And it's not who I am or at least not who I've worked so damn hard to become.

But ever since he invited me, I haven't been able to stop thinking about it.

Or him.

About the way his voice dropped when he told me I should stop by. The weight behind his words. The way his eyes latched onto mine like he was trying to see straight through me.

It scares me how much I want him to.

There's something about Torrent that crawls under my skin and settles there, something dark and steady and impossibly magnetic.

It's not just that he's gorgeous, though, God help me, he is.

It's the way he looks at me like I'm more than just the tired waitress with a fake smile and too many secrets. Like I matter.

And that's dangerous too.

I've worked so hard to build a wall around my life. To keep people out. To keep things safe and simple. But Torrent? He's a battering ram aimed right at those walls.

I've met some of his crew at the diner. Drift, Cetus, the guy they call Ganges.

They're rowdy and loud, but they tip well and treat me with a surprising kind of respect.

Still, I know better than to judge a man by how polite he is over pancakes.

I've seen what loyalty to a club like that can cost. I've seen it ruin lives.

But I've also seen what loneliness does. How it eats at you. How it whispers that maybe one night of letting go wouldn't be so bad. That maybe letting a man like Torrent look at me like he does wouldn't be the worst mistake I've ever made.

I press my palms against the cool edge of my bathroom sink, staring into the mirror. My makeup's already done, light but enough. My hair is falling into soft waves. My tight red, off-the-shoulder shirt and jeans are hugging my body like a glove. I look like a girl about to make a bad decision.

"You shouldn't go," I whisper, like saying it out loud will make it easier to resist.

But my heart has already made the call.

And no matter how wrong this might be, I'm still going.

I leave the bathroom and grab my purse, shoving my phone inside with shaking fingers. If I don't leave now, I'll keep circling the same damn argument in my head. What's right? What's wrong? What feels too good to be either.

But in the end, I'll go anyway.

I lock the door to my apartment behind me and pause on the landing, sucking in a deep breath of crisp night air in a desperate attempt to settle my nerves. It doesn't work. My heart's still pounding against my ribs like it's trying to get out. My palms

are damp. My thoughts are racing.

The walk to Savage Steel is darker than I expected.

The streetlights are sparse along this stretch, casting broken pools of yellow light between long stretches of shadow.

I normally avoid this route, prefer the main roads where people and headlights are constant company, but there's no other direct way to the shop.

Every step closer tightens the knot in my chest, coils my nerves just a little tighter. But it's not fear that has me twisted up inside, it's anticipation.

Like I'm walking into hell, knowing the fire's gonna burn, but craving the heat anyway.

That's what Torrent does to me.

He ignites something I thought I'd buried long ago. Makes me feel alive again. Makes me feel like I'm seen. And not just seen but wanted. Desired. Desired in a way that shakes me, confuses me, thrills me.

This isn't just about checking out his new shop. It's not about guns or a tour or even polite conversation.

This is about the line we're toeing. The one I keep pretending I don't see.

The truth is, I've been ready to cross it for a while now.

"Hey, you got a light?"

The voice cuts through the silence like a knife, and I nearly stumble, heart leaping into my throat. A man steps out from the shadows near a dumpster, his face barely lit by the flickering light above him.

“No,” I say quickly, my voice sharper than I intend. I clutch my purse tighter and pick up my pace.

He doesn't follow. Doesn't say another word. But my body's gone full fight or flight, and my mind races with every awful possibility. I feel exposed, like I'm walking a tightrope with no net below me.

By the time the glowing sign of Savage Steel comes into view, I'm practically gasping for breath. I throw a glance behind me, just in case, but the street is empty.

I step into the parking lot, relief brushing over me, but not the kind I hoped for. Not the triumphant, sassy strut I envisioned. My smartass confidence is gone. All that's left is adrenaline and anxiety.

I stop at the edge of the building and lean against the cool brick, pressing my back into it like maybe it'll ground me. I close my eyes and take slow, steady breaths.

Then the door opens, and before I even look, I know it's him.

I feel his presence rolling in like a storm, heavy, electric, impossible to ignore.

“Tessa?” His voice is low, rough, concerned. “What's wrong?”

I turn to him and lift a brow, trying for playful. “What, you psychic now? Can you see through walls?”

He steps closer, resting his hand above me on the brick. His body heat curls around

me. His gaze pins me in place.

“There are cameras everywhere,” he says simply. “I see everything. And I can see something’s wrong. So let’s cut the bullshit. What happened?”

I straighten, forcing a smile that doesn’t quite reach my eyes. “Well, bossy, it’s a bit of a walk here. I didn’t wanna show up gasping like a dog in heat, so I took a second to breathe. That okay with you? Or do I need to file a report with the club first?”

He narrows his eyes. He knows I’m lying. I can feel it in the silence that stretches between us.

But he doesn’t call me out.

He just stares for another beat, then shakes his head slowly and pushes open the door, holding it for me.

The moment I step inside, everything changes.

Lights blaze across the walls, illuminating gleaming gun displays and steel counters.

Music hums through a state-of-the-art speaker system.

The space is sleek, industrial, modern, and yet somehow still has that rough edge that screams Torrent.

It’s immaculate, professional, and yet unapologetically badass.

And it’s his.

“Torrent,” I whisper, my eyes wide as I take it all in. “Holy shit.”

He doesn't say anything at first. Just watches me as I spin slowly, taking in the shop. Watches me like I'm the only thing worth looking at.

"I told you it was worth seeing," he murmurs, his voice dipping just low enough to curl heat through my stomach.

And that's when I know I'm in trouble.

Big, leather-clad, tattoo-covered, pulse-racing trouble.

I'm still reeling from how incredible the shop is when Torrent places a warm hand on the small of my back.

The touch is subtle, but it sends a jolt through my entire body.

He guides me toward a group of guys standing near the front counter, laughter spilling between them like they've known each other their entire lives.

They probably have.

"Boys," Torrent says, his voice cutting through the noise but with a familiar ease. "This is Tessa."

I give a small wave, suddenly hyperaware of how out of place I am in my jeans and boots, standing in a gun shop surrounded by men in cuts and confidence. These aren't the kind of men I serve coffee to. These are the kind of men who make the world bend to their will.

One by one, they smile or nod. Some offer hands, others just a chin lift. There's no menace in their eyes, just curiosity. But I can feel them trying to place me. Trying to figure out why Torrent has brought me into their space.

“She’s the one you’re always sneaking off to see, huh?” one of them, Crab, I think, asks with a grin as he leans on the counter.

Torrent shoots him a look that’s half-warning, half-amused. “Don’t start.”

They laugh again, and I manage a smile, but my heart is hammering against my ribs. This feels like a moment. A shift. I’m not just Tessa from the diner anymore.

I’m with Torrent, whatever that means.

After a few minutes of easy conversation, Torrent tells the guys to get things ready out back. “We’ll be out in a minute,” he adds, and the group filters toward the back door, still chatting, still laughing.

Once they’re gone, the air in the shop shifts.

Quieter. Closer.

He doesn’t say anything right away. He just watches me, his eyes softer now. Gentler in a way that makes me want to lean into him.

“I’ve got something for you,” he says finally, then turns and walks through a doorway behind the counter.

I stand there frozen for a beat, unsure what the hell that means. When he comes back, he’s holding a black case, small and sleek. He sets it on the counter in front of me and opens it slowly.

Inside is a gun.

But not just any gun.

It's gorgeous. Matte black with chrome accents and an engraving on the slide of a rose. It's compact, feminine even, but powerful. I don't know much about guns, but I can feel the weight of this gift before I even touch it.

I take a shaky step back. "Torrent, what is this?"

"It's a Hellcat. Small frame, easy to handle. Good for beginners." His voice is calm, but there's something behind it, something heavy. "I had it customized for you."

I blink at him, completely overwhelmed. "You, what? Why would you do that?"

"You told me you've always wanted to learn. I want to teach you."

I shake my head, emotion rising too fast to swallow. "Torrent, this is too much. I can't accept that. I can't afford?—"

He cuts me off gently. "It's not about money. It's about you being safe. It's about me wanting you to have something that's yours. Something that makes you feel strong."

I cover my mouth with my hand. The tears hit before I can stop them. I try to blink them away, but one escapes, rolling down my cheek.

No one's ever given me something like this before. No one's ever seen me like this before.

Torrent doesn't reach for me. Doesn't say anything. He just lets me feel it. Lets me process it.

"I can't take it," I whisper. "It's too much."

He nods, like he expected me to say that. "Then I'll hold onto it. Until you're ready."

Until we set up some time, and I teach you. Deal?"

I look at him, really look at him, and the weight of what he's done, what he's offering, crashes into me.

It's not just about the gun.

It's about trust.

It's about him.

I don't think. I just move.

I step toward him and press my lips to his.

It's soft and uncertain at first. A question I'm too scared to ask aloud.

Then his hand slides to the back of my neck, and his other arm wraps around my waist, pulling me to him with a need that knocks the air out of me. He deepens the kiss, answering my question with a promise I feel in every inch of my body.

It's not gentle anymore.

It's hungry. Intense. It's every word we haven't said and every look we've stolen.

I melt into him, my fingers gripping the front of his shirt like it's the only thing keeping me upright. The world outside disappears. The fear, the doubt, the war inside me is gone.

All that's left is Torrent.

And the fire we've been pretending not to feel.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Torrent

The second we step outside into the yard of Savage Steel, the vibe shifts.

Music's thumping, the grill is going, and my brothers are already well into their second or third rounds. Bottles clink, laughter echoes, and the scent of smoke and sweat hangs in the air like something primal. It's our kind of party, rough around the edges and free as hell.

But for the first time in a long time, my attention isn't scattered across the chaos.

It's focused.

Right on Tessa.

She's walking just a step ahead of me, her eyes wide with curiosity, but her shoulders finally starting to loosen. That tension I've seen in her since the day we met is melting. Little by little. Like she's letting herself be here, in this world of mine, and not just as a guest.

As someone who belongs.

"Beer?" I ask, dipping into the cooler and pulling out two.

She nods, takes it with a smile that does something sharp and reckless to my chest. "Thanks."

We don't need words. Not yet. There's still something buzzing between us after that kiss. Hell, I haven't caught my damn breath since it happened.

But she's not running.

She's here.

And damn, she looks good surrounded by the roar of my life.

Crab walks over and slings an arm around her like they've been friends for years. "You surviving your first Royal Bastards party?"

She laughs, nudging him with her shoulder. "Barely. I've only been offered a shot three times in five minutes."

"Only three?" he teases. "We're slippin'."

The guys are drawn to her but not in that flirty, territorial way. More like they're curious how someone like her ended up in a place like this. But she handles it, even jokes with them. Laughs. She laughs, and the sound of it settles something in my chest I didn't realize was tight.

She fits.

More than I expected.

Maybe more than I'm ready for.

We drift through the party together, never far from each other. Her hand brushes against mine. My arm slides around her waist when we're talking to a group. She leans in when she laughs, her shoulder grazing my chest. It's light touches, casual and

innocent to anyone else.

But to me, it's a goddamn firestorm.

She's not just flirting.

She's giving in.

And I feel like I'm one heartbeat away from grabbing her and claiming her right here in front of everyone.

A few of the club bunnies wander over, clinging to some of the guys. Tight dresses, louder than hell, trying way too hard. I don't blame them. This life is addictive. And the men in it? Dangerous as sin.

Tessa watches as one of them practically climbs into Finch's lap, her lips curled in dry amusement. She looks over at me and mutters, "Club bunnies are the worst."

I choke on a laugh, caught off guard. "Club bunnies, huh?"

She just sips her beer, lifting a brow at me like it's obvious. "What? You think I don't know things?"

I stare at her for a beat, searching for an answer in her eyes.

She doesn't flinch. Doesn't explain.

I could press her on it.

But I don't.

I file it away. Add it to the growing list of things I don't know about her. But tonight isn't about that.

Tonight is about this.

Us.

Fun.

Fire.

Freedom.

So, I smirk and clink my bottle against hers. "Good thing you're not one of them."

She laughs again, brighter this time, and bumps her hip into mine. "Damn right I'm not."

The night wears on, and she doesn't fade. If anything, she shines. Playing darts with Finch, kicking Riptide's ass at pool, dancing with some of the old ladies to a song that should've been outlawed in the 90s.

And me?

I can't take my eyes off her.

Her cheeks are flushed, eyes sparkling, that guarded edge she always wears finally dulled. I've never seen her this free. Wild. Happy.

And fuck, if it isn't the hottest thing I've ever seen.

Every time she moves, I feel it. Every glance she throws over her shoulder, every smirk, every laugh it's gasoline. And I'm the match.

By the time midnight hits, the tension between us is wrapped so tight it's a miracle we haven't exploded. I catch her looking at me from across the yard, and I know that if I don't touch her again soon, I'm gonna lose my damn mind.

But I don't make the move yet.

Not here. Not now.

Because this night isn't just about sex.

It's about her.

Seeing her like this.

And knowing she chose to come.

To stay. With me.

It's fucking amazing.

The party's still rolling, but it's mellowed.

The firepit's burning low, and the guys have switched from beer to whiskey, voices low and easy.

Tessa's curled into the corner of the patio couch, laughing with Finch and Crab about something dumb, I'm sure one of them said.

She's glowing completely at ease, and fuck if that doesn't do something to me.

She fits here like she's always belonged.

I move toward her, catching her eye. There's a flicker of something behind her smile. Want. Curiosity. Heat. I nod toward the shop, and she stands without hesitation, brushing her hand along my chest as she passes.

The touch is light, but it burns me like fire.

I guide her through the back door of Savage Steel and close it behind us, the heavy metal clicking shut and sealing us off from the world.

The party fades into a dull thump beyond the walls.

In here, it's quiet. The soft hum of electricity, the faint scent of oil and steel. The place where everything is built.

Where everything's real.

She steps forward, running her hand along one of the workbenches, her fingers trailing across a disassembled barrel. I move behind her, slide my hands into her hair, and gently pull her back against me.

"You have no idea how fucking happy I am that you came tonight."

She exhales, a soft sound that rolls through me. "I almost didn't."

"I know. But you did. And watching you tonight?" I turn her slowly to face me, my fingers still tangled in her hair. "Watching you laugh with my brothers, move through this place like you belonged in it, you've never looked sexier."

Her eyes darken, and her fingers grip the hem of my shirt. “You’ve been driving me crazy all night. Every time you touched me, every time you looked at me, I thought I was gonna combust.”

My lips twitch. “You think that was me trying?”

She lets out a breathless laugh, then looks up at me. “This is a bad idea.”

I step closer, lowering my forehead to hers. “Yeah. The worst.”

And then I kiss her.

No hesitation this time.

It’s deep and hot and demanding. Her hands fist in my shirt, pulling me closer as my mouth claims hers like I’ve been waiting years. She opens for me, soft and hungry, and when she moans against my lips, I damn near lose it.

I walk her back until she’s pressed against the metal table. My hands are on her hips, lifting her to sit on the edge. Her thighs part, drawing me in, and her nails scrape down my arms like she needs to feel all of me.

We keep kissing, tasting, teasing. Our bodies locked in a rhythm that’s nothing short of lethal.

My hand slides up her thigh, her breath catches, and I break the kiss to look at her.

The need or want, probably both, that I see staring back at me is fucking hot.

I grin as I lean forward and suck on the delicate skin of her neck.

“You need relief, don’t you?”

I press my fingers against her center through her jeans, and she moans loudly.

“Tell me, Tessa. Tell me you need relief.”

I can feel her shaking, but it’s not her nerves. It’s the buildup ready to explode. She’s trying to fight it, but I know what she needs. I know what she craves, because I feel it too.

“Please, Torrent,” she whispers, digging her nails into my arms.

“Fuck, hearing you beg would make me do anything.” I unbutton her jeans and slip past the barrier of her panties, giving her exactly what she needs.

“Oh God,” she cries out, making my dick even harder.

“You’re dripping wet, and I’ve barely touched you. Do you have any idea how fucking sexy that is? How it makes me want to rip off all your clothes, press you against the wall, and slam my hard cock into you? How it makes me want to know your taste, memorize your sounds, and watch you come undone?”

“Torrent, God, please.” She rocks her hips against my fingers, begging for me to push them inside.

I don’t make her ask again. I slam my fingers into her hot, wet, tight pussy. We both moan, lost in the feeling.

There’s so much more I want. So much more I need. But not now. Right now, Tessa needs relief, and that’s what I’m going to give her.

My fingers fuck her pussy, curling as I find the spot that has her nearly falling off the table. “That’s it, Tessa, don’t fight how it feels. Let go of everything and give it to me. Give it all to me,” I hiss, watching her mouth as she pants around her moans.

“Torrent, fuck, it’s been so long. I’m not going to last.” She pushes forward on my fingers, drawing me deeper.

I drive my fingers into her faster and harder, pushing her closer to the edge.

Her hard nipples are poking through her shirt and making me want to do so much more.

Not now, though. Right now, she needs to see that this isn’t just about getting her into my bed.

This is about so much more. This is about her giving in to what we both know is inevitable.

“Let go, Tessa, I demand, curling my fingers and rubbing her clit with my thumb.

As if my words are enough, she explodes on me. Wave after wave crashing over her as her release spills onto my fingers.

“Torrent!”

My name falling from her lips is the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard. Watching her unravel for me in the middle of a room built for war might be the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.

She’s still panting when I kiss her again, slow and deep. I pull my fingers out of her, and she flinches as I remove them from her jeans. Her eyes lock with mine as I bring

my fingers to my mouth and suck them clean.

“Fuck, you taste better than I imagined.”

She tries to fight a grin, but it hits her full lips as she pulls my shirt to bring me closer. “What about you?”

I press a soft kiss to her lips as I reach down and button her jeans. “My time will come, I promise you that. But for now, let the ache in your tight pussy be a reminder of what else is to come.”

“Fuck,” she whispers, wrapping herself around me.

“This is just our beginning, Tessa, don’t doubt that, but I’m not giving or taking more. Not tonight. I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone before. You’ve been fighting it for so long, I need to prove myself to you. You get that?”

She’s quiet for a moment, her breath lightly blowing on my neck. “Yeah, I get that.”

“Good.” My forehead rests against hers, our breathing tangled. “I’m taking you home.”

She tries to speak, but I cut her off with a look.

“No arguments. You’re not walking again. If you need to go anywhere, you call me. Got it?”

She starts to smile like she might protest, but I pull her phone from her back pocket, type my number in, and hand it back. “That’s not a suggestion, Tessa.”

She studies me for a beat, then nods. “Okay.”

I help her off the table and brush my hands down her sides. “Let’s get out of here.”

The ride is quiet, but not in a bad way. She wraps her arms around me like she doesn’t want to let go. Her body pressed tight against mine on the back of the bike. It’s the kind of silence that says everything loud and clear.

When we pull up to her place, I kill the engine and walk her to her door. The street’s empty, still. The only light comes from the single bulb above her entrance. She turns to face me, her cheeks pink from the wind and maybe something more.

I cup her jaw, thumb brushing her cheekbone.

“You’re something else, Tessa.”

She lifts her chin. “So are you.”

I lean in and press my lips to hers, soft this time. A gentle promise. Her fingers grip my jacket, like she’s not ready to let the night go.

Neither am I.

But I pull back anyway. “Sleep, baby. I’ll see you soon.”

She nods, stepping back toward the door. And just before she disappears inside, she gives me a look over her shoulder that tells me we’ve only just begun.

And damn if that doesn’t make the fire inside me burn hotter.

Tonight has been more than I ever thought I’d get.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Tessa

The morning rush at the diner is chaos with plates clattering, coffee pouring nonstop, and conversations happening in every direction. Weekends are always slammed, packed with people trying to chase away the regret of the night before with greasy bacon and bottomless caffeine.

But that's not my issue this morning.

I'm hungover, yeah, but not from alcohol. I'm hungover from Torrent.

My body's here, pouring coffee and smiling like nothing's changed, but my mind?

It's still in the back room of Savage Steel.

Still tangled in the way he touched me like he already knew my body inside and out.

I swear I can still feel his fingers inside me, still feel the way my body came apart under his control.

But what lingers more than anything is how he touched me, like I mattered.

Like he'd been waiting for that moment for longer than I'll ever understand.

And the gun.

God, the gun.

That moment will stay burned into my memory forever.

The way he held it out to me like it was something sacred, like he was offering me protection and trust and maybe even a little piece of himself.

I could barely breathe. I didn't want to take it, not because I didn't want it, but because I knew it meant something.

He knew I was scared, and instead of ignoring that or trying to push past it, he gave me space to figure it out.

He put the gun away, promising to teach me how to shoot it.

That kind of gesture? No one's ever done that for me before.

Also, being with his crew, watching them joke with each other, and including me like I wasn't some outsider peeking into a world I didn't belong in was amazing. I laughed like I hadn't in a long damn time.

And Torrent? He was always right there. His hand at the small of my back. His fingers brushing against mine. His eyes locked on me like I was the most fascinating thing at the party, even with the music and noise and women throwing themselves at every guy in the place.

I caught the way he watched me watch the club bunnies. I rolled my eyes at them more than once, and I saw the way he laughed, like he hadn't expected that from me. Like maybe I wasn't the girl he thought I was, and maybe I was the woman he needed.

The way the night ended? Jesus.

Not just the heat of his hands or the fire he built between my thighs, but the way he kissed me afterward.

Like he savored me. Like he wasn't done, even if the moment was over.

And when he insisted on driving me home, walking me to my door like some kind of tattooed gentleman, I didn't know what to do with that.

I still don't.

Sleep didn't come easy. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw him. Felt him. Heard his voice in my ear when he told me he wanted me to call him if I needed anything. That he'd be there.

He's not just getting under my skin; he's in me now. He's like ink beneath my skin. And what scares me most is that I don't want to wash him off.

Being at that party, in that shop, on his bike, it felt like I wasn't just passing through this town anymore. It felt like I'd found something solid to hold onto. Like I'd found a place to land.

Like I'd found home.

And that scares the hell out of me.

But it also makes me want more.

More of Torrent.

More of that feeling.

More of us.

I'm wiping down the counter for the third time in five minutes when I see him walk in. Leather cut, dark jeans, confidence radiating off him like heat off asphalt. Torrent pushes through the door of the diner like he's the one in charge, and honestly, the way he looks at me, maybe he is.

My heart skips, stutters, and then starts pounding because I have absolutely no control over it, not anymore.

He heads straight for me, ignoring the couple waiting by the door for a booth and a guy who has been waiting for a refill of coffee at the end of the counter. I barely manage a smile before he leans over the counter, and without a word, no warning at all, he kisses me.

Not soft.

Not gentle.

But slow and deliberate, like he's staking his claim right there in front of God, coffee, and the Saturday breakfast crowd.

I jerk back with a sharp breath, eyes wide as I glance around, half-expecting people to be staring. "Torrent," I hiss, my face heating. "I'm not big on public displays of affection, especially when I'm working."

He just grins, all smug and unbothered. "That's about to change."

I glare, but it's weak because I'm fighting a smile. The nerve of this man.

"You're impossible, but seriously not at work. I can't afford to lose this job."

“I am impossible, but for you, I’ll try to contain myself while you’re working.” He takes a seat at the counter and looks up at me with that cocky smile. “Even though you like it.”

I roll my eyes, but the truth is? He’s not wrong.

“Coffee?”

“Please.” He watches me pour, his eyes tracing over me like last night is still fresh in both our minds. And it is. The moment’s so easy it shocks me. I thought it might be awkward. I thought maybe I wouldn’t know what to say. But it’s not like that. Not even close.

He glances around the diner before leaning in a little, lowering his voice just for me.

“What time you off tonight?”

“Six. Why?”

“I want you to come over to my place.”

My heart lurches, and not from nerves. From anticipation. From want.

But still, I bite my lip and shrug. “Can you pick me up at my place? I wanna change first.”

He raises an eyebrow, already shaking his head like he expected this. “I’ll pick you up from here, take you to your place so you can change, then we’ll head to mine.”

“So damn bossy.”

“Get used to it.”

I narrow my eyes at him, but my lips twitch, and he smirks like he knows he's winning.

Hell, he already has.

I grab the coffee pot and move to another table, needing to get my head back in the game, but I can still feel his gaze burning into my back.

And damn it, I like it.

The second my shift ends, Torrent is waiting. Leaning casually against his bike like he hasn't got a care in the world. His arms are crossed over his chest, those dark eyes of his finding me the second I step out the door.

It's unfair how good he looks. Like sex and danger wrapped in leather and confidence. And he's here for me.

"You ready?" he asks, straightening off the bike.

"Yeah," I nod, grabbing my bag and slinging it over my shoulder. "But we have to stop at my place first."

"I know." He opens his hand for mine, and I give it to him without thinking. It fits. It feels natural.

Maybe a little too natural.

When we get to my apartment, I pause at the door, already pulling my key out, hesitating. "You can wait out here."

He arches a brow. "You serious?"

I nod. “Yeah. It’s just not much. I don’t really like people seeing it.”

“Too bad,” he says, brushing past me with a grin as I open the door. “I’m not people.”

I groan under my breath as he steps inside. He looks around, taking it all in. My worn-out couch, the thrifted table, the peeling paint by the window, I keep meaning to fix.

“It’s cozy,” he says, dropping onto the couch like he’s done it a hundred times before.

“Yeah, well, it’s temporary,” I mutter, already heading toward my bedroom before he sees more. “Give me ten.”

I close the door and lean against it, heart thudding in my chest.

He’s in my space. My world. I didn’t think I’d let him in here. Not like this. But he’s here and not judging, not making me feel small.

I pull my hair out of the messy bun it’s been in all day and smooth it down.

I take out my curling iron and get to work on putting the perfect amount of curls in.

My fingers work fast as I touch up my makeup, adding just a bit more than usual, before I change into my favorite black and white sundress.

The one that hugs the top of my body just right and flows gently around my legs.

It’s simple, but it makes me feel beautiful.

And I want to feel beautiful tonight.

When I open the door, he stands immediately.

His eyes move over me slowly, heat rising behind them. “Jesus, Tess.”

I smile, suddenly shy. “Too much?”

“No,” he says, stepping toward me. “You’re gorgeous.”

He cups my cheek, brushes his lips over mine, and I melt into it. The kiss is slow but heavy, the kind that makes your knees a little weak and your heart race like it’s trying to remember how to beat. When he finally pulls back, he slides his fingers between mine.

“Let’s go.”

I climb on the bike and hold on tightly to him.

My arms wrapped around his waist as the wind tears at my dress.

I press my cheek against his back, and for the first time in a long time, I feel free.

The roar of the engine, the heat of him, the way I fit so perfectly behind him, it’s enough to make my chest ache in the best way.

When we pull up to his house, I’m surprised. I don’t know what I expected, maybe a run-down place in the middle of nowhere, but what I find is a beautiful ranch-style home with a clean exterior and a wide wrap-around porch.

Inside, it’s just as stunning.

Three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a gorgeous updated kitchen with an open layout that

flows into the living room. A big leather couch sits across from a mounted flat-screen. Out back, through the sliding glass doors, I can see a hot tub on a stone patio.

“This is not what I imagined,” I admit as I walk through slowly, taking it all in.

He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “I like comfort. Doesn’t mean I don’t still get my hands dirty.”

We sit on the couch after he orders food, and he turns toward me, his arm stretched across the backrest, fingers playing lightly with the ends of my hair.

“Alright, Tessa. Time we get to know each other.”

My stomach twists. I knew this was coming, but I still feel unprepared. I keep my smile in place and nod, giving him the surface level.

“I grew up in Oklahoma. Middle of nowhere kind of town. Not much to say about it.”

He watches me, waiting. “Siblings?”

“Only child.”

“Parents?”

I laugh dryly. “Not worth talking about.”

Something shifts in his expression, but he doesn’t push. He lets me steer around it.

“I left home when I was old enough to start figuring out who I wanted to be,” I say.

“Tried a few places. Ended up here.”

I leave out the part where I ran away at sixteen with nothing but a backpack.

That I slept in shelters, worked crap jobs, and spent years looking over my shoulder.

I fought physically and emotionally to keep going every single day.

I don't even know if my parents are still alive, and I don't care.

I just wanted to disappear from their world before they destroyed me completely.

But I don't tell him that.

I don't tell anyone.

Instead, I ask, "What about you? You always been in Newport?"

He shakes his head. "No. I was with a different MC before. Far from here."

"What made you leave?"

His jaw tenses for a second before he sighs. "Her name was Sarah. She had cancer. Fought like hell, but it wasn't a fight I could help her win."

My chest squeezes at the pain behind his voice.

"When she died, everything felt pointless. I was just stuck in the past. Couldn't breathe without her. Haunted by it all. So I left. Newport offered me a fresh start. A chance to lead something new. I took it."

He looks at me with a small grin. "And for a while, I was just existing. Going through the motions. Until I saw you."

I feel my breath catch.

“You made my heart start beating again, Tessa.”

Tears prick the back of my eyes, but I swallow hard and shake my head, trying to laugh off the intensity.

“God, I don’t know how to deal with this.”

“Have you ever been in love?” he asks softly.

I bite my lip. “No. And I’m not sure I ever will be. Love means giving someone that kind of power over you, and I...” I trail off, unsure how to finish that without revealing just how broken I used to be.

“You’re stronger than you think,” he says, brushing his knuckles along my jaw. “Is that what happened with your parents?”

“No, they were suited for each other.”

I refuse to discuss them. My past is behind me for a reason. So I force myself to laugh and search his face. “How old are you?”

He chuckles and moves his hand down to rest on my thigh. “I’m thirty-eight. Never really thought about age, I guess. How about you?”

“Twenty-six.”

He’s older, which I kinda thought, but age doesn’t mean a thing. Not to me, anyway.

The doorbell rings, and he squeezes my thigh before he gets up to grab the pizza. He

puts the box on the island that separates the living room from the kitchen and grins.

“Last question before we eat,” he lifts an eyebrow, and my pulse races. “What’s your last name?”

I laugh and stand up, walking toward him. “Levine.” I rest my hands on his solid chest and search his dark eyes. “What’s your real name?”

“Lex. Lex Hayes.”

It’s a simple answer to a simple question, but to me, it holds the weight of the world. He told me his real name without so much as a second thought.

It means something.

It means a lot.

As we sit at the island and eat our pizza, the questions in fact don’t stop.

“Do you have any siblings?”

“No, only child too. Parents both died when I was twenty-three in a car wreck.” He bites into his pizza like he didn’t just hit me with another tragic part of his past.

“I’m so sorry about your parents and Sarah. I’m sorry you’ve had to suffer so much,” I say.

I take a sip of my water, trying to keep my emotions in check. He’s lost so much, yet he’s so full of life. I wish I was more like that. More like him.

“Thanks. I’ve learned that losing what you love only makes you want to fight that

much more for what you have.”

I nod and place my hand on his knee. “And what do you fight for?”

“My club, Savage Steel, and you.”

He says it like it’s nothing. Like it’s the most obvious answer there is.

He’s fighting for me, and I realize it’s time I do the same.

Fight for me.

Fight for him.

Fight for what makes me happy.

And just like that, he makes it a little easier to believe I’m not just surviving anymore.

That I’m finally learning how to live.

Torrent

The night stretches around us like a blanket, warm, quiet, and safe.

The food's long gone, forgotten as soon as our plates were pushed aside. Now we're on the couch, the lights low, the soft hum of music playing in the background. It feels like the rest of the world faded out hours ago, and all that's left is us.

She's curled up at one end of the couch, her sundress draped across her thighs like something out of a dream.

She's laughing, light and unguarded, and the sound goes straight to my chest. That kind of laugh doesn't come easily for someone like her.

I can tell. It's taken a lot for her to let her walls drop like this, even if it's only halfway.

And fuck, she's beautiful.

"Give me those sexy legs," I murmur, tapping my thigh.

She raises an eyebrow. "So bossy," she says with a smirk.

"Always."

She rolls her eyes but swings her legs up and lays them across my lap. I rest my hand on her shin, then let my fingers drift up, kneading gently at her calves. Her skin is

soft, and the way she lets out a small sigh when I hit a tender spot makes me grin.

“You always like being in charge?” she asks, trying to sound casual, but there’s curiosity beneath it.

I nod, fingers still moving in slow circles along her leg. “Only when it matters.”

“And this?” she asks softly.

“This matters,” I say without hesitation. “You matter.”

Her breath hitches, and I can feel the shift in the air, thicker now, charged.

I let my touch linger a little longer before sliding my hand behind her knee, lifting her gently. “Come here,” I say again, this time my voice deeper, rougher.

She moves without a word, climbing into my lap, her knees on either side of my hips, her hands on my chest. I hold her waist, pulling her closer until there’s no space left between us.

And then I’m sinking my fingers into her hair, threading through those soft strands like I’ve been aching to all night. Her lips part slightly, her breath brushing against mine, and for a moment, all I can do is stare at her.

She’s undone me in the quietest way.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” I whisper, brushing my thumb across her cheek. “You don’t even know what you do to me.”

Her hands slide up to my shoulders, anchoring there, her eyes locked on mine. She’s trying to play it cool, but I can see the heat in her, the want.

“I’ve wanted you from the second I saw you,” I admit, my voice barely above a breath. “Every time you look at me like you’re not sure if you should run or stay, all I want is to make you feel safe enough to stay. To choose me.”

She exhales, her breath shaky, and I keep going.

“I crave you, Tessa. Not just your body. Though fuck, I want that too. But all of you. The fire, the fear, the pieces you try to keep hidden. I want every part.”

Her eyes glisten with something that hits me square in the chest. Vulnerability. Trust. And need.

She leans in slowly, her forehead touching mine. “I don’t know how to be what you need,” she whispers.

I tighten my hold on her waist, my other hand still buried in her hair. “You already are.”

And then I kiss her, deep and slow, like I have all the time in the world. Like, I never want this moment to end. Her mouth opens for me, soft and eager, and I feel the way her body presses into mine, needing, aching.

My hands roam down her back, gripping her hips as I pull her tighter against me.

She lets out the smallest moan of desperation laced with heat, and it lights a fire low in my gut.

Her fingers tangle in my shirt, nails biting into my skin, and I’m so far gone I don’t even know where I end and she begins.

This isn’t just lust.

It's something bigger.

Something neither of us can outrun anymore.

Something we need to run toward.

I've spent the last few years of my life running from the pain, from the ghosts I couldn't silence, from the wreckage of a life I never thought I'd walk away from.

But now, sitting here with Tessa straddling my lap, her heart beating against mine, her breath mingling with mine, I realize something I never expected. I'm done running away.

It's time to run toward something.

And that something is her.

I break the kiss, needing a second to breathe, to steady myself, to take her in. Her forehead rests against mine, our breaths ragged and syncing slowly. I can still taste her on my lips, feel the fire of her touch in every corner of my body.

But what's burning the hottest isn't lust. It's the need for truth. For something real.

"I need to know how you feel, Tessa." My voice is rough, raw from holding back. My fingers tighten around her hips, grounding both of us. "I need to know if you want this as badly as I do. If you're willing to let me in."

Her eyes flicker, a storm of emotion swirling in them. Her hands move to my shoulders, trembling slightly, and it kills me to see how hard this is for her. But I wait. I need to hear her say it.

She lets out a shaky breath, and her voice is small but steady. “I’m scared, Torrent. I’m scared of how I feel, of what I want, of the uncertainties. I haven’t let someone in, or even close to it, in so long, I don’t know if I can.”

I open my mouth to respond, to tell her she doesn’t have to be afraid, not with me, but she presses her finger to my lips.

“You can’t always be in charge,” she says, her voice soft but firm. “Let me finish.”

A grin pulls at my mouth against her fingertip, and I press a gentle kiss to it.

“Thank you,” she whispers, and for the first time, there’s a glimmer of humor in her voice. A thread of hope.

I nod, letting her keep going, my heart pounding in anticipation.

“I like having control over my life,” she says, her voice more confident now. “The thought of giving that up? It terrifies me. I’ve spent so long building a safe space. Guarded, quiet, just mine. Letting someone in feels like setting fire to all of that.”

She pauses, then leans in and presses the softest kiss to my lips. It’s not heated, not desperate, it’s tender. A surrender.

“But what scares me more...” she continues, her eyes holding mine, “...is losing you. You’re not just someone that I’m attracted to.

Not just someone who makes my body burn with need.

” Her voice wavers, her fingers curling slightly on my chest. “You’re the only friend I have.

The only person who's seen me and hasn't run.

So yes, Torrent, I do want this as much as you do.

Maybe even more. As terrifying as it is for me, I can't fight it anymore.

I can't keep pushing down what I'm feeling. ”

Her confession hits me like a punch to the chest, hard, breath-stealing, real.

For a moment, I can't speak. Can't move. My chest tightens with something I haven't let myself feel in a long damn time, hope. Real, soul-deep, shaking hope.

I reach up, cupping her face with both hands, thumbs stroking the soft skin beneath her eyes. “You don't have to give up control, baby. You're not losing anything. If anything, you're gaining someone who will fight like hell to make sure you never feel alone again.”

She blinks, tears threatening, as I search her eyes. “We'll go slow, okay? One step at a time. You set the pace.”

“And if I run?” she whispers.

“Then I'll run with you. Just don't run away from me.”

That makes her smile, small, but honest. She leans in, brushing her lips against mine in a kiss that says thank you, I'm scared, and I want you, all in one.

And as she settles against me, her arms wrapped around my neck, her body molded to mine like it's where she belongs.

I know one thing with absolute certainty.

This isn't just the start of something.

This is the beginning of everything.

I watch as the sun begins to rise through the sliding doors of my living room, streaks of orange and pink filtering in across the floor and casting a glow on the woman sleeping in my arms.

Last night didn't go the way I expected, not even close.

I didn't think we'd end up curled up on the couch, fully clothed, just talking until her eyes drifted closed mid-sentence. I didn't think I'd stay awake, holding her, staring at her, listening to the slow rhythm of her breathing like it was the most important sound in the world.

I sure as hell didn't think I'd feel something this strong after one night with her.

One night of just sleeping together and nothing else.

But here I am.

She talked about being scared, about not wanting to lose control, and fuck if that didn't just make me want her more.

She let me in last night, and I know how hard that was for her.

It wasn't just her words; it was the look in her eyes.

The shake in her voice. The way she gripped me like I was her anchor and her risk,

all at once.

I want her more than I've wanted anything in years. I don't want to push her, though. Even if my dick is throwing a goddamn tantrum about it. I want her to feel safe, to know that I'll wait as long as it takes for her to be ready.

She deserves that.

But then she stirs softly and slowly against me, and everything tilts.

Her hand slides across my chest as she stretches, her cheek pressing against my pec, and then she looks up at me with sleep-heavy eyes and that mouth that drives me fucking insane.

"Morning," I say, my voice gravelly from the hours I spent awake, thinking about her.

She doesn't answer. Not with words.

Instead, she shifts and moves to straddle me without hesitation. The hem of her sundress hiking up her thighs as she settles onto my lap, waking every part of me in an instant.

"Tessa," I murmur, unsure if this is just sleepy confusion or if she knows exactly what she's doing.

Her lips find mine before I can say anything else, hot and hungry, her hands diving into my hair as she kisses me like she's been waiting her whole damn life to do it.

My hands fly to her hips, holding her steady, and I break the kiss just long enough to breathe, to think.

“Baby, we don’t have to do this. There’s no rush,” I say, my eyes bouncing between hers, my chest rising hard with restraint.

But she shakes her head, her grip on me tightening. “There is for me. I need to feel this. You. I need to know what it’s like to let someone in completely.” She bites her lip, her eyes searching mine. “I need you, Torrent. No more fear. No more waiting.”

Her words hit me like a damn freight train. My self-control is already hanging by a thread, and she just torched it.

The way she moves against me, the heat in her eyes, the way her voice trembles with need, it’s all I can take.

“I’ve got you,” I whisper roughly, dragging her mouth back to mine. “You want this? Then I’m going to give you everything.”

When I lay her down in my bed, it won’t be about claiming or conquering.

It’ll be about connection.

It’ll be about showing her, through every touch, every moan, every shudder of pleasure, that she’s safe.

That she’s wanted.

That she’s mine.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Tessa

I search his eyes, and it nearly knocks the breath from my lungs because in them, I see everything. Honesty. Vulnerability. That quiet kind of strength I've only ever dreamed about. And something else, something I never thought I'd see reflected back at me.

Love?

No. Not yet. That would be too fast.

But whatever it is, it's real. It's raw. It's mine.

And I'm overwhelmed.

Overwhelmed with emotion, I don't know how to name, with feelings I never believed I'd be allowed to have. Not me. Not with my past. Not with the damage I've carried like armor for so long.

But Torrent, he's different. He makes me feel wanted, adored, cherished, safe.

Like maybe I deserve this.

Those are things I've never had, not like this. And I'm not sure I know how to accept them. But last night something changed. Listening to him open up to me, watching the way he let down his guard without expecting anything in return, it cracked something wide open in me.

The walls I've spent years building to protect myself, they're starting to fall. Not with an explosion, but slowly, brick by brick, just from the way he sees me.

I've always told myself I was good at reading people. That I could spot a lie in the eyes of a stranger. But when it comes to Torrent, there's nothing to read because he lays it all out for me. No mask. No front. Just the truth.

And that truth flipped something in me I didn't even know was still alive.

He told me there's no rush. That he'll move at my pace. That he'll wait for me to be ready. And God, I adore him for that. I've never felt so valued, so respected, like my wants and needs actually mattered.

But just because I've finally admitted my feelings, just because the fear is fading and something warmer is taking its place, doesn't mean the need has faded too.

If anything, it's stronger. Hotter. More dangerous.

I've spent months fantasizing about what it would be like to be with him. To feel his hands on me. To hear that gravel in his voice when he whispers dirty things. The way his body would fit against mine, how I'd melt into him, completely, willingly.

And now, he's right here. Holding me. Looking at me like I'm the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

I'm done hiding. Done pretending I don't want this.

I want him. Every piece of him.

More than I want my next breath.

I press my lips to his, slow but sure, and feel him respond instantly, like his restraint is hanging by a single fraying thread. I shift closer, my hands curling around the back of his neck, and when I pull away just far enough to speak, my voice is barely a whisper.

“I don’t want slow,” I say. “I want you.”

His breath stutters, his fingers flexing on my hips, but he still hesitates.

“Tessa...”

I shake my head, not giving him a chance to talk me out of it. “Please. Let me feel this. Let me feel you. I need it. I need you.”

His mouth is on mine in an instant, and this time, there’s no hesitation. No holding back. It’s fire, wild and consuming, and I want to be burned by it.

Torrent kisses like a man who's waited a lifetime. Like every second he’s been close to me has been a test of will, and now that he’s been given permission, he’s unraveling. And I’m unraveling right along with him.

His hands grip my hips tightly, pulling me deeper into his lap until I can feel every hard inch of him beneath me. I gasp against his mouth, and he swallows it like it fuels him.

“You drive me crazy,” he mutters against my lips, his voice rough and low, sending a tremor straight through me. “You’ve been in my head since the second I saw you, and now you’re in my arms and I’m not letting go.”

“I don’t want you to.” My voice is shaky, breathless, needy. “Please don’t stop.”

He doesn't.

His hands slide up my thighs, under the hem of my dress, and the way he touches me, like I'm fragile and invincible all at once, makes my heart ache and my body pulse.

My hips push forward when his fingers slowly drag across my panties. I let out a soft moan while he growls against my neck.

His lips crash to mine again, deeper this time. More possessive. His tongue tangles with mine as he stands, holding me against him like I weigh nothing. I wrap my legs around his waist, clinging to him, loving the way his muscles flex beneath me with every step.

He takes me down the hallway, into his bedroom, and lays me back gently on the bed. But his body doesn't follow right away. Instead, he hovers above me, eyes tracing every inch like he's memorizing me.

"You're so beautiful," he says, voice thick with emotion. "I need you to know that. I need you to feel it."

I swallow hard, chest tight, because I do. I feel everything.

"Show me," I whisper.

His eyes darken as a small grin hits his lips. That look that tells me he's about give me more than I ever imagined, and I can't wait.

He peels my dress off slowly, eyes never leaving mine. He takes a moment to let his eyes wander over me, my bra and panties the only thing keeping me from being completely exposed. Yet, I already feel exposed.

And it doesn't scare it, it only makes me want more.

"You take my fucking breath away, Tessa," he whispers, moving his body closer.

The way he talks to me, so honest and pure, has my heart hammering against my chest. He reaches around and unclasps my bra, pulling it down my arms. Before I have time to even think about it, he's ripping my panties off and tossing them behind him.

"Fuck, I've never seen anything sexier in my life." He leans forward and wraps his lips around my hard nipple.

"Oh yes!" My body arches, wanting more. Needing more.

He moves to my other breast, sucking, biting, licking. My body is burning, the flames being fanned with each touch.

He pulls back and stares down at me. His eyes are dark with want, and it's incredibly hot. There's just one thing I need to do.

"Your clothes need to come off. I need to appreciate you too," I whisper, running my hands down his solid chest.

I grab the bottom of his shirt and pull it up until I can't reach and he takes over.

He yanks his shirt off, and I'm frozen. His body is carved with the kind of strength that makes heads turn.

Broad shoulders that taper down to a lean, defined waist, every muscle etched like stone.

Black ink flows over his chest and arms in bold, intricate designs that move with him.

Each tattoo tells a story that I want to read more about.

Veins trace down his forearms, highlighting the raw power in every subtle flex.

His abs are sharply cut, a perfect rhythm of muscle that leads the eye lower.

I lift my gaze to his and notice he is just watching me, taking him in.

“Damn, Torrent.” My voice is barely a whisper as my fingers reach out, touching the sheer perfection in front of me.

My fingers trace the hills and valleys of his body and the ink that is uniquely him. As they move down, they hook into his jeans, and I look up at him.

“Take them off,” he says, his voice rough like he’s trying to hold himself together.

I don’t hesitate. I quickly unbutton his jeans, pulling the zipper down. He does in fact help me and pulls them off, along with his boxers.

We are both now completely exposed to each other and I’ve never been more turned on in my life.

My eyes roam down his body and his hard cock makes my eyes widen.

“Yes, I’m pierced. Don’t let it scare you. It’s as much for me as it is for you.”

I peek up at his face and feel the blush crawl up my neck. “I’m not scared. I’ve just never been with someone who had a piercing. It just shocked me.” I rest my hands on his thighs and smile. “In a good way.”

“Fuck,” he growls moving on top of me. His warm body touches me, and it sends my body into overdrive.

He kisses down my body, worshipping every inch, his hands everywhere at once, my breasts, my hips, the insides of my thighs. My body arches toward him, desperate for more, and when his mouth finally finds my pussy, I cry out, fingers tangling in his hair.

“Fuck yes,” I moan.

He takes his time. Drives me wild. His tongue moves against me at a speed I’ve never experienced. It’s practiced and precise. It’s fucking everything. I’m holding tightly to his hair, begging without words for him not to stop.

His warm breath blows over me and I shudder, rubbing my pussy against him. “Torrent, it feels so good.”

I feel him grin before he moves his talented mouth to my clit. He wraps his lips around it, sucking on it as his fingers slam inside me.

“Fuck!” I cry out, pushing against him. Needing to feel more.

He never slows down. His fingers fuck me as his tongue lashes against my clit. He’s relentless, pulling me closer to my release with every touch.

His fingers curl inside me, hitting the spot that has me seeing stars. It’s too much and not enough. He licks at my clit with a punishing speed, and I feel myself beginning to fall.

“I’m so close,” I shout, pulling his hair harder.

Somehow, he picks up his pace, and I can't fight it. I explode, lifting off my bed like a woman possessed. "Fuck, Torrent!"

He's breaking me open and putting me back together with nothing more than his mouth and his hands, giving me the most intense orgasm of my life.

Once I begin to settle, he places small kisses against my pussy and slowly moves up my body, kissing every inch of me along the way.

By the time he moves over me, I'm trembling. Excitement, nerves, and want all wrapped in one.

His dark eyes are full of heat, and it makes my already hard nipples, harder.

"You're now my favorite taste in the world, baby.

" I feel myself blushing as he presses his wet lips to mine, allowing me to taste myself.

"Listening to you, feeling you, tasting you, has become my new obsession. I'll crave it every day.

" I bite my lip, and he places a soft kiss next to my mouth before continuing.

"But, Tessa, once I push inside you, that's it. You're mine. There's no going back. Once I claim you, I won't let you go."

There's no hesitation as I press a soft kiss to his lips. "I don't want you to let go, Torrent. Take me, please."

His fingers sink into my hair as he stares into my eyes. "Tessa," he whispers, pressing

his forehead to mine, “you feel like mine already.”

“I am,” I breathe. “I’ve been yours. I just didn’t want to admit it.”

He keeps his eyes locked on mine as he slides inside me with one deep, slow thrust.

I’m trembling. Floating. Home.

I cling to him, burying my face in his neck, breathing him in as we move together, finding a rhythm that feels more like fate than timing. His body fits mine perfectly, like we were made for this, for each other.

“Fuck, Tessa, your pussy is my heaven.”

My nails dig into his back as his pace picks up. He’s driving into me hard and fast, and I’ve never wanted something more in my life.

I can’t stop the cries of pleasure and moans of ecstasy. It just fuels him as he groans and continues his pounding assault.

His piercing is hitting the spot that has my body shaking. He was right, it’s just as much for me. It makes me feel things I didn’t think were possible.

“Oh Tessa, fuck, you’re everything. The way your wet, tight pussy is squeezing me is fucking magic.”

Our moans echo off the walls as we both give in to feelings that are both physical and emotional.

“I’m so close. I’m not going to last,” I cry out.

“Don’t fight it. Give yourself to me, Tessa. All of you.”

His words are too much. They push me over the edge, and I fall, hard.

“I’ve got you,” he murmurs, over and over, his lips brushing my ear, my jaw, my mouth. “I’ve got you.”

And he does.

He has every piece of me.

Mind. Body. Soul.

And for the first time in my life, I don’t want it back.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Torrent

“Drift, that shipment is coming in tomorrow. We need to make sure we’re ready. No fucking mistakes.”

I drop into the chair at the head of the table, the worn leather molding to me like it was built for this weight, my weight. I lean back, arms crossed, my mind already racing through contingency plans.

Drift doesn’t flinch. “Nothing to worry about. Finch, Crab, and Riptide have it handled. They’re grabbing the shipment and bringing it back to Savage Steel.

Gideon will load everything into the second van and take the wheel.

Crab, Ganges, and Cetus will ride front and tail to the drop. It’s covered, Prez. Don’t stress.”

The title used to feel heavy. Now it’s second skin. Having Drift as my VP was one of the easiest decisions I’ve made since founding this chapter. He’s sharp, loyal, and thinks five steps ahead. The club’s pulse is strong with him watching our back.

“Good.” I nod once. “How are the custom guns coming?”

“Again, nothing to worry about.” He leans back, arms wide, like he’s lounging in his own living room. “Everything’s right on track.”

He shifts in his seat to face me, one brow cocked like he’s got something brewing.

“So, you gonna tell me what’s going on?”

My gaze narrows. “What do you mean?”

He tilts his head like I’ve lost my damn mind. “With you and Tessa.”

Just her name in the air sends a fucking ripple through my chest.

My mind flashes back to last night. Her body trembling under mine, the soft way she whispered my name, the way she kissed me like I was salvation and sin rolled into one.

I’ve been with women. Slept with more than I should’ve. I’ve been in love before. But nothing, nothing, compares to what it felt like to be with her. There’s a fire behind her sweetness, a quiet strength that calls to something in me I thought had died with my past.

I shake my head slowly, a grin tugging at my mouth. “Nope. That’s none of your fucking business.”

Drift lets out a laugh as he pulls a cigarette from his pack, offering one to me. I take it, light up, and let the nicotine drag some of the tension out of my spine. But it doesn’t settle the thoughts.

“She’s everything I hoped she’d be,” I say after a long breath, my voice quieter now. “And nothing I expected. She’s under my skin, man.”

Drift watches me like he already knew that. Maybe he did. I’m not exactly subtle.

“I’ve never felt like this before,” I admit, letting the words fall. “And that’s saying a lot.”

Drift nods, blowing smoke toward the ceiling. “You deserve it, Torrent. You’ve walked through the flames of hell. It’s about time you got a taste of something good. She fits in, too. Everyone liked her at the party. She held her own. She’d make a solid ol’ lady.”

The laugh escapes me before I can stop it. “Yeah, she would.” I rest my cigarette in the ashtray beside me. “But I’ve got to ease her into this life. She’s tough, I’ve seen that. She can handle it. But she needs to believe she can. I’m not throwing her into the deep end before she’s ready.”

“She got any friends?”

I snort. “Not that I know of. I’ll keep my eyes peeled, though.”

We both laugh, but there’s truth behind the words. I’d give this woman the world if I could. And if that includes finding her a tribe of her own in this place, then I’ll make it happen.

The door creaks open, and we both glance up as Finch strolls in like he’s in charge. He throws himself into a chair and kicks his boots onto the table.

“What are you ladies talking about?” he asks with a grin.

I narrow my eyes and shove his boots off the table. “If I still wanna keep you as SAA.”

He bolts upright like I just threatened to skin him. “Shit, what’d I do?”

“You’re an idiot,” I mutter, but there’s no heat behind it. “What’s up?”

“I just finished that custom Glock,” he says, eyes gleaming with pride. “Thing came

out badass. Was gonna lock it in the safe when I saw the Hellcat still sittin' there. Thought you were giving that to Tessa?"

"I am." I flick ash into the tray and take one last pull. "It's staying safe for now."

Because the time needs to be right.

Because Tessa's not just some woman I'm fucking. I'm claiming her. And when I hand her that gun, it won't just be for protection.

It'll be a vow.

One I intend to keep.

I stub out the last of my cigarette, letting the silence settle for just a beat before I speak.

"Alright, enough of this love life shit. Go keep eyes on the shop. I want someone on-site and someone in the back watching the cameras at all times. I don't like how quiet things have been lately."

Drift nods without question, already rising. "On it."

Finch doesn't argue either, for once, and just says, "You got it, Prez," as he grabs his keys and heads out with Drift.

I pull my phone from my pocket and shoot off a quick text.

Me: Picking you up after work. Don't make me wait, pretty girl.

The reply comes seconds later.

Tessa: You miss me that bad already?

I grin to myself, thumb flying.

Me: You have no idea.

Tessa: ;) Can't wait.

It makes something shift in my chest. Something warm and fucking real.

Hours pass, filled with the usual chaos. Checking inventory, finalizing drop logistics, signing off on work orders. But my mind keeps drifting back to her. I can still hear her laugh in my ears. Still feel the way her hands clutched at my back like I was the only thing tethering her to the earth.

By the time I'm parked out front of her job, my knee is bouncing with energy.

She walks out, spotting my bike before her eyes land on me. The smile she gives me makes it all worth it. Every second. Every scar. Every battle I've fought, just to still be standing.

"Hey, handsome," she says as she slides onto the back of the bike, wrapping her arms around me.

I don't say anything, just reach back, squeeze her thigh, and pull into traffic.

But I don't take her home.

We ride through the darkened streets until Savage Steel comes into view, glowing like a beacon in the dusk. I feel her tense slightly behind me, but she doesn't question it. She just holds on tighter.

We pull up, and I cut the engine. She hops off and looks around, brows raised.

“We're at Savage Steel?”

I nod, resting my hand low on her back as I lead her inside.

“Wanted to bring you somewhere important.”

We walk around back, and I take her into a door she hasn't been before, the door to our clubhouse. As soon as we walk in, the sound of laughter greets us. The guys are in the lounge area. Drift with a beer in hand, Finch arm-wrestling Crab, Cetus watching and talking shit.

“Your clubhouse,” she whispers, looking around.

“Tessa!” Drift calls out, standing to give her a one-armed hug. “Look at you, showing up all pretty and shit. We were starting to think Torrent was keeping you all to himself.”

She laughs, as her cheeks turn pink. “He's so damn bossy.”

“Oh, she's the reason for your good mood,” Finch mutters, giving me a wink as he grabs another beer from the fridge and offers it to her.

“Damn good to see you again,” Cetus adds. “You made the last party feel like less of a sausage fest.”

Tessa snorts, settling onto the couch like she's been there a hundred times. They talk to her like she's one of us, like she belongs. I stand back for a moment, watching the scene unfold.

The way she jokes with them, the way they respect her without trying too hard, the way her eyes flick toward me every few seconds like she's making sure I'm still close. It hits me deep in the chest.

She's it.

And this? This is ours.

After a while, I lean down and murmur in her ear, "Come with me."

She follows without question, and I take her through the door that leads to the back room where the guns are worked on. I go to the safe and punch in the code, the metallic click loud in the quiet room.

I open the door, reach in, and pull out the matte black Hellcat.

Tessa's eyes widen slightly. "You're trying this again?"

I nod, stepping closer, curling her fingers gently around the grip. "I told you this was yours. I meant that."

She looks down at it, then up at me with a small, serious smile. "It's not that I didn't want it before, I just wasn't sure what it meant."

I close the safe and face her fully, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"It means I trust you. That I want you protected. That I see you walking beside me, not behind."

She breathes out, the weight of the moment settling over her.

“When do you want to learn to shoot?”

She looks at the gun in her hand, then meets my eyes with that familiar fire.

“Tomorrow.”

I grin, full and unguarded. “Good girl.”

The next morning comes fast, and by the time the sun crests over the edge of the city, I’m already loading up the black duffel with everything we’ll need. The Hellcat, ammo, ear protection, and targets.

Tessa walks in just as I zip it closed, wearing those tight jeans and a fitted tee that makes my jaw clench. She has no idea what she does to me.

“You ready, baby?” I ask, giving her a once-over that lingers far too long on the curve of her hips.

She bites her bottom lip and nods, clearly trying to look confident. But I see the nerves behind her eyes. Not fear. Not of me. But of the weapon. Of what it represents.

I reach for her hand and tug her closer, pressing my mouth to her forehead. “This is about control, Tessa. You hold the gun, not the other way around. I’ll be with you every step.”

She exhales slowly, leaning into my chest. “Then I’m ready.”

Fifteen minutes later, we’re at the private range out behind Savage Steel’s compound. It’s just us, no distractions, no spectators. The shooting lanes are well-maintained, the silence broken only by the occasional chirp of birds and the creak of old wood settling.

I set up the target and hand her a pair of protective glasses. When I turn to hand her the ear protection, my fingers graze the side of her neck. She sucks in a breath, her eyes darting to mine.

But I keep it together. Barely.

“Put these on,” I say, my voice already thick with something heavier than instruction.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

She does as I say, waiting for more.

“Now,” I continue, stepping behind her and wrapping my arms around her waist, “this is where it gets interesting.”

I slide the Hellcat into her hands, guiding her grip, positioning her fingers.

“You want it snug. Tight enough that recoil doesn’t knock you off balance. Keep your arms slightly bent.”

My chest is pressed to her back, my mouth hovering near her ear. I feel her breath hitch when I touch her hips, shifting them just enough to square her stance.

She murmurs something I can’t hear over the muffs, but I don’t need to. Her body is saying plenty.

“You feel that?”

She nods.

“Now breathe.”

Her chest rises and falls. I step even closer, hands ghosting over her shoulders and down her arms as I adjust her aim.

She pulls the trigger.

The shot rings out, hitting the edge of the target.

“Not bad,” I murmur. “But I think we can do better.”

I guide her again, this time slower. Her ass presses back into my hips, and my control starts to unravel.

“I’m not sure this is strictly about shooting anymore,” she says, just loud enough for me to hear.

I chuckle, lowering her gun hand slowly and turning her to face me. “It was never just about shooting.”

Her eyes search mine, all fire and challenge. “Then what are you waiting for?”

I grab her face and kiss her, rough and hungry, tasting the adrenaline on her lips. The gun hangs loose at her side, and I gently take it from her, setting it down on the bench behind us.

She’s in my arms in seconds, fingers in my hair, body arching against mine like she’s begging to be consumed.

“Fuck, Tessa,” I growl, pushing her back against the wall of the booth, my hand sliding up under her shirt, fingers teasing the edge of her bra.

She kisses me harder, gasping when my hand cups her breast. “This was your plan all along, wasn’t it?”

“Plan was to teach you,” I say, voice low and thick. “Didn’t plan on losing my mind every time you touch me.”

“Good,” she whispers. “Because I want to make you lose it again.”

She pulls me closer, grinding against me with a slow roll of her hips.

I groan as my forehead presses to hers. “We can’t fuck in the range, baby.”

She smirks, breathless and flushed. “Who said anything about fucking?”

She drops to her knees in front of me and I grab her hair, pulling her head to look at me.

“You think this is any better?”

A grin hits her full lips as she quickly unbuttons my jeans and pushes them just past my hips.

“You’ve had your taste. Now it’s my turn.”

My hard dick jets out in front of her and she wets her lips.

“Oh, fuck it. If anyone walks in, they get a goddamn show,” I hiss, tightening my hold on her hair as I guide her toward my dick.

Her hands rest on my thighs as she wraps her lips around my dick.

“Fuck!” My body shudders as her warm mouth takes me in.

There’s no hesitation, no taking her time. She sucks my dick like it’s her fucking job and fuck, she’s good at it.

Her head bobs as she takes me to the back of her throat before moving back until I’m

almost completely out of her mouth before taking me back in. She uses her tongue and teeth, causing me to shake as I try to keep myself steady.

“Tessa, don’t stop. I’m going to fuck your mouth, keep doing what you’re doing. I’m not going to last long,” I hiss, taking over.

I pump my hips over and over, fucking her mouth like it was her pussy. The heat, the tightening of her lips, the scraping of her teeth, it’s got my eyes rolling back.

“That’s right, baby, take me all the way in. Fuck, it feels so good.”

Her hand reaches under, and she cups my balls in her hand.

I pull her hair tight and groan loudly, surely drawing the attention of anyone close.

But right now, anyone could walk in, and there’s no way I’d be able to stop.

I’m so close to coming that if she pointed that Hellcat at me, I wouldn’t be able to stop.

My head drops back as she squeezes my balls and drags her teeth the length of me. Her tongue swirls around my piercing, causing me to moan.

“I’m not going to last, Tessa. I’m so fucking close to losing it.”

My voice is rough and thick with sexual emotion. I thrust my hips, and she hums against it, sending me right over the edge.

“Oh fuck, Tessa, take it all. Fuck, take it all,” I shout, exploding in her mouth.

She takes every last drop I have to give, drinking me down and moaning as she does.

I don't know if she realizes how incredibly hot that is, but damn, I could come again just listening to her.

Once I finish, she slowly pulls back until her hot mouth pulls off me and looks up at me. She licks her lips and grins.

"So good," she says.

I grab her under her arms and lift her, crashing my lips to hers. A soft moan escapes her, and I swallow it down, loving how she reacts to any way I touch her.

We're breathless when I break the kiss and rest my forehead on hers.

"That was fucking epic, baby."

"Yeah, and kinda exciting with the thought of being caught."

I raise my eyebrow and pull back slightly. "You like that? The idea of being caught?"

She shrugs and steps back slightly. I tuck myself away, keeping my eyes on hers.

"Never thought about it. It did add a sense of fear and excitement, though."

I pull her into her arms, resting my hands on my ass. "I'll show you excitement, baby."

"You already have," she whispers.

I kiss her quickly, grab the gun, and stuff it in the duffel. I haul her over my shoulder with a growl that makes her laugh and squeal all at once.

“Lesson’s over. Time to get something to eat.”

This lesson might be over, but something tells me we’re just getting started.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Tessa

Another Friday night at Savage Steel.

It's become part of my routine now, something I look forward to all week. Not just because of the music, the drinks, or the excuse to dress up a little, but because it feels like home. Like family.

This is the sixth party I've been to, and each one feels more natural than the last. Torrent and I have been together for almost two months already, though it somehow feels like both no time at all and a lifetime.

I still get butterflies when he walks into the diner, all commanding presence and lethal charm. I still crave his touch like an addiction I never want to quit. My heart still races every time his eyes lock with mine across a crowded room, like I'm the only one he sees.

These last two months? They've been the happiest of my life.

I feel safe with him, and for someone like me, who's spent most of her life looking over her shoulder, that feeling is rare. Sacred.

A loud burst of laughter snaps me out of my thoughts.

I glance around and smile. The guys are loud, wild, and borderline inappropriate most of the time, but they're good.

Loyal. And they've welcomed me with open arms. I get it now, what they mean when they say this club is family.

It's more than a patch on their back or the parties. It's a bond.

I dance, drink, joke with the guys, completely at ease in a world I never thought I'd belong to.

"Tessa!" Finch calls out, weaving through the crowd with a girl trailing behind him. "Come here. I want you to meet someone."

He stops in front of me, practically beaming. "This is my best friend, Emerson."

"So nice to finally meet you," she says with a warm smile as she pulls me into a quick hug. "And please, call me Em."

"It's nice to meet you, too," I reply, eyes darting between her and Finch. "Finch, why haven't I met your best friend before?"

Em lets out a laugh and smacks his chest. "Because I just moved here."

"From where?"

"Georgia. Born and raised. First time away from home. It was time for a change, and Finch, being the softie he is, offered to let me crash with him until I get settled."

Finch grins down at her, and something about his expression makes my chest tighten a little. I've never seen him look at someone like that before. There's something more in his eyes. Something real.

"That's really sweet of you, Finch," I say.

He shrugs and tosses me a wink. "I'm a sweet guy. People forget that."

Em rolls her eyes and then looks back at me. "So, you're Torrent's girl?"

The words make me smile. Torrent's girl. I'll never get tired of hearing it. Never stop feeling proud of it.

"Yeah," I say, a little breathlessly. "I am."

"I met him once. He seems like a great guy." She pauses, curious. "How'd you two meet? Have you always been part of the club?"

My eyes drop without meaning to, a familiar reflex. "No. God, no. I'm a waitress at a diner. That's where we met."

She lets out a soft, surprised laugh. "Stepping into this world must've been a shock to your system."

"Yeah," I lie.

It wasn't. Not really. If anything, it was like slipping into something I'd known once but had long forgotten. Something dangerous and chaotic that felt like home.

She studies me for a beat and then smiles again. "Listen, I love Finch, but I could really use a girlfriend. If you ever want to hang out. You know, coffee, shopping, just not talking about bikes and guns for an hour, I'd love that."

I blink, then nod quickly. "Yeah, I'd like that too."

Maybe it's silly, but the thought of having a real friend, one who doesn't come with conditions or secrets, is a big deal to me. Bigger than she probably realizes.

We exchange numbers, and just as I slip my phone back into my pocket, a voice rumbles behind me.

“There’s my girl.”

I turn as Torrent slides an arm around my waist, pulling me close to his chest. That familiar heat floods my body like it always does when he touches me.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he says, eyes roaming my face like I’m the only thing that matters.

“I’ve been right here,” I reply with a smile.

Finch clears his throat with a smirk. “Hey, Prez. You remember Em?”

Torrent’s eyes flick to her and soften. “Oh yeah. What are you doing here?”

“Needed a change,” she says simply.

Torrent looks down at me, his hand tightening on my hip, his voice low and meaningful. “I understand that.”

And I know he does. Better than most.

In this moment with his arm around me, surrounded by laughter, music, and new beginnings, I feel it in my bones.

I belong here.

With him.

Girls' night.

The words still feel strange in my head, like they belong to someone else. Not me. Not the girl who's spent most of her life keeping people at arm's length. Not the girl who used to count silence as comfort.

But here I am, sitting across from Emerson in a cozy corner booth at a loud, neon-lit bar downtown, sipping on my second fruity cocktail, and actually laughing. Like real, chest-deep, belly-warming laughter that I didn't know I was capable of.

"Okay, but you didn't answer the question," Em says, leaning in and narrowing her eyes at me over the rim of her drink. "When Torrent stepped into the diner that first time, did he just ooze biker bad-boy energy or was it more like a slow burn?"

I giggle. "Oh, it was full-on smolder. He walked in like he owned the damn place, all tattoos and shadows. Didn't say much at first, just watched me. Eyes tracking every move I made."

Em fans herself dramatically. "Damn. I'd have tripped and spilled coffee everywhere."

"Almost did," I admit, grinning into my glass. "I was rattled. But curious. He didn't flirt like other guys do. He stared, like he already knew something I didn't."

She raises a brow. "And now?"

I bite my lip, cheeks heating at the flood of thoughts rushing through me. "Now he touches me like I'm a prayer he's desperate to say out loud."

Em lets out a soft, dreamy sigh, sinking back into the booth. "Girl, that is poetry. I need to find myself a biker."

“You’ve got Finch,” I tease.

That gets me an eye roll. “Finch is complicated. He’s a mess with dimples and too many leather jackets. I’ve known him forever, so hooking up would probably be like kissing my brother.”

“But you’ve thought about it.”

“I plead the fifth,” she says, holding up her hands with a laugh. “Besides, this night is about you and me, not our overly hot, emotionally repressed men.”

“Fair,” I say, clinking my glass to hers.

We settle into an easy rhythm, gossiping, venting about work, trading childhood horror stories, and dissecting every guy in the bar that dares glance our way. It’s light and warm, a kind of comfort I forgot existed. For once, I’m not looking over my shoulder. I’m not worrying about what comes next.

I’m just here. With a friend. Laughing. Living.

Halfway through the night, Em grabs her phone and snaps a picture of us. Two girls, flushed from cocktails and the comfort of each other’s company, smiling wide and real. She types something before texting it to me with a smug grin.

I glance down.

Emerson: We’re officially best friends now. No takebacks. Love you, bitch.

I laugh, heart swelling. I type back one word.

Me: Deal.

When we step outside later, the night air is cool against my flushed skin. I wrap my arms around myself, but before I can even think about how I'm getting home, I spot him.

Leaning against his bike, arms crossed, that unreadable expression on his face until his eyes land on me. Then, he softens. Always for me.

I jog up to him, throwing my arms around his neck. "Hey, stranger."

His arms cage around my waist, and he leans in to kiss my temple. "You have fun?"

"I did," I whisper against his throat, breathing him in. "Thanks for letting me go."

"You never have to thank me for having a life outside of me." He pulls back, eyes searching mine. "But I'm glad you came back to me."

I smile, tucking myself against his side. And as Em calls out a drunken goodbye from the sidewalk, I realize something that makes my heart skip.

This isn't just happiness.

This is belonging.

The ride back to his house is quiet. Not awkward-quiet but comfortable. Torrent has one hand on the throttle, the other resting on my thigh, his thumb tracing lazy circles against my jeans. The wind whips around us, cool and sharp, but I don't feel it.

All I feel is him.

When we pull into his driveway, the rumble of his bike fades into silence.

He opens the door and steps back to let me in first. I toe off my boots as the door shuts behind us with a soft click.

And just like that, the world disappears.

He takes my hand and leads me to his bedroom. His bed is rumped, the sheets still carrying the shape of our last night tangled together. I turn to face him, his presence taking up the whole room, his eyes shadowed and heated as they roam over me.

“You looked happy tonight,” he says, voice low.

“I was happy.” I smile, stepping closer. “It was new. In a good way. Em is great.”

He brushes his fingers along my cheek. “You deserve good people in your life, Tessa.”

“I have them now,” I whisper. “I have her and I have you.”

His jaw flexes, and his hand slides to the back of my neck, pulling me forward until our foreheads touch. “You have all of me. You know that, right?”

I nod, swallowing against the emotion tightening my throat. “I do. I really do.”

The air shifts between us, charged with something deeper than just desire, though that’s definitely there, simmering beneath the surface. But tonight, it feels more tender. More us.

He steps back just enough to strip off his cut, laying it gently over the back of the chair, then his shirt follows, revealing ink and muscle and everything that’s mine. I follow suit, tugging off my jacket and tank top until I’m standing in front of him in my jeans and bra, heart racing.

Torrent watches me, eyes hooded, reverent. “You always look at me like you’re seeing something more,” I say, voice barely above a whisper.

“Because I am,” he says without hesitation. “I see you, Tessa. The real you. And she’s fucking beautiful.”

I step into him again, placing my palms on his chest, feeling the steady thump of his heart. “Then show me,” I whisper. “Not just with your words.”

His breath hitches. “You drunk horny?”

“No,” I say, my voice stronger this time. “I need you, Torrent. No distractions. No noise. Just us.”

He kisses me then, soft but sure, fingers threading into my hair, holding me like I might slip away. But I’m not going anywhere. I’m here. With him. For him.

Clothes fall away between kisses and stolen breaths. We sink into the bed like it’s a world made only for the two of us. He moves over me with worship in every touch, every kiss a vow, every sigh a promise.

“You’re beautiful, Tessa.”

It isn’t rushed. It isn’t wild. It’s slow and intimate.

This isn’t fucking, it’s something more. Something real.

This is love.

He continues at a slow, unhurried rhythm. His hands roam my body, touching me softly.

“Torrent,” I whisper, overcome with emotion.

His eyes lock with mine as he pushes back in slowly, and he presses a soft kiss to my lips.

“I feel it, baby.”

I never take my eyes off his. We stay connected in every way possible. Moving together, feeling everything together.

“I’m close.”

“I know you are. Let go, Tessa. Let go of everything,” he whispers.

My arms wrap around his neck, and I search his eyes, finding my future staring back at me. I’ve never felt like this before, but I know it’s true.

Before I can say anything, my release crashes over me and I fall fast and hard.

“Torrent!”

He continues to move, and before I can catch my breath, his release finds him.

“Oh, Tessa.”

I curl into him, his arms wrapped tight around me, our legs tangled under the sheets. My cheek rests against his chest, listening to the heartbeat that has become my favorite sound.

This is love. It’s the kind of love that doesn’t need to prove itself, it just exists, steady and true, in every caress, every whispered name, every breath shared between us in

the quiet dark.

“Torrent?”

He moves just enough so I can see his face.

“I love you, Tessa.”

Tears prick my eyes because he feels the same.

“I love you, too.”

He kisses me and I feel a tear roll down my cheek.

For the first time in my life, I am exactly where I’m supposed to be.

Torrent

Tessa stands beside me, arms outstretched, breathing steadily as she fires off her last round. I watch the way her body moves, controlled, focused, powerful. When she lowers the Hellcat and hits the button to bring the target forward, I catch the proud little smile that tugs at her lips.

Center mass. Tight grouping.

She's getting better every time.

"Damn, baby," I say, stepping up behind her and wrapping my arms around her waist. "You keep this up and I'm gonna have to start watching my back."

She laughs softly, leaning into me. "Guess you taught me well."

I kiss her cheek and take my Glock out, then step up to the line to empty my own clip. By the time I finish, she's already started reloading her mags, her brow furrowed in concentration.

We've been out here for a couple of hours. It's one of my favorite things to do with her. It's quiet, intense, no bullshit. Just her and me. And I like knowing she can handle herself, especially if she's gonna keep walking deeper into my world.

But as much as I don't want to cut this short, duty calls.

I pull off my ear protection and glance toward her. "I need to take you home. Club

business.”

She doesn't flinch. Doesn't even pause her reloading. “Okay. I'll give Em a call, maybe we'll hang out for a bit.”

She starts to pack her gear, calm as ever. And it hits me again how rare she is. How easy she makes things feel.

But something's been clawing at the back of my mind, and before I can stop myself, I speak.

“You've never once asked about the club,” I say, stepping in front of her. “Not what we do. Not what I mean when I say ‘business.’ You don't flinch, don't push, don't question. I'm not saying that's a bad thing, it's refreshing, actually, but why have you never asked?”

She blinks up at me, the sunlight cutting across her face, catching in those sea-glass eyes of hers. She lifts a hand and pushes her sunglasses up into her hair, expression unreadable.

“Because I know better,” she says simply.

I stare at her. “What does that mean?”

Before she can answer, the range door swings open and Drift strides in, tension all over him. “We need to get going. Now.”

My whole body tightens, but I force myself to look back at Tessa. “You good?”

She nods, already slinging her bag over her shoulder. “I'll walk.”

“Oh, hell no,” I say, stepping closer. “Gideon will give you a ride home.”

She just nods again, no argument, no drama, and turns to head toward the clubhouse without another word.

Drift’s watching me with a tight expression. “You good?”

I stare at her walking away and something twists deep in my chest.

“I don’t know,” I mutter.

Because I trust her more than I should.

And something about the way she said ‘I know better’ is still sitting like a loaded round in my gut, unfired, but dangerous.

And now I’ve got club business, and my girl is walking into the clubhouse with thoughts in her head I don’t know how to read.

And that scares me more than anything waiting on the other side of this ride.

“Let’s go.”

The salty stench of the port hits my nose the second I climb off my bike. The sound of cranes humming and metal containers clanking echoes around me like a war drum. But the only thing I hear is blood rushing in my ears.

This shipment was supposed to land hours ago. And now I’m standing in a fucking maze of steel and lies, and some asshole is telling me it never arrived?

I stalk toward the dock man, a guy we pay good money to, every step fueled by the

fire burning in my gut.

“I know the shipment came,” I growl, fists clenched at my sides. “So why don’t you pull your head out of your ass and tell me where the container is?”

The guy flinches, eyes darting around like he’s hoping someone will swoop in and save him.

Drift steps up beside me, ever the calmer half of the storm. “Look, we know how crazy busy it is here, and I’m sure it’s an honest mistake. Just take another look at the log and tell us where it is.”

His voice is cool, measured. Me? I’m past that point.

This isn’t a small run. This is one of our biggest shipments this quarter. Guns, parts, custom jobs, everything is riding on this landing smooth. And this fuckup? It puts my guys in danger. That’s what has me seeing red.

“That’s the thing,” the dockworker stammers. “It’s not here yet. It’s, uh, late. Supposed to come in tonight.”

I laugh, but there’s no humor in it.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I snarl, stepping in until we’re nearly nose to nose. “Do you have any idea how this fucks with my plan? How now I’ve got to reroute everything. The drivers, lookouts, escorts? My guys have homes, families, lives, and you just tossed all that into the fire.”

“Torrent,” Drift says, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Calm down. It’s not his fault the shipment’s late. He doesn’t control the ships.”

I pull in a breath, jaw grinding as I stare at the dockworker. He's sweating bullets. Good.

I point a finger in his face. "Looks like someone's working late. I want you right here when that shipment comes in. You don't fucking leave until my guys have it in hand and you've seen their goddamn taillights disappearing into the night. You got me?"

He nods frantically and scurries off like a rat who just spotted the trap.

Drift waits a beat, then glances over. "This about the shipment or about Tessa?"

I don't answer right away. Instead, I stare out at the water. The cranes. The metal containers that now feel like goddamn bricks on my chest.

Drift keeps pushing. "'Cause I gotta be honest, Prez, if you're letting your love life get mixed up with business, it's a dangerous game."

He's not wrong.

But I don't know how to separate it anymore.

Tessa's got me fucked up.

She said she "knows better." She didn't flinch when I brought her into the clubhouse. She knew what the club bunnies were. Didn't need to ask what kind of "business" the club did.

That should've raised a flag, but I was too caught up in how she feels in my bed. Too wrapped around her smile, her laugh, her goddamn loyalty.

She's got history in this world. I never asked. But maybe I should've.

And the thought of her being with someone else in this life? In this world? It twists something sharp in my chest, something ugly.

Jealousy? Maybe.

Fear? Probably.

I exhale hard, rubbing the back of my neck. “She knew the terms before I ever said them out loud. She knew the players, the setting, everything.”

Drift eyes me sideways. “So, what, you think she was with another club?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. It’s not like I asked. I figured if she wanted to tell me, she would’ve.”

“Or maybe she’s just like the rest of us. Trying to leave the past the fuck behind.”

I let that sit for a moment.

Yeah. We’ve all got ghosts. But hers? I feel them creeping into my bed at night, into my thoughts, my chest. I need to know what they look like before they start pulling her away from me.

“She’s different, Drift. She’s not just some girl.”

“I know. Everyone knows. Just don’t lose your edge.”

I nod, though my jaw is still tight.

This world is chaos. But for the first time in a long time, I’ve found something good in it.

Now I just have to make sure it doesn't slip through my fingers.

Tessa climbs onto the back of my bike like it's second nature now, holding onto me tighter than necessary, just to be close. I love having her on the back of my bike. She fits perfectly, like she always belonged there.

Once we get back to my place, we step into the kitchen, and I grab a beer. She's glowing, grinning as she talks about her girl's day with Em. I nod along, sip my beer, and offer the occasional "yeah?" or "that's good," but my mind's not on her words.

It's still on the port. Still on her.

That one line from earlier keeps repeating like a scratch in my skull— "Because I know better."

What the fuck does that mean?

She's laughing, telling me something about Em nearly knocking over a mannequin at some vintage store, and I can't even pretend to follow. I'm staring at her lips, but I'm not hearing a word. I want to ask. I want to demand answers. But just before I get the chance, there's banging on the door.

I curse under my breath as I rise, beer bottle clinking against the table. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

I swing the door open hard enough to rattle the frame, only to find Drift and Finch standing there, both wearing looks that tell me I'm not going to like what's next.

"We got trouble," Finch says.

"Fucking hell," I mutter.

What now? I worked my ass off today to make sure this drop goes smooth. Pulled strings, called in favors, threatened that dock rat six different ways to Sunday. The last thing I need is another fire to put out.

“Scorpions are nosing around again,” Drift says, stepping inside.

I see his eyes flick toward the kitchen, toward Tessa. “Fuck. Hey, Tessa,” he adds awkwardly.

I turn on him, cold and sharp. “Can you just give us a minute?” I ask her without taking my eyes off Drift.

She nods silently, lips pressed tight. She disappears into the bedroom and closes the door behind her.

I narrow my eyes at Drift, my voice low and seething. “What the fuck, Drift? You need a refresher on who the fuck is around before you open your mouth?”

“Alright, chill,” Finch says, holding up his hands. “We’re not used to you not being here alone all the time.”

“Well, get used to it.” I grab a cigarette, light it with a flame that’s similar to the one burning under my ribs.

“What’s the problem?” I ask through a cloud of smoke.

Drift runs a hand through his hair. “Got word the Scorpions were at the dock, trying to lean on our guy. Pressure him into talking.”

“Fuck!” The word rips out of me like a growl.

“He didn’t talk,” Drift adds quickly, “but it means they know something. We need to remind them that the port belongs to us.”

“No argument there,” I say. “But let’s not fuck this up with impulse. Shipment’s coming in tonight. We keep eyes on it, get our shit locked down. After that, we hit them back. Clean, loud, and hard enough they remember why they keep their distance.”

Drift nods. “Okay. But let’s not sit on this long. You know how they are.”

“Oh, believe me. I know.”

We hash out the rest of the plan for tonight. The routes, assignments, fallback spots. It’s business. But the whole time, my thoughts are behind that closed door.

Once they leave, I take a breath, crush out my cigarette, and head back to the bedroom.

She’s pacing when I walk in. Barefoot, arms crossed, her teeth worrying her bottom lip. The tension radiating off her hits me in the chest.

“Hey, baby,” I say gently. “I’m sorry about that. Drift and Finch shouldn’t have come in here talking like that.”

She turns, eyes wide. “So, the Scorpions are here because of you?”

“No. They were here,” I answer carefully, watching her face shift with fear.

“Since when? Have they always been, or is it recent? How long exactly?”

There’s something in her voice, panic, old and raw, and I don’t like it. I step forward,

pull her into my arms. She's stiff for a beat, then melts into me, but not all the way.

"Hey," I murmur, pressing a kiss to her temple. "What's going on, huh? How do you know about the Scorpions? Why are you so scared of them?"

She pulls back just enough to look me in the eyes. "What? I'm not."

"Were you with one of them before?" I ask it before I can stop myself. I hate the way it sounds coming out of my mouth, but I need to know.

Her eyes go wide. "What? No! God, no."

"Then what is it?" I ask, voice soft but firm. "Because that fear? That isn't just nerves. That's history."

She exhales shakily and looks away. "I've just heard bad things about them. At the diner. You know, people talk."

But that's not all. Not even close.

And I know it.

Still, I let it go for now. She's scared. And cornering her won't help.

"Listen," I say, brushing her hair behind her ear. "Yeah, they've been around. But they didn't really crawl out of their hole until we rolled into town. They've always wanted what the Royal Bastards have."

"Which is what exactly?" she asks, voice smaller than usual.

"Control. Territory. Respect. Shit they'll never earn, so they try to take it."

She nods, biting her lip again. I see the questions in her eyes. I see the past behind them, too.

I'll get the truth. Eventually.

But for now, I just pull her close again and whisper, "I've got you, Tessa. No one touches what's mine."

And God help whoever tries.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Tessa

“Can I get you another cup of coffee?”

My voice is steady, but my hands are anything but. I grip the carafe a little tighter, forcing a smile for the older gentleman at the counter.

Suddenly, a dish crashes from the back, the sharp sound slicing through the clatter of the diner.

I jump.

Like a reflex hardwired into my bones, my body tenses, and I nearly spill the coffee. My heart kicks up in my chest like it’s been sucker-punched.

“Hey, you alright there?”

His eyes are kind, brows raised with genuine concern. He’s just a customer. Just another regular. But I’m nearly shaking in front of him.

“I’m fine,” I lie quickly, forcing out a light laugh. “When a dish breaks, it reminds me of my grandmother tossing one at my grandfather.”

He chuckles, like it’s a funny memory. “Oh, I’ve been in that situation before.”

I pour his coffee, nod, and excuse myself like it’s nothing. But it isn’t.

I rush to the back, into the tiny bathroom, and slam the door shut behind me. My breaths come fast, too shallow. I grip the sink hard enough to make my knuckles white, staring at myself in the mirror.

“Get it together, Tessa,” I whisper, teeth clenched. “You’ve lived here for years with no problems. You’re letting your past fears creep into your present. You’re better than this.”

I exhale slowly, trying to calm the racing in my chest.

But the truth is, this last week has unraveled me. The ground I’ve worked so damn hard to rebuild under my feet is cracking, splintering under the weight of memories I thought I buried.

And Torrent, he watches me now like I’m this fragile thing. Like I’m going to snap. Like he’s just waiting for the moment he has to swoop in and carry me off like some tragic heroine in one of those old paperbacks.

And I fucking hate it.

I don’t need saving. I don’t need to be looked at like glass. I need to be treated the way he used to with equal parts challenge and temptation. Not like a bomb that he’s afraid to set off.

Maybe being with him was a mistake.

He doesn’t realize it, but trouble follows him like a shadow. He deserves someone solid. Someone safe. Not a woman who’s constantly looking over her shoulder, waiting for ghosts she hasn’t told him about.

Someone who might just bring more trouble than he’s prepared for.

“Tessa, you okay? You’ve got customers,” Megan’s voice filters through the door.

Shit.

“Yeah, be right there.”

I run my hands down my apron, force another smile, and open the door like everything’s fine. Like I’m not barely holding myself together.

Megan meets me with a shrug. “Sorry, but there are some bikers here looking for you.”

Her words freeze me in place. My heart stutters. My stomach twists. I brace myself against the wall, willing myself not to panic.

No. No. No. Not them. Not here.

I suck in a few steady breaths, then make myself walk to the front counter.

The relief I feel when I see Finch and Crab sitting there is so intense it nearly knocks me over. My smile this time is real.

“Hey guys, what can I get you?”

Finch reaches across the counter and grabs my hand. His face is soft, almost pleading.

“Look, don’t tell Torrent we were here.”

I tense, instinctively pulling back. “What the hell is going on?” I glance between the two of them, alarm crawling up my spine again.

Crab elbows, Finch. “Tell her.”

“Seriously, guys. What the fuck is going on?”

I’m scared again, but this time it’s different. More immediate.

Finch lets out a breath. “It’s not really our business, but Torrent has been in a mood since the other night. When Drift and I were at his place, something shifted. He’s pissed. Constantly yelling. And before that? He was happy. Like, really fucking happy.”

He looks at me carefully. “If you guys are fighting, I’m not trying to get in it. But can you fix it? We need our President back.”

God.

It is about me. About the way I reacted the other night when I heard about the Scorpions. He saw it in my face, how my entire world went sideways.

“I’ll talk to him,” I whisper.

“Please don’t tell him we came here,” Crab adds quickly. “He’ll kill us. Literally.”

I place one hand on each of theirs. “Guys. Trust me. I know how to keep a secret. He won’t hear a word from me. You have my word.”

“Thanks. We need to get outta here,” Crab says, standing.

But Finch lingers, eyes studying me. “I know you won’t say anything.

It’s obvious you’ve got your own secrets.

I just hope none of them are things you're keeping from Torrent.

"He hesitates. "Em said she hasn't been able to get ahold of you.

Is that the problem? Is Torrent jealous of your time with her?"

His words hit like a sucker punch. The guilt twists so hard I nearly double over. Everything feels like it's unraveling, and I'm the loose thread pulling it apart.

"Finch, I've just been swamped with work during the day and spending time with Torrent at night. I haven't had a minute to breathe, let alone text Em. But Torrent isn't mad about her. I swear."

And I do swear. But I'm not sure I believe myself.

Something's gotta give. This tightrope I'm walking between my past and my present it's getting harder to balance. But I think I know what I need to do.

"Now go," I say, soft but firm. "Things will get better. You have my word."

Finch leans over the counter and presses a light kiss to my cheek. It's the kind of simple affection that breaks something in me.

"Thanks, Tessa. Torrent isn't the only one who got lucky when you came into his life. We all did."

I watch them leave, Crab tossing a wink at Megan and Finch throwing me one last look.

And then I'm alone again, behind the counter, my chest tightening with emotion I can't name.

Tears well, but I blink them back.

I need to fix this before the past I've buried destroys the only good thing I've found in years.

The bell over the diner door rings as I'm wiping down the counter for the last time tonight, and I know it's him without even turning around.

Torrent always walks like he owns the world, like he could break it in half if he wanted to, but chooses not to. There's this heavy confidence in his steps, a silent warning and a comfort all at once.

When I finally glance over my shoulder, our eyes meet, and I manage a smile.

Not the real kind. Not the broken kind either.

Something in between. Something he needs.

"Hey, handsome," I say, untangling the apron from my waist and tossing it under the counter. "Come to sweep me off my feet?"

His lip twitches, almost a smile but not quite.

"Wouldn't dream of lettin' anyone else try."

We don't say much as we leave. His hand finds the small of my back, that familiar touch grounding me as we step out into the warm night air. He offers me his hand to get onto his bike without a word, and I climb on, wrapping my arms around his waist.

The ride to his place is silent, but not the good kind of silence. It's thick, heavy with all the shit neither of us is saying. I rest my head against his back and hope that the

wind against my skin can carry it all away.

But it doesn't.

It just carries it home with us.

The second we walk through his front door, I know I can't let the silence keep spreading. It'll suffocate us both.

So, I become her. The girl he knows. The girl he met. The girl he fell for.

I drop my bag and toe off my shoes, pulling my shirt over my head in one smooth motion and letting it fall to the floor with a grin. "So, we having beer and pizza? Or am I making grilled cheese in nothing but a bra again?"

That gets him.

Torrent's head tilts back with a short laugh, and his eyes drop to my chest. "You forget pants too, or is this just a new uniform?"

"That depends. Is it working?" I ask, winking.

His smirk is real this time. "It's definitely doing something."

I watch him closely, cataloging every twitch in his jaw, every shift in his eyes. The more I flirt, the more I joke, the more his shoulders start to drop. That tension, tight and wound and angry, starts to ease off him like sweat.

He grabs two beers from the fridge and tosses me one. I catch it with a smile.

"See?" I say, popping the cap off mine. "I'm cute and have reflexes. I'm a goddamn

unicorn.”

He chuckles as he leans against the counter, watching me like I’m the answer to a question he doesn’t want to ask.

“You’re a fuckin’ menace,” he says, but there’s no heat in it. Just affection.

I lean on my elbows, sipping my beer, pretending like my heart isn’t caving in on itself.

Because I see it now.

The weight he’s been carrying.

I saw it in Finch and Crab’s eyes when they looked at me today. Saw it in the way Torrent barely spoke when he picked me up.

He's hurting. Because of me.

Because I pulled away.

Because I flinched.

Because I’m not who he thinks I am, not entirely.

And still, he looks at me like I’m worth all of it.

So, I laugh too loud and tease too much and run my fingers over his knuckles when I pass him, hoping the electricity between us is enough to burn away the fear.

“You’re quieter than usual,” I say, curling up on the couch with my beer, legs tucked

under me. “What, my boobs not distracting enough tonight?”

Torrent raises an eyebrow. “Nah, they’re doin’ fine. I’m just waitin’ for the other shoe to drop.”

My smile falters for a second. Just a second. But I recover fast.

“Well, it’s a damn good thing I only wear sandals then.”

He shakes his head and finally, finally, laughs. A real one. Full. Rough. Deep. The sound of it hits my chest like a punch.

I joke and flirt and keep it light because I want to give him something solid again. Something he can count on. Not another problem to carry.

I want to be the reason the guys get their President back. The man they trust. The man they’d follow into hell.

Even if I’m standing in the middle of it, pretending I’m not already burning.

I follow him to the bedroom after we finish our beers, my hand brushing against his as we walk down the hall. It’s a subtle move, but he catches it. He always does.

When he closes the door behind us, I sit on the edge of the bed and pull my legs underneath me, watching as he peels off his shirt. God, he’s gorgeous. Tattooed, rough, lean muscle. Built like he was carved to ruin someone. Maybe me. Probably already has.

He tosses the shirt into the hamper and sits beside me, one hand rubbing the back of his neck. The silence stretches, but I break it before the weight of it crushes us again.

“You know what I think?” I ask softly.

He glances over at me with those stormy eyes. “What’s that?”

I reach up and gently touch the corner of his mouth. “I think you’re sexier when you smile.”

He huffs a laugh. “You’re trouble, woman.”

“You like it.”

“Yeah. That’s the fuckin’ problem.”

We don’t say anything else for a moment. We just breathe.

I shift onto my knees and straddle his lap, my hands finding his chest. His eyes darken, hands automatically settling on my thighs like they belong there, which they do.

I’ve stayed hidden in plain sight all week. We haven’t touched more than a casual kiss goodbye.

That needs to change.

So, I kiss him slowly. Deep. Not rushed. Not desperate. Just real.

He kisses me back like he needs it more than air.

And maybe he does, because I sure as hell do.

The weight of the week, of all the things neither of us have said, it’s there between

every touch, every moan, every grip of skin.

We get our clothes off quickly, and Torrent lowers himself on top of me. Skin on skin. Eyes connected. Souls being exposed.

I run my fingers through his hair and pull him to me.

His lips brush against mine and as his tongue enters my mouth, his cock pushes inside me.

I moan, and he tightens his hold on me. Maybe to make sure I'm still here, still real.

He's not rough with me, not tonight.

He's worshipping me, like he needs to prove something to both of us, that we're still us. That he still has me.

His moves are slow and calculated, stretching me out and putting me back together all at once.

I break the kiss only to moan as his piercing hits right where it should.

"Oh, Torrent," I moan, digging my fingers into his back.

"Fuck, Tessa, you feel so good. I missed you. I needed you."

His words are too much, and I close my eyes to keep the tears from spilling.

We move together slow and gentle. Not rushing. Making this feeling last as long as possible.

He needs it.

I need it.

The way he moves, the way he holds me like I'm the only thing tethering him to earth, makes my heart hurt that much more.

He picks up the pace, just a fraction, but it's enough to send my body into overdrive. The worries disappear, temporarily, as the building of my release takes over.

"I'm so close," I cry out.

He reaches between us and rubs my clit and I arch off the bed.

"Let go, baby. Let it all go with your orgasm."

I can't fight it. I can't hold back. The buildup has been too much.

"Torrent." My voice echoes around us as my release crashes over me.

Wave after wave, trying to wash away the fear and doubts.

He drives into me a few more times before his orgasm finds him and he stills above me.

"Tessa," he groans, locking his eyes with mine.

He falls onto me, holding me like a lifeline.

It's quiet for a while. The kind of quiet that feels like peace.

We lie tangled in the sheets, his fingers tracing lazy circles on my hip, his breathing steady against my shoulder.

I keep my eyes on the ceiling, because if I look at him now, I'll start crying and I don't know if I'll be able to stop.

"You good?" he asks, voice low and raspy.

I nod against his chest. Lie.

"Torrent?"

"What baby?"

His voice is soft and gentle. Completely relaxed and dare I say, happy.

"I love you. I love you so damn much it hurts."

He holds me tightly, just how I need.

"I love you, too, baby. I love you more than I love myself."

I hope that's not true.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Torrent

"Finch, how about we take Tessa and Emerson out sometime?"

The words leave my mouth before I can second-guess them, but Finch reacts like I've just suggested a group manicure. His brows shoot up like they're trying to hit the damn ceiling.

But he nods anyway. "Yeah. That'd be fun."

I offer a quick nod, like it's no big deal, like I didn't just make a fucking peace offering in the form of a double date.

But the truth is, I needed to say that. I needed to do something because I've been off.

Distant. Angry. And not just the kind of pissed you walk off in the yard with a smoke.

The kind of anger that soaks into your bones and makes you forget who the hell you are.

Drift warned me. Told me not to let my shit with Tessa bleed into club life. And what did I do? I let it pour straight into the heart of the club I swore to protect.

That shit won't happen again. I won't let it.

Last night, it grounded me. It brought me back to the girl who once made me believe in something good again.

The one who looked at me like I wasn't broken.

I needed to know that girl was still in there somewhere.

And she was. In her smile. In her laugh.

In the way she curled into me like I was still the safest place on earth.

She didn't say she was okay. Didn't promise she was past whatever demons she's battling. But she showed me.

And it wrecked me.

Because, as much as I hate to admit it, without her, I don't function right. It's like walking with a limp I forgot I had until she's near and I remember how it feels to move without pain.

"Good to have you back, Prez," Drift says, clapping a hand to my shoulder.

We're at Savage Steel, the usual spot, doing what we always do. Selling guns, taking orders, checking over manifests. Nothing about the day is different on the surface. But I am. I feel lighter. Clearer. Like I finally kicked a dark cloud that's been following me around.

I lean against the display case, arms folded, and glance at Drift.

"I'm not gonna apologize to anyone else, but I owe you one. You warned me. Told me not to let my personal shit spill into club business. And I ignored it." I look him in the eye. "That won't happen again."

Drift doesn't miss a beat. His face softens, not with pity, never that, but with respect.

“I don’t need your apology, man. Just need to know my President is all here, all the time.”

The guilt stings deep in my gut. That I made them doubt me. Even for a second.

“I am. You fucking know that.”

He nods once. “I do. Just remember that next time you and Tessa butt heads. Because we can’t afford for you to go dark again.”

“I meant what I said. I won’t let that happen again.” I push off the counter. “We need to have church. Lock up. Get everyone around the table.”

Respect is earned in this life, every goddamn day. I’ve had mine for years, but that doesn’t mean I get to coast.

If I don’t have their trust, I’ve got nothing.

We all take our places around the table, the weight of leadership settling on my shoulders the moment I sit at the head.

I’m still proud to wear this patch. Still honored to call these men my brothers.

“Everything alright?” Cetus asks, arms braced on the table.

I nod slowly. “Yeah. Just need to say something.”

The room goes still. All eyes on me.

“It’s been brought to my attention that I’ve been less than a President lately.

” My gaze flicks to Finch and Crab, who exchange a quick look.

I clock it but keep going. “I’ve had personal shit going on, but that’s not an excuse.

I’m your President, and that’s not a title I wear lightly.

You’re my brothers, and you deserve better than what I’ve been.

But I’m here. Fully. And I’m not going anywhere.

I made you a promise when I took this seat, and I’m making it again now: I will always have your backs.

Always fight for this club. Always lead with my head straight and my loyalty unwavering. ”

I lean back, let the silence stretch. It’s not uncomfortable. It’s grounding.

I’ve come so far from prospect to leader, from reckless to responsible. Tessa and this club are my world, and maybe it’s messy, but fuck, it’s mine.

“It’s cool, Torrent,” Ganges says, tapping ash from his cigarette. “We’ve all got shit we can’t always bury.”

“I just figured you were on your period,” Riptide snorts.

The room breaks into low chuckles, mine included.

Until Finch speaks.

“Tessa told you, right?”

My body stills.

“Finch, shut the fuck up,” Crab hisses.

My eyes cut between them. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Finch pales. He looks at me, then at Crab, like he’s hoping the table will swallow him whole.

“One of you better start fucking talking,” I growl, my voice low and dangerous.

“Asshole,” Crab mutters, glaring at Finch.

“We went to Tessa. We were worried about you and asked her to fix whatever was going on between you two,” Finch blurts.

My chair crashes to the floor as I stand too fast.

“What the fuck?”

“What the hell were you thinking?” Drift barks.

“Oh, hell,” Riptide groans, rubbing his face.

Cetus just shakes his head. Ganges exhales slowly and lights another smoke.

“Why the fuck would you get Tessa involved?” My voice cracks like a whip across the room. “She’s not in this club. You’ve got a problem with me? You come to me. You don’t drag my woman into it.”

“We were desperate,” Finch mumbles. “And Tessa’s kind, and we thought

maybe?—”

“She didn’t tell you, did she?” Crab interrupts.

I turn on him, teeth clenched, heart pounding in my ears.

“No, Crab, she didn’t. But she fucking should’ve.” I lean over the table and brace my hands against the wood. “What happens in this club stays in this club. You don’t go whispering to my ol’ lady like this is some teenage drama. This is a goddamn brotherhood. Not a fucking high school cafeteria.”

And then the words hit me. Hard. Like a sucker punch to the ribs.

She only smiled for me last night because they asked her to.

“When?” I ask, quieter now. “When did you talk to her?”

“Yesterday,” Finch admits.

I drop into my chair like the air’s been sucked from my lungs. I scrub my hands down my face, the realization clawing its way down my spine.

Last night wasn’t ours.

It was theirs.

Every kiss. Every smile. Every soft moan in the dark, I thought she was choosing me.

But she was trying to fix me.

“Everyone out,” I mutter, then louder, “Get the fuck out!”

Chairs scrape. Boots shuffle. Everyone clears out, leaving me alone in the silence.

Finch lingers for a second. "I'm sorry, Torrent."

"Get out before I do something I'll regret."

He nods and disappears.

The door closes.

And I sit in the quiet, heart pounding, rage bleeding into something colder. Emptier.

I stare at the wall, at nothing, and reach for the ashtray.

"FUCK!"

I hurl it across the room. The glass shatters, and so does the last piece of peace I thought I had.

The ride home feels like punishment.

Helmet on. Engine roaring. My thoughts louder than both.

The ashtray breaking wasn't enough. I wish it had been.

Wish it had snapped something loose in my chest, given me clarity.

But all I've got is smoke in my lungs and heat burning beneath my skin.

Hurt. Betrayal. Confusion. They all fight for space in my chest, pushing and twisting until I can barely breathe.

I shouldn't be this wrecked.

But I am.

Because last night meant something to me. Meant everything.

And now I don't know what any of it meant to her.

I pull into the driveway and kill the engine, sitting on the bike like it might still carry me away from all this. But the quiet is louder here. The house is dark. Still. Waiting.

I dismount slowly, toss my helmet to the steps, and drag my feet up the porch. I don't bother turning on any lights inside. I know this place by heart. And tonight, it feels fucking hollow.

My phone buzzes in my pocket for the fifth time. I pull it out just long enough to see Drift's name flash across the screen before I hit ignore.

Then again.

And again.

I can't.

Not yet. Not until I sort the storm inside of me.

I strip off my cut and toss it onto the arm of the couch, where it slumps down like even it's too tired to deal with me. I grab a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet, the good kind not the cheap shit, and take a long pull straight from the bottle.

I sink onto the couch, elbows on my knees, bottle dangling between them.

She smiled. She laughed. She touched me like I was still hers.

And all of it might've been fake.

No.

Not fake.

Just forced.

And somehow that's worse.

Tessa has always been fire and honesty. She doesn't pretend. Doesn't play games. That's what drew me to her in the first place. She was real in a world built on lies and shadows. She saw me.

So why the hell couldn't she come to me?

Why the fuck did it take Finch and Crab showing up like two clueless knights with a guilt trip for her to finally touch me like she used to?

I take another drink and let the burn settle deep. My stomach twists, but I don't stop. I can't.

Because if I let this feeling get out from under me, I'll say something I can't take back.

And I love her too fucking much to do that.

My phone lights up again.

Missed call. Drift.

Group text. Ganges asking if I've cooled off. Finch begging me not to hate him. Crab saying he tried to stop him.

I don't care.

Not right now.

I need to find my footing again. I need to stop being the guy reacting from pain and go back to being the man who leads with purpose. Logic. Strategy.

That's who I am.

That's what the club needs from me.

And it's what Tessa deserves, too.

Because if I go to her now, if I face her while my heart's bleeding and my pride's shattered, I'll break everything. Her. Me. Us.

And I want us to make it through this. God, I want that more than I want my next breath.

So, I sit in the dark with my bottle and my bleeding heart, counting breaths like prayers.

Trying to remember that I'm more than the pain.

That I'm Torrent.

President of the Royal Bastards.

And the man who still fucking loves that woman, even if she broke something in me without meaning to.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Tessa

The door clicks shut behind me, and I barely make it three steps into the house before the tears start.

They hit like a storm, silent at first, then violent.

I lean against the wall, pressing my palms flat to it like it might hold me up, like maybe I'll stop crumbling if I just stay still.

But I'm already breaking.

Working today after last night, after leaving my heart with Torrent, was impossible.

I slide down until I'm sitting on the floor, knees pulled to my chest, tears soaking into my sweater. My heart doesn't know what the hell to do with itself. It's fighting me, screaming that this is wrong, that I don't belong anywhere but with him.

But I know what I have to do.

I have to walk away.

Because I love him. Because he deserves better than what I've become.

Last night was my gift to him. One more night of us. Of what we used to be. I wanted him to feel that girl again, the one he fell in love with. I wanted to look into his eyes and give him peace. Give him me, without the heaviness. Just love. Laughter. Touch.

Everything I had left.

But I didn't expect it to feel so good.

So real.

And that's what's breaking me now.

Because if it was real for me, it had to be real for him too. And that means I'm about to rip both our hearts out.

My phone buzzes on the table across the room. I don't have to look to know it's Emerson.

She's probably worried. She probably saw through the smile I forced this morning.

Emerson always sees too much. And God, I want to answer.

I want to hear her voice and fall apart for real.

I want someone to tell me that I'm not a coward for doing this.

That I'm strong. That this is what love looks like sometimes.

But if I talk to her, if I say it out loud, I'll never stop crying.

So, I let it ring.

And then ring again.

And again.

Eventually, it stops.

And I'm alone with the silence.

I wipe my face with my sleeve and force myself to breathe through the ache. It's deep. Deep like, something is dying inside me. But I know that if I stay, I'll keep pulling Torrent down with me.

He needs to be sharp. Focused. Cold when it calls for it, but warm when it matters. He can't carry the weight of a broken ol' lady while trying to lead a club of soldiers through a battlefield.

They need their President.

He needs to be their President.

And if being with me puts even the slightest crack in his armor, I need to fix it. I won't be the reason he falls.

I love him too much for that.

I drag myself to the bedroom, grabbing a small bag and staring at it like it's a grenade.

Because once I pack it, once I leave, I can't take it back.

And I don't know who I'll be on the other side of that choice.

My throat tightens and the tears come again, hot and endless.

"I love you," I whisper into the empty room. "I love you so fucking much."

I wish he could hear me.

But maybe it's better that he doesn't.

Because if he came for me right now, if he told me to stay, I'd do it.

And that would destroy us both.

I pack only necessities, fighting tears the entire time.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. I wasn't supposed to need to run again.

Not after all this time.

But it's happening.

There's only one thing left I need to do.

I sit at the kitchen counter, a pen trembling in my hand, paper blurry beneath tear-filled eyes.

Torrent,

I don't even know how to start this.

There are a thousand things I want to say, and none of them feel big enough for what you mean to me.

I love you.

I don't say it enough. I should've screamed it from every rooftop. I should've carved

it into every moment we shared. Every laugh, every kiss, every mile on your bike with my arms wrapped around you and the wind in my hair. I should've said it every damn time.

I remember all the nights we made dinner together, how that one time you acted like my chopped onions were trash but still ate the whole plate with that smug smile.

Or when you taught me how to shoot and I almost took out a tire in the parking lot, and you just laughed and wrapped your arms around me, fixing my stance, your hands steadying me, grounding me.

And those nights at Savage Steel. The music too loud, the whiskey too strong, you by my side with that possessive grip on my waist like you were telling the whole world, "She's mine."

God, I am yours.

I've always been yours.

Even when I was scared. Even when I pulled away. My heart? It never left you.

Not once.

I remember the way your hand felt in mine, how safe I felt, how your eyes softened when you looked at me like I was everything right in a world gone wrong.

I remember the way you kissed me like it was a promise.

And the way you held me after we made love, like you never wanted to let go.

Tears drip onto the paper, smearing the ink. I press my fist to my mouth and close my

eyes.

I'm doing this for you. I'm doing this because I love you.

I set the pen down and draw in a shaking breath, wiping my face with the sleeve of the hoodie I stole from him. One that still smells like his cologne, gun oil, and home.

The knock on the door startles me. It's too sharp. Too sudden. Not like Emerson. Not like someone who loves me.

My stomach drops.

Slowly, I rise to my feet, glancing at the half-written letter, the bag at the door, the phone I haven't touched in hours.

When I open the door, it's like all the air leaves the room.

"Tessa."

My heart stops.

Every drop of blood drains from my face, my fingers curling around the edge of the door.

He's older. Leaner. Colder.

But I know that voice.

I know those eyes.

Terror roots me to the floor.

I try to slam the door shut, but his boot kicks out, jamming it open with a sickening crack.

“Don’t make this harder than it needs to be.”

“NO!” I scream, scrambling backward, but he’s already inside.

His hand clamps down on my arm like a steel vice, and I thrash, claw, kick. “Let go of me! Get off!”

“You ran away from your family and thought you could hide with the President of the Royal Bastards?” His voice is full of venom, but calm in that horrifying way. “You used to be smart, darling.”

Another man steps through the doorway.

Then another.

It’s too fast.

It’s over.

“It’s time to pay for your mistakes.”

I scream louder, desperate, pleading for someone, anyone, to hear me.

But no one comes.

My back slams against the wall, then I’m being dragged out, my feet fighting for purchase, nails scratching wood.

Torrent.

His name is a prayer in my head.

The last thing I see is my letter on the counter and the pen still uncapped beside it.

The bag sitting there, waiting to go.

And then I'm thrown into the back of a van, hands bound, knees buckling as the door slams shut and locks me in.

My head spins, heart pounding so hard I think it might explode.

This is how it ends.

Not with goodbye.

Not with peace.

But with fear.

And the memory of the man I love echoes in my chest like a ghost I'll never get to hold again.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:37 pm

Torrent

I call her again.

Straight to voicemail.

For the fourth goddamn time.

“Tessa, pick up the phone,” I mutter, jaw tight. “You wanna ignore me? Fine. But at least have the fucking guts to say it to my face.”

I shove the phone into my pocket and whip my bike into the parking lot of the diner. I’m fuming. All that damn emotion I’ve been choking on all morning, and now she’s just ghosting me like the other night never happened?

Like we never happened?

I shove the door open hard enough that it rattles the bell above. Megan turns around behind the counter, wide-eyed.

“Oh! Torrent.” She glances at the clock. “Tessa didn’t come in.”

I stop in my tracks. “What?”

“She was supposed to open. It’s not like her. We’ve been calling since seven. No answer. It just rings.” Megan frowns, biting her lip. “Do you know if something’s wrong?”

That icy, crawling feeling under my skin starts to creep up my spine.

No. She's just pissed at me. That's all.

She's being stubborn. Giving me the silent treatment. Trying to make a point.

Right?

But blowing off work? That's not Tessa.

Not ever.

Without another word, I bolt out of the diner and race back to my bike.

I drive to her apartment, the time going too slow, even though I'm speeding.

I take the steps two at a time to her apartment.

"Tessa!" I yell and go to bang on the door. Fist clenched, heart pounding, but when I go to knock, the door creaks open at the lightest touch.

My stomach twists.

The fuck?

I step inside slowly. "Tess?"

Nothing.

"Tessa!" I shout louder, moving deeper inside. The place is still. Too still.

Then I see it, a letter.

My heart slams against my ribs.

No. Don't fucking tell me she left.

I leave the letter untouched, refusing to believe she walked away without saying goodbye to my face. My boots thud against the floor as I tear through the apartment.

"Tessa! Goddammit, Tessa!"

I check the bathroom, the bedroom, the tiny closet.

Nothing.

Panic flares in my chest, hot and fast.

I storm back out and grab the letter, hands shaking now. The ink is smudged. My name at the top. Her handwriting, messy like she was crying while writing it.

I read the words and feel every one of them like a knife to the gut.

"I love you."

She writes about our nights. The cooking. The way I taught her to shoot. About the parties, the bike rides, the kisses that meant everything.

She loved me.

She still does.

But it's not finished.

My eyes snap to a packed bag just sitting there.

Her phone on the counter.

The door open.

A cup knocked over. A chair angled weirdly.

My blood runs cold.

She didn't leave.

Maybe she was going to leave, but she didn't.

Someone stopped her.

I clench the letter in my fist and grab her phone with the other hand, shoving both into my pocket.

My boots are heavy on the floor as I storm out. My legs are moving before I even know it. Rage and fear mixing in a deadly fucking storm under my skin.

I swing a leg over my bike and hit call.

"Drift. Now," I bark the second he answers. "Get everyone around the table."

"What's going on?"

"Just do it." My voice cracks, and I swallow the emotion threatening to choke me.

“Tessa’s gone. And this wasn’t by choice.”

The clubhouse is silent for only a second after I call the meeting.

Then I drop the words that feel like they’re carving me in two.

“Tessa’s gone.”

Chaos erupts.

“What the fuck do you mean gone?” Riptide’s voice cracks as he slams his hand on the table.

Ganges pushes up from his chair, eyes wide. “Gone where? What happened? What’s the next move?”

“Did she leave you?” Finch’s voice is too high, too frantic. “She was at work yesterday. Emerson saw her. She seemed off, but she didn’t say anything!”

“Enough!” Drift barks, standing with both palms flat on the table. “Everybody shut the fuck up!”

But I barely hear them.

Their voices are faint, muffled, distant, like I’m underwater.

All I can focus on is her.

Her laugh. Soft and carefree.

Her smile when she handed me burnt pancakes and called it breakfast in bed.

The way she looked riding behind me, arms tight around my waist, chin resting on my shoulder like I was hers.

How she kissed me when I was angry. How she pulled my face into her hands and reminded me that love could be louder than rage.

I can still hear her whisper, "I love you," like it was the only truth in her whole broken world.

I let her slip through my fingers.

And now she's gone.

Then something she said plays in my mind, sharp and clear.

When I asked her how she knew what club bunnies were.

"I know a lot."

And that first time I brought her to the clubhouse?

"Your clubhouse."

She didn't ask, didn't guess. She knew.

And when I asked why she never poked around the club stuff?

"Because I know better."

She wasn't just respecting my boundaries.

She knew the rules because she'd lived them.

And that day at my place, when she overheard about the Scorpions. Her whole demeanor shifted. Like something hit her hard and fast.

“So the Scorpions are here because of you?”

“No, they were here.”

“Since when? Have they always been, or is it recent? How long exactly?”

The questions weren't casual.

She was terrified.

My eyes snap open wide, and I straighten in my chair, heart racing.

“Holy shit.”

Drift looks at me, eyes narrowing. “What?”

“She's connected to the Scorpions.”

The room explodes again. Chairs screeching, voices raised.

“What do you mean? Connected how?” Riptide asks.

“Wait, like knows them or is one of them?” Finch shouts.

“She ain't a damn Scorpion,” Drift growls.

I shake my head, trying to breathe through the roaring in my ears. “I don’t have answers. I don’t know. But she was scared, beyond scared, when the Scorpions were mentioned.”

“You think she dated one of them?” Cetus asks.

“I asked her that,” I say quietly. “She said no. But I think it’s more.”

“More how?” Finch says.

“Family maybe,” I whisper, voice low and cold.

Everything clicks into place. Not clean, not solid. But the pieces are jagged enough to draw blood.

“Would be the perfect revenge,” Riptide says grimly. “They’ve been trying to cock block us from the port. Been looking for leverage.”

“And they found it,” Ganges adds, eyes dark. “They found her.”

Drift looks at me, his voice quieter now. “You really think they took her?”

I nod slowly, the letter burning in my pocket like it’s branding into my skin.

“Yeah. I think they’ve had eyes on her. Maybe even from the beginning.”

“She knew it was coming,” I say hoarsely. “The way she kissed me last, she knew. She was saying goodbye.”

The silence this time is heavy. Deadly.

“Then we find her,” Drift says, calm and cold. “And we burn whoever took her to the fucking ground.”

I look around the table at my brothers, my family, and I nod once.

“She’s mine. And I will tear this city apart brick by brick to get her back.”

No sooner have the words left my mouth than Riptide stiffens, his eyes locked on the monitor by the wall.

“Motion on the outer cameras,” he says, already moving. “Something or someone just came onto Savage Steel’s property.”

All of us snap into action.

Chairs scrape back, boots thunder across the floor, hands instinctively reaching for weapons. Every second feels like it’s dragging razor wire across my chest.

Drift signals to sweep and secure the perimeter, the guys spread out like muscle memory.

I move fast but steady. I don’t panic. I never panic.

But this isn’t just another threat.

This is her.

My eyes land on something ahead. It’s small, still, lying in the gravel just inside the fence line.

I walk toward it, each step pounding in time with the scream in my head.

It's a sweatshirt.

My sweatshirt.

The one she always stole.

The one she wore to bed at night.

It's spread out like someone laid it there on purpose.

I crouch, chest tight, and pick it up with shaking hands.

There's a note pinned to the fabric.

Black ink on white paper. Block letters.

"Missing something? Daughters of Scorpion Presidents don't fuck Royal Bastards."

My blood goes cold.

I blink, but the words don't change.

Daughter.

She's a Scorpion's daughter.

Holy fuck.

Rage detonates in my chest.

I see red.

It all makes a sick kind of sense now.

The fear in her eyes when the Scorpions were mentioned.

The guarded look she always wore when anyone asked about her past.

How she never wanted to talk about her parents.

The way she held me the other night, desperate, like she knew it was the last time.

My hands crush the sweatshirt against my chest.

Drift is behind me, his voice calm, but I can hear the tension in it.

“Look, it’s not good, but it’s not over. We’ll find her, and we’ll figure it all out.”

I stand slowly, the paper crumpling in my fist.

“I’ll kill every one of them,” I whisper, voice shaking with fury.

“No hesitation. No mercy.”

Drift doesn’t flinch. Just nods once, like he was expecting that answer.

“Call in backup,” I say, already turning toward my bike. “We go full lockdown. Nobody gets in or out of this fucking city without us knowing about it.”

He’s already reaching for his burner. “You got it.”

I don’t care who she’s related to.

I don't care what lies in her bloodline.

She's mine.

And nothing, not her past, not her name, not even a fucking club of venomous assholes, is going to keep me from bringing her home.

Torrent

The roar of bikes cuts through the silence like thunder splitting the sky. Gravel crunches, engines kill, and then there's nothing but the heavy weight of anticipation in the air.

Our brothers from Helena, Montana, are here.

Moose is the first off his bike, tall as hell, with fists like bricks and a heart as solid. Serpent's quiet, his eyes always moving, reading the room like a predator sizing up prey. Kai's fast and lethal with a loyalty that's never wavered.

They don't say much. They don't have to.

We're all cut from the same cloth. Stitched together by blood, brotherhood, and the brutal truth that in this life, when shit goes down, you show up.

"Glad you're here," I say, gripping Moose's hand tight.

He nods. "You said you needed us. So, we came. What's the plan?"

We gather inside, around the table where this all began. Drift pulls out a map of the port and lays it flat, markers scattered around to show our potential points of attack. Everyone leans in.

"We got intel," Drift starts. "It's thin, but solid. Tessa's being held at the docks. One of the shipping containers on the far side of the yard, near the southeast access gate."

“Security?” Serpent asks, already calculating.

“Scorpions got eyes posted on the water and the land side,” Ganges says. “They think they’ve got the upper hand. We’re gonna make sure they don’t.”

“We surround them,” I say. “Divide and cover all exit points. We don’t go loud right away. We wait for the signal. Then we strike when they least expect it. No hesitation.”

“Kill first, confirm second,” Moose mutters, nodding.

“Exactly,” Drift agrees.

The room hums with tension. Controlled rage. Focused chaos. We’re men with nothing left to lose when it comes to the ones we love. And every one of them is ready to die beside me if it means bringing her home.

We head to the stockroom, and Savage Steel doesn’t disappoint. Rifles, handguns, suppressors, knives, whatever we need, it’s there. Steel and fire. We load up like soldiers prepping for war.

Because that’s what this is.

War.

And I’ll burn the fucking world down to get her back.

But while my brothers talk tactics, check ammo, and count rounds, my head’s somewhere else.

With her.

Is she hurt? Is she scared? Is she even still alive?

I can't fucking breathe when I think about it.

Every time I blink, I see her smile.

The way she used to tilt her head when she was pretending not to laugh at something stupid I said. The way she curled into me at night, small but fierce, like even in sleep, she refused to let go. The sound of her laugh when she was happy, really happy.

And now? Now she's somewhere dark. Cold. Alone.

And I'm here, arming myself for a war I never wanted but will fucking win.

I close my eyes and exhale slow and steady.

This world, our world, it doesn't bend for love. It doesn't give a fuck about good intentions.

But we do.

And I'm going to make them pay for ever thinking they could take her from me.

Drift claps a hand on my shoulder. "You with us?"

I nod, gripping the strap of my rifle. "Yeah. I'm with you."

And I mean it.

Because the second we hit those docks, every Scorpion bastard that laid a hand on her is going to wish they never crossed the Royal Bastards MC.

Tonight, we paint the port in blood.

We have the port surrounded from every angle. Rooftop, dockside, alleyway, we have eyes. Guns. Brothers.

I crouch low behind a shipping container, my heart pounding in my chest so loud it nearly drowns out the ocean crashing onto the rocks beside me. It isn't the fight that has me like this.

It's Tessa.

Is she alive? Is she scared? Does she still believe in me?

I hope to God she knows I'm coming. That she hasn't given up. That whatever doubts live in her about who she was, where she came from, and who her father is, she still holds on to one truth. I will protect her. I will fight for her.

Always.

She didn't tell me the truth, no. And yeah, that stings. But it doesn't change how I feel about her. How I love her. What I will do to get her back.

The first Scorpion makes a move, stepping out from between the containers.

This is our sign.

"Now!" I bark, and everything explodes.

Finch, Ganges, and Riptide are the first out, charging like men possessed. Crab and Cetus flank from the other side, guns raised, shots already firing. Drift and I burst from our position, Moose, Serpent, and Kai on our tail, shadows with death in their

eyes.

Gunfire cracks the silence like lightning.

Men scream. Metal pings. The smell of blood and gunpowder hit like a punch to the throat.

It's chaos, violent, brutal chaos.

I don't stop. Don't flinch. I bulldoze my way toward the container we believe she's in, my body moving faster than my thoughts can keep up.

Until someone steps out in front of it.

Black leather cut. Patch I recognize instantly. Smirk I'd love to wipe off his smug fucking face.

"Looking for my daughter?" he asks, cocking his head like this is a goddamn game.

The breath leaves my lungs.

This son of a bitch.

I raise my gun without hesitation, but the moment I do, red laser dots dance across my chest. Snipers. Hidden in the shadows, trained on me.

He laughs.

I don't lower my gun. Don't move.

"You'll have to kill me," I say, steady and firm, "because I'm not leaving without my

girl.”

“She’s a Scorpion,” he says with a sneer. “Born and raised. It’s in her blood.”

I take a step forward, not caring about the fucking guns aimed at me.

“No. I’m in her blood. She’s in mine. I don’t give a shit where she came from. I know where she belongs.”

He crosses his arms, acting as if he holds all the cards. “This port belongs to the Rhode Island Scorpions. Your shipments? Ours now. I’m not here to negotiate. You walk away, we let you live. My brothers keep the port. I keep my daughter. That’s the deal.”

This crazy mother fucker.

“See,” I say, lips curling into a grin, “I do things a little different.”

A shot rings out from above. One of ours.

The red dots vanish.

Before that prick even knows what happened, I pull the trigger.

He drops, screaming, as a bullet rips through his leg.

Not dead.

Not yet.

I step up and press my boot hard into his chest, forcing him flat on the concrete. He

wheezes, glaring at me.

“Royal Bastards don’t negotiate, asshole,” I growl. “We protect what’s ours. This port. This club. My girl.”

I shoot him again, this time, in the other leg, and he howls like a damn animal. I smirk as his eyes lock with mine. “And I’ll kill anyone who hurts my girl. Even her father.”

I pull the trigger, emptying the rest of my mag into him.

Dead.

I reach down and I dig through his pockets with blood-soaked hands until I find a small key.

My fingers shake as I jam it into the container lock and twist.

The door creaks open with a metallic groan.

And there she is.

My Tessa .

Her eyes are red, face bruised, hair wild, but she’s breathing. Alive.

And then she’s running straight into my arms.

I catch her, wrapping myself around her like a man dying of thirst finally tasting water.

She's crying, sobbing, shaking in my arms. "I'm sorry," she keeps saying. "I'm so sorry, Torrent."

"Shhh," I whisper, burying my face in her hair. "It's okay, baby. You're safe now. I got you."

She clings to me like she thinks I might disappear.

"I told you I'd never leave," I say, voice thick with everything I'm too broken to say. "And I'm not."

Not now. Not ever.

I don't wait around.

As soon as I have her in my arms, I'm gone.

Drift didn't argue. Finch gives me a nod. The others know what to do. Clean up the mess, burn the bodies, erase the scene.

I'm grateful because my only focus is her.

I bring her home to my place. Somewhere safe. Somewhere that's hers now too, whether she realizes it yet or not. She didn't say much on the ride back. Just held me tighter than ever before, her fingers gripping my cut like if she let go, the nightmare would start all over again.

When I carry her inside, she buries her face in my neck and exhales like she's been holding her breath since the moment they took her.

I set her down gently on the couch, kneeling in front of her as I pushed her tangled

hair back from her face. She looked like hell, beautiful, broken hell.

“Do you need anything?” I ask, even though I already know what she needs most.

She shakes her head, eyes shimmering.

I sit beside her, resting my hand on my knees, staring at the floor for a beat before I speak. “You should’ve told me.”

“I know,” she whispers. “I wanted to. So many times. But I didn’t know how. I didn’t want you to look at me the way you did today.”

My chest aches. “Tessa, I didn’t look at you like that because of who you are. I looked at you like that because I was so damn scared of losing you.”

She turns to me slowly, her fingers twisting in her lap.

“You have no idea what it was like growing up in that world. Being taught to hate everything you stand for. Being treated like shit. Beaten because I was hungry or upset. It was a cruel, unforgiving world. A world I feared. I ran the second I was old enough. I’ve been running ever since. ”

Listening to her makes it difficult to breathe. The pain she’s suffered. The fear she’s endured. It’s fucking horrific and it breaks my heart.

I reach for her hand, lacing our fingers together. “Then stop running.”

Her chin trembles. “I didn’t think I could stay. Once I heard they were around, I knew they’d cause trouble for you because of me. I didn’t want that to happen.”

“I should be pissed at you,” I admit. “For lying. For keeping something that big from

me. For wanting to run instead of talking to me. And I was. Until I saw that empty apartment and realized you weren't leaving because you didn't love me. You were leaving because you thought you had to."

Tears well in her eyes, spilling over.

"I should've protected you from the start," I said. "Not just physically, but from that fear. From ever thinking you weren't mine."

She lets out a quiet sob, and I lean in, pressing my forehead to hers.

"I love you, Tessa. You're not your father. You're not the Scorpions. You're you. And you're mine."

She nods, breaking apart in my arms, her hands fisting in my shirt as she cries.

"I love you, too," she whispers against my chest. "I didn't want to go. That night with you it was everything. I needed you to know how much I loved you. I was trying to give you something good to remember me by."

"Don't say that." I hold her tighter. "You're not a memory. You're not some goodbye. You're here. You're staying."

She looks up at me, her lip quivering. "But I'm the daughter of the enemy."

"No," I cut her off. "You're the woman who has survived more than most. Who's brave enough to stand against everything she came from. You're mine, Tessa. And I'm yours."

She leans into me, and we sit like that for a while, tangled up in each other, letting everything finally fall into place.

We are still like that when there's a knock at the door.

A beat later, Drift walks in without waiting for an answer, followed by Finch, Riptide, and Ganges. They all look like hell. Sweaty, bloody, pissed, but solid.

Drift looks between us and gives a slow nod. "Just checking."

"We're good," I say, squeezing her hand.

"Tessa?" Finch asks gently.

She sits up straighter, wiping her face, nodding. "Thank you, all of you. Thank you for not giving up, even after you found out who I was."

"Wasn't even an option," Riptide says. "You're one of us now."

That is the damn truth.

"So, now that Tessa's safe and everything is settling down." Finch looks around at everyone and runs his hand through his hair. "Did you guys see Moose?"

"Yeah, he helped us clean up," Drift says, lifting a brow, confused.

"Yeah, I know. I mean, during the fight. Moose just grew claws and tore into that guy," Finch says, with wide eyes.

We all laugh, telling him he's crazy.

"Might be time to lay off the booze," I say, laughing, appreciating the comic relief he's brought.

They don't stay long. Just enough to be sure we're okay. To offer backup, food, and a few jokes to cut the tension.

And as they leave, I look at her again.

"You're safe," I whisper.

Her eyes meet mine. "Are you?"

"Yes, baby, I am. The threat is gone."

She climbs onto my lap, and I hold her tightly against me.

We stay like that for a long time, wrapped in a silence that feels like healing. There will be more to face, more battles, more ghosts, but we'll face them together.

And for the first time, I feel whole again. Because I'm not alone.

I have her.

And nothing, not bloodlines or bullets, is ever taking her from me again.

Tessa

Six months.

That's how long it's been since my world nearly came crashing down again.

But instead of breaking, I bloomed.

It wasn't perfect right away. Torrent and I had to wade through the storm of what happened, what I kept from him, what it meant, what it changed. There were nights when we'd stay up late, just talking. Sometimes yelling, sometimes crying. But always together.

And somewhere in all of that? We found us again. Real, steady, deep-down us.

Now, I wake up next to him. Every day. Wrapped in warmth, not fear.

His arm is draped over my waist, his hand splayed across my stomach like it always is, like if he doesn't anchor me to him while he sleeps, I'll float away. I love that. Love him.

The soft morning light filters through the curtains, casting a golden glow over the room. I shift slightly, and his hold tightens.

"Mmm," he grumbles, his voice deep and scratchy from sleep. "Where do you think you're going?"

“I wasn’t going anywhere,” I murmur, smiling as I turn to face him. “You’re clingy in the mornings.”

“Damn right I am,” he mutters, opening one eye. “You’re warm and soft and mine. I don’t see the problem.”

“You’re also ridiculously handsome when you’re half asleep.”

He grins, and it’s that slow, crooked grin that still makes my heart skip.

“You know what else I am?” he asks, his hand sliding just a little lower, teasing.

I squeal and squirm, laughing as I bat his hand away. “Horny. You’re always horny.”

“And you’re always beautiful.” He kisses my forehead. “Still don’t know how the hell I got so lucky.”

I press my fingers to his jaw and meet his eyes. “We both got lucky.”

He pulls me closer, our legs tangled, our bodies molded together like they were made to fit. And maybe they were.

“You happy?” he asks softly, like it still matters more than anything.

“I am,” I whisper, brushing my lips over his. “I’m really, really happy.”

I left the diner a few months ago and started working at Savage Steel.

Finch taught me how to handle inventory, Crab showed me the books, and even Drift said I had a knack for keeping the place running smoothly.

It felt weird at first, leaving behind the only place I’d known for so long.

But here? At Savage Steel? With Torrent and the club?

It feels like home.

No more running. No more secrets. No more fear slithering beneath my skin. The club, our club, has my back. And Torrent? He has my heart.

He kisses me again, longer this time, deeper. Like he's trying to tell me something without words.

When we pull apart, I breathe him in and smile.

"Wanna stay in bed all day?" I tease, tracing circles on his chest.

"Tempting," he says, voice low, "but we've got parts to unload and your fine ass to show off around the shop."

I laugh, burying my face in his neck. "You're such a charmer."

"I'm serious. You should see the way the guys snap to attention when you walk in. Grown-ass bikers getting nervous 'cause the boss's girl looks too damn good."

I lift my head and grin. "I am the boss's girl, huh?"

He cups my cheek and kisses me slow, sweet, and full of everything we've fought for.

"You're everything, Tessa."

And I believe him. I believe every word.

Because six months ago, I wasn't sure we'd make it. But here we are stronger, closer,

in love.

Safe.

Together.

Forever.

And I wouldn't change a single thing.

Thank you for reading *Torrent Strike*. Want more MC heroes? Check out Zane, *Shattered Souls MC*, Book One.

I was raised by the devil and in love with the enemy. Both of them could easily destroy me if I let my guard down .

I'm the daughter of the president of the Vegas Kings MC. I was born and raised with the club.

Zane's a member of *Shattered Souls MC* and nephew to their president. We grew up together, leaned on each other, loved one another. Enemies and lovers. But, we knew even back then that it was life or death. Walking away was one of the hardest things we've ever had to do.

Years later he comes crashing back into my life, refusing to stay away.

He's not the boy I remember, he's a man full of anger and pain hidden in his dark eyes.

I try to keep my distance, but when it comes to that wicked smile that means nothing but trouble, it's impossible.

The risks are higher, the wounds are deeper, but the want is stronger. It's a deadly situation for us both.

Love should stand the test of time, but I let my guard down . Now the devil will do whatever is necessary to make one of us suffer - forever .