



Viridian Vault (Blood Reapers #2)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: A revolution may be started with one person, but it sure isn't finished with one.

Irene

They say like calls to like. How ones darkness seeps into the pores of another. It can be infectious or prosperous, depending on how one chooses to embrace it. For me, the darkness calls to bring light to others. My bridges are alight with flames, burning all around me, but if I can light the way for the prosperity of others, I will. Even if it means jumping into the roaring flames myself.

Blood Reapers

The call to the wild haunts us in our dreams, feeding our dangerous pleasure to the next willing victim. We seek revenge for the hunted, seizing their livelihood for the hunt. Bloodhounds released in the darkness of night, we reap what those souls sow. Deriving pleasure from their sins, there's nothing we won't do to ensure we get what is ours. We are the only ones who can give her the darkness that she craves...even if she doesn't know it yet.

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Prologue

Irene

TWELVE YEARS AGO

“F uck off!” The new girl shrieks as the man in the mask brings her back. I roll my eyes at her bravery. All her fighting will get her knocked out or sold off faster. Neither of which is ever good for the rest of us, either.

When I first got here four years ago, I witnessed the aftermath of the girls who struggled.

To say the least, it wasn't pretty.

I was twelve when I was first grabbed, and I fought like hell to get free.

Hours later, I saw an older girl get brutally raped and murdered in front of the group to teach us a lesson.

At the ripe age of twelve, I quickly learned my place.

As time went on, I went to auction only once.

I was the only girl who didn't get bought or killed.

Not sure whether that was a blessing or a curse, I was immediately put to work. If I

didn't do what was asked?

The whipping marks still healing on my back burn with the not-so-distant memory itself.

A shudder runs up my spine as the sore flesh lays against the cold brick behind me.

Four painful years later, they are considering taking me back to auction now that I'm no longer willing to do their bidding.

Not only that, but they realized I would rather get a whip to the back than doll up another girl for them.

No fucking way. In my mind, there are only three outcomes for me right now.

One: they kill me on the whipping post.

Two: I'm sold off at auction and slaughtered by my buyer.

Three: I'm not sold then used as their own personal plaything.

I'm the only one to survive the night that an auction failed to do what it was supposed to. The others? Shot, execution style, in front of the crowd.

Their joyful cheers still echo in my head.

Rattling chains echo in the distance as girls scream, the henchmen dragging the girl behind them like rag dolls.

"Let's go," a voice barks at the front of my cage. I look down at the shackle around my ankle and shake it. Through the sheer cloth of his mask, he rolls his eyes and

enters.

Knee him in the face.

Spit in his eyes.

Impale your thumbs-

“There, now move,” he wraps his hand around my bicep, dragging me behind him as we go.

“Don’t want the boss to be upset when your ass is stained red.

” Refusing to say anything that would get me lashes, I keep my lips shut as he yanks me through the compound.

The heavy metal chain chafes my skin, rubbing it raw.

Turn after turn, I have no idea where we are going anymore.

When I ‘helped’ them before, it was only on one side of the compound.

The only time I was auctioned, they put a burlap sack over my head and carried me the whole way there.

Now, I can see exactly where I’m going and who is taking me.

Minus knowing their actual identities, I have never gotten this close to any of the henchmen.

His artery is right there.

Sink your teeth into his throat.

Kill him.

Kill-

The chain catches on a corner, sending me tumbling forward onto the concrete floor. My guide obviously cares for my existence when he fists my hair and wrenches me off the ground before I can gather my footing.

“Watch where you are fucking going, stupid bitch,” he spits while shaking me.

“Boss doesn’t like damaged goods.” Feet barely underneath me, we make it around another corner where several large men are standing shoulder to shoulder.

Shrinking into myself, I can’t stop the whimper that escapes my lips.

If my shackles didn’t notify them before, they sure know now.

All of them glance over at me, one guy in particular not wavering his gaze from me.

He furrows his brows, almost as if he’s confused, before finally looking away.

I glance up at my henchman to see if he caught that, but he’s already gone with another guy.

They reach toward one another as if they are going to kiss when a booming voice comes on the overhead speakers.

With the echo of quiet whimpers around me, I realize I’m not alone. Eyeing them, I quickly count twelve of us.

When did more come in?

Blood thrums in my ears as a muffled voice begins talking on the other side of the curtain. The men who were previously messing around all seem to get into some sort of soldier mode, tugging on the chains of the surrounding women.

I can't tell what ages they are, but I know I'm not the only one underage.

Pain in my chest grounds me to the real world, the knowledge that men like them feel as though they can treat us like the gum on the bottoms of their shoes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the fourth annual Flesh and Bones Trade!" Cheers from the crowd can be heard from the other side of the wall.

Panic in the room increases tenfold amongst the girls while the announcer continues.

"We have a very wonderful selection tonight of all shapes, sizes, and ages!"

Again, an uproar.

I swear I can feel the vibrations from everyone back here, their jittering bodies mixed with the high energy from the other side.

A brown-haired girl manages to glance over her shoulder at me, her eyes sunken as if she's been here just as long as I have.

None of us are fed well, barely getting scraps to keep us alive for the next auctions.

"First, we have a fifteen-year-old female from Mansfield, Ohio. Did you all want to hear her story?" The crowd doesn't wait for him to finish his sentence before they rally together.

My brows furrow when he starts talking about where she was and how they managed to get her.

Since I only ever went to one auction, I don't remember the specifics, but I feel like I would remember if they started to tell them about my kidnapping story.

"Twelve-thousand!" A female shouts right before "fifteen-thousand!" is called right after.

Up and up, the bids continue to rocket for the female they refuse to call by her name.

The bid finally lands at a whopping sixty-three thousand.

Men escort the sobbing female off the stage, her willowy body barely keeping up with them as they drag her away.

Girl after girl, the henchmen bring them forward for the crowd to ooh and awe over. It's absolutely disgusting, but there's nothing I can do to stop it. A revolution may be started with one person, but it sure isn't finished with one.

"Next we have-" he's cut off by several gunshots.

People scream for an entirely different reason as more voices shout for everyone to get down.

Henchmen do their best to rally the girls they have, but when a stampede of spectators rolls through the doors to the back, they abandon us to save themselves.

Like an out-of-body experience, I slowly back up until my body hits a wall and I watch from the corner of the room as they flurry around in panic.

A smirk lands on my face at the possibility of them getting the same future us girls had

A bullet to the skull sounds oddly satisfying, whether I'm the giver or the receiver.

"Everyone on the ground!" A male voice booms through the halls. Something about the voice sparks a fragile piece inside of me, and my knees crumble under my weight.

A switch flicking on, I wrap my arms around my head and tuck it between my knees. Breathing is a struggle as I fight against my lung capacity.

"You are not going to die," I mutter to myself, rocking slightly with the tips of my toes.

"Everything is fine. You are not going to die. Everything is fine." The surrounding chaos slowly fades as I chant over and over to myself.

Demons of all shapes and sizes threaten to creep back over me.

Their hot, sticky bodies touching my skin bring nasty memories to the surface.

"You are nothing better than a hot pocket to be in," they snicker behind their burlap head wraps.

"Please stop," I whisper, shaking my head and hugging myself tighter. Willing the racing thoughts to simply leave me be, but it's no use. "Stop!" My hands plant over my head as voices surround me, the deep baritones of men who simply live to degrade us and make us smaller than they are.

Something lands on my shoulder, and the out-of-body experience deepens further as I grab the wrist and yank.

Someone stumbles toward me, though they aren't what I'm looking for.

Instinctively, I grasp the weapon holstered on the hip of the male.

He isn't fast enough to stop me. Trembling fingers grip the harsh plastic handle as I aim outward, warding them off of me as I scramble to stand.

"Woah," one of the guys says, his voice soft but rough. They won't trick me like this again. "Take it easy, young lady. We are not here to hurt you."

"That's what they all say!" I scream, and when he takes a single step forward, I grip it with both hands. He stops, his hands pulling upward in a mock surrender. "Backup! All of you!"

They follow the command silently, taking several steps back. One of the guys moves to step out of the formation, but he stops when I turn the barrel on him.

"What's your name?" The guy asks again. I scoff. Does he seriously not know us? Typical men trying to rage-bait me and the others into thinking they are here to help. "I'm Haze, from the Blood Reapers Motorcycle Club."

Something about that makes the thoughts in my head spin as if I have heard that somewhere. He moves, just barely, but that brings me out of my thought bubble.

"Don't move!" I shriek again, my heart racing in my chest as I think about the girls. Oh God, I have to get to the others... "Where are the other girls? What have you done with them? Loaded them up to take them to the next destination for filthy fucking pigs like you?"

My mouth runs a mile a minute, and I don't stop it. It's either their last day or mine.

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He shakes his head, throwing a thumb over his shoulder.

“Your friend, Cassidy, I believe she said her name is, is getting medical attention from one of the guys due to those...idiots dropping her on her head.” The male who calls himself Haze shuffles slightly to the side to show my brown-haired cell neighbor, barely conscious.

Her eyes stare at the man working on the blood gushing from a wound in her skull, and that’s the moment I realize it’s not going to be them.

It will be me.

Turning the gun to myself, I press the tip to my temple. The milling seems to halt as sharp breaths are sucked in. My brain finally gives me a reprieve from the racing thoughts.

Well, besides ruminating over how cold the metal tip is.

“Cassidy said her friend’s name is Irene,” the guy treating my cell neighbor says quietly, glancing up at me from his position next to her.

Haze nods without removing his gaze from my face.

“Irene, I brought someone with us in case you needed some support, and to show you that we aren’t the guys your brain thinks we are.

” I open my mouth to cut him off, but he continues first. “My wife, Ulia, is in the

dock. She's waiting for you girls to meet her outside where she has fresh clothes, warm blankets, and plenty of food.

"My stomach threatens to growl at the man for mentioning our lack of rations.

"How do I know this isn't a stunt? A mockery to get us all to follow you willingly?" I ask, my voice suddenly wavering at the end.

"Would you like her to come in and meet you? I usually don't like to have her come into places where there are active weapons, but...

"his eyes don't move from my head and what he must be assessing as an active threat.

I hold tighter on the gun, my finger squeezing slightly to show him that I'm not moving from my position. He nods in resolution.

"I'm going to shout. So if you could remove your finger from the trigger for a moment, that would make me a bit more comfortable in showing you that we are serious.

"Glancing around at the men surrounding me, I hesitate.

He must catch it because he orders them all to back up a few steps.

There still isn't enough space between me and them, but I slowly take my finger off the trigger.

He lets out a short-lived sigh as I place my nail at the front of the trigger bay.

I won't push it from being startled yet none of them can try anything.

If anyone of them charges me, I'm done.

"Ulia!" Haze shouts, his eyes never leaving mine.

I can't help the wince from the loudness.

The sound of heels clicks through the tunnel with another man following her, and my brain shuts off.

It's fairly dim back here, but I see short, white-haired women dressed in small heels, dress pants, and a blouse.

"Oh, dear," she sighs, her voice sad with a mix of confusion. "You called?" She tilts her head toward me like she can't get a read on me, her eyes sparkling with interest and something else...

"This is Irene," Haze says with his hands still raised. Ulia nods, a small smile warming her lips. "She is having a hard time understanding our mission here today. I figured if she were to meet you, it might help her come to terms with it..."

Ulia just smiles at me, her green eyes lighting up the room like fresh-cut grass on a gloomy day.

"That makes sense," she says, her eyes flitting over the men around us.

"Well, I'm Ulia, but most people call me Uli.

Is there a nickname or anything that I can call you while we talk?

" Before I can open my mouth, she is striding a bit closer.

I take several steps back, my back pasting against the wall as I jerk my finger back on the trigger.

She takes the hint, stopping where she is before dropping to the dirty floor.

Criss-cross applesauce style, she folds her hands in her lap and waits.

Confusion pings around my brain at what she's doing, but Haze seems to know.

"No," I snap, the terror inside of me rising back up. My lungs expand, and air struggles to flow into my body.

"Hmm, alright. Can we talk?" I shake my head, clouds of darkness threatening to take over my vision. "Then I will talk to you, no worries!" There's a chipperness to her tone that has my nerves out of whack. We are in a fucking dungeon, and she's acting like we are at the park...

"I am fifty-three, and that's my husband, Haze. We have been married for about thirty years, give or take. Ol' Lady title for thirty-two of those years."

Curiosity happens to get the better of my filter. "What's an Ol' Lady?"

She smiles warmly. "It's a title that is used for the significant other of men in motorcycle clubs."

"Like he owns you?" I scoff, shaking my head at the absurdity.

"No way," she snorts, followed by a crackle.

"More like I own him. There are some archaic rules that prevent women to join the club. Which I will admit I'm perfectly okay with because driving a motorcycle scares

me.

Anywho, he can own my soul as long as I have his, just like marriage.

Nothing changes except that we live in a clubhouse.

We decided that we didn't want children, which works perfectly for all the little rascals these other men have hootin' around!

" She pats her pockets for a moment and then frowns.

"I wish I had my phone so I could show you! A brother from another chapter just had his baby and the cheeks !"

Swallowing thickly, I have no idea what is happening. She keeps talking as we continue this little standoff, none of us moving as she chats away.

Before I know it, the gun seems to get lower and lower before it clatters to the ground with my grip letting it loose on accident.

As if that was the cue, men dive for it at the same time I do. I don't want to hurt that sweet lady...

"Now!" A sharp sting lands on the back of my neck. I'm barely able to get my hand up and around the thing to pull the dart out before my vision goes black.

Chapter One

Irene

PRESENT DAY

“How old are you?” The small child looks up at me with sad, scared eyes as I smile softly. There’s little I can do to ease her fears, yet at the same time, I have to gauge what I’m doing. She opens and closes her mouth several times before shaking her head.

I try not to let out a frustrated sigh in front of her. There’s no telling how old she is, what her cognitive abilities are, or how to engage her gross motor skills to ensure she is on track. I can guess based on her build, but we also have zero idea of how she was being treated.

The tech guy from the MC, Globe, had done some research with a couple of guys from other chapters.

If they are correct, this young individual was taken from her home in Nashville when she was just three months old, approximately six years ago.

So, she should be almost seven. The family provided their local detectives with DNA samples that are being shipped to us, but with this latest bust happening so fast, it will be about a week before we even get the sample to the lab.

Her nails drag against the skin on her inner wrist where others like it have welts

over. A couple of them are scabbed, but I don't want her to cause herself any more pain. If only I could tell her that what happened to her was wrong, but that's not my role currently.

Running my fingers through my hair, I give her a tentative, strained smile.

"Well, young lady, it was lovely to meet you. Would you like to meet one of my other friends to go play?" Her face immediately lightens as she nods fiercely.

I can't say that I blame her for wanting to get out of this place.

Being one-on-one with an adult she's never met is pretty scary.

I gently knock on the wall next to me, and then seconds later, the door opens to Winifred smiling brightly.

"Aren't you cute!" Wini says, her gentle southern accent playing on the kids' heartstrings. "Why don't you and I go play with some others while Ms. Irene talks with Ms. Mila?" Wini doesn't give the girl any time to agree before corralling her into the main area with the other kids.

Mila comes in behind them; Her face lights brightly as she passes the girl. The second the door closes, the facade drops.

"This is bad," she mutters, dropping her notepad to her lap followed by her head in her hands.

As the lead in-house therapist, if she's saying things aren't looking too hot, then it's absolutely awful.

"We don't have many records for the kids here, dude.

” Looking back at my computer screen, my entire spreadsheet comes up practically blank.

“I know,” I sigh, putting my hair into a bun to get it off my suddenly sweaty neck. “Any luck on Wini’s side?” Mila immediately shakes her head.

“Out of the two hundred kids, she’s only been able to see twenty or so, not including the twelve that aren’t old enough.

You still have about fifty to screen before they are sent to me, then here for additional screening, then brought back to you for final approval.

On the plus side, Wini has been able to get a couple of the teenagers started on basic vitamins to help level out their blood work. ”

“Sweet,” I murmur, frustration licking at my bones. “Think you two would be able to get a finalized report by the end of next week?”

She nods. “I don’t see why not, though I think the guys want to go to Servants of the Sun to talk to the older kids and figure out what their plans are.

” That has my head snapping up. “Apparently, Globe has been working with Regan and a few of the Jacket Pickers on getting parents contacted out? Unfortunately, they are running into a lot of issues. One teenager has been missing for over thirteen years.” I let out a low whistle, my anxiety skyrocketing.

“The parents weren’t happy to see him?” I question, my anger rising to a boiling point.

She shakes her head with a sad smile. “Negative. They were doing research and saw somewhere that teens coming back from those.... circumstances are more likely to

act and lash out. They didn't want to deal with it.

"She opens her folder and grabs a stack of papers.

"These are all parents who have signed over their rights to Ride4Kids and Blood Reapers MC. Thankfully, two sets of parents were contacted and were thrilled to know their child was located. We apprised them of the situation, and that we aren't aware of what they went through, they were both ready to take on the action.

We informed them that our doors would always be open if they needed to bring them back for any reason.

They didn't seem interested in that option.

So, we should see them later this week."

I gawk at the stack. There are easily one hundred pages sitting in front of me, more than I think I have ever experienced in my tenure.

Sadness for these kids barrels into my heart, an emotion I'm not unfamiliar with in this position.

We bring them back from being in shit positions only for someone to decide that research is better than their kid.

It's a fucked-up world, but I'm so glad we can support them.

If it weren't for my history, knowing what it is like to be taken from terror only to be brought to the unknown, I don't think I would have survived being told my parents didn't want me.

Being told that I'm not wanted by the people that are supposed to love me unconditionally because of the shit I went through.

Another unfortunate piece to the puzzle that I have witnessed is that love is conditional, no matter whether people believe it.

A knock on the door makes me sit up slightly. Regan peeks her head through the door, a soft smile gracing her delicate features.

"I have a study group in ten minutes if you want to round up the troops?" She questions, looking more at Mila than me. Mila grabs the stack of papers back and puts them away before standing.

"We will have those reports done for you by the end of next week. If anything else comes up before then, let me know." With that, she turns on her heel and follows Regan out of the door.

Silence stretches longingly between me and the faint steps that grow more distant. Several seconds go by when my ears suddenly ring from the silence. Not being able to take it anymore, I pull out my phone to play soft music.

Ever since I was rescued all those years ago, the silence is far too loud for me.

As if my body feels the impending doom looming over me, it thinks everything will fall inward.

I spent days in isolation when I wasn't busy helping them prepare others against my will, or if I refused, they just sent me to spend time in the brig.

It was completely silent, with no water droplets or mice scurrying across the concrete like on the main levels.

It was awful, and while I still do not know how long I spent in the brig when I went.

Just thinking about it is enough to send me into a mini tailspin.

Taking several slow, long deep breaths, I force myself to focus on the task at hand. My past isn't my present, which doesn't define my future. I am safe and continue to save those who need it most, even if they don't understand that they need it.

As the head of case management for the children in the group home and adoption agencies, it's my job to ensure they are getting what they need.

We have several other qualified workers who follow up with them one-on-one, but I have the final say in their medical plans.

Winifred is our group psychiatrist, only really needed when children have exceptional needs or require medication management.

Thankfully, out of the now five hundred children we have housed here, only one hundred and fifty are on her side of the program, give or take.

Filling out the item reports is easy as the data is pretty much already there.

Matteo, one of the computer guys, inputs the generic data for me so that I can go from there.

Working quickly, I do my best to create a finalized number for the middle of the month to put forward to Shark, the MC president.

For the funding that he helps us receive, they require a fuck ton of additional paperwork.

“What the fuck?” I grumble as my computer screen suddenly goes black. Clicking buttons, pushing the power button, looking at the power strip, none of that works. My lights are still on in the room, so obviously the power isn’t out.

Dialing out to the main area doesn’t work, which means I’m stuck calling the main tech guys.

“Matteo speaking,” the voice growls. Like an immediate out-of-body response, I swear my core cries for mercy. Gravely and deep, it’s a voice that I’m not able to resist. Sadly, I don’t think I have ever met him in person, but if I did, I might have to ask him to say dirty things to me... “Hello?”

“Oh!” I gasp, clearing my throat in embarrassment and attempting to shake away the dirty thoughts bouncing in my brain. “This is Irene from Ride4Kidz.”

“I know; I have caller ID,” he chuckles, the sound sending shock waves straight to my core. “Is everything okay?”

“Actually, I seem to have some issues with my computer.”

“Desktop or laptop?” He responds quickly.

“Uh,” I blow out a breath, looking for the box thingy that makes noise. “I think desktop? It’s usually a big rectangle thing on the side of my desk...” I glance down to see the spot is empty. “Well, it’s not there anymore.”

“One of the others must have come to upgrade the system without telling you. I will be there in a few.”

“Oh, you can-” Before I can respond, the line goes dead. Cool. Let’s hope his face doesn’t match his voice because the likelihood of me climbing him is pretty damn

high right now.

Fuck hormones.

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Chapter Two

Matteo

G rumbling to myself, I pack up my laptop and snatch a bunch of cords off the table. Globe peaks his head out of his office door, brows furrowed deeply.

“What are you doing?” He huffs, his bulky arms crossing over his chest, causing the soft material to stretch tight. I do my best not to let my eyes linger too long before moving back to packing things into a go-bag.

“One of the girls from the foundation called about her computer not working. Don’t know, her tower is missing, though.

Could be that Hawk or Jones replaced it before she got back and could be told what needs to happen,” I say with a shrug.

Their having basic computer issues is the exact reason that Globe threw me into this position.

When I joined the club three years ago, there wasn’t much that I could do.

I didn’t have any actual job experience, but the basic technical side was easy enough.

He hums before pushing off the door frame and walking toward me. I don’t make any move to notice him, but when his hand lands on my shoulder, I can’t help but tense.

He doesn't know...

Taking a deep breath, I glance over at him and see his deep brown eyes burning into me. Like an inferno raging around us, his nostrils flare, causing the appendage in my jeans to grow tight against my zipper. Tilting my head to the side, I inhale deeply before gently shaking off his hand.

"It's fine. I just need to go show her how to use the laptop with the switch box, that's all I'm sure." Or at least I fucking hope it is. Unlike Globe, my technical skills are subpar at best.

"Want me to come with you?" He asks, his gravelly voice shaking with something I can't quite put my finger on.

Does he...

I shake my head. "Nah, all should be fine." I step away from his heated body, a slight sweat collecting on the back of my neck at his proximity. Also, it should be illegal for him to look this good. Though being a one-percenter, I don't think it would matter all that much if it were.

Globe says nothing as I turn my back on him to throw the last items into my bag.

At his hesitation, I sigh and turn toward him once more.

"If something is wrong, I will call you as soon as I can. There was a fresh shipment of littles that came in from the rings that I don't want to scare off by having you there.

" I wave my hand toward his body, with the colorful tattoos and shredded muscles on full display.

“They might not see you as a protector just yet.”

He huffs before turning on his heel and stomping back to his office. I can't help but snort at his dramatics. The walk over to the agency is quick. I'm stopped by a girl at the front desk, her brows raised in question.

“I'm here to see...” I pause, my voice trailing as I realize I forgot to get the name of the individual. That doesn't seem to be an issue, though.

“Are you here to figure out what's going on with my computer?”

” A snide voice comes from around the corner, my brows furrowing in confusion.

Her posture is tense, the tall heels on her feet clacking as she gets closer.

The second her eyes land on me, something inside of her deflates.

Her gaze roams over the planes of my body, and I instinctively straighten my spine to show off.

Something about her is oddly familiar, yet I can't place my finger on it.

“I'm sorry, this computer debacle mixed with other things happening has my anxiety fighting for its life inside of my head.

” Her laugh goes straight to my balls, and I fight myself to keep from adjusting the boner inflating itself.

I wave her off, my cheeks heating. “Don't worry about it,” I say, realizing that it's definitely not the right thing to say to someone with anxiety.

“Show me the way?” She turns around, not waiting to make sure I’m following.

I glance at the woman at the front, who simply shrugs at me.

At six-three, the power-walking female could easily be at eye level with me.

It could also be the high heels she’s sporting.

Without them, I would say she is about five-foot-nine or so.

Still, the legs on this woman are a mile long, and I definitely wouldn’t mind sinking my teeth into her.

After a short walk, she waves her hand into an open-door office.

“I don’t know what’s happening. All I know is that the tower thing is missing and there’s new equipment I haven’t seen before.

” Nodding, I glance around the office at her setup.

I’m not sure what I was thinking would be here, but the dark accents around weren’t even in the realm.

I drop the bag gently onto the pristine carpet and walk over to her desk.

There are black accents everywhere, yet nothing personal anywhere.

No photos of her or others, no signs that would wish someone well.

It’s just...black. All decor is solid black with some marbled black accents.

Clearing my throat, I tear my gaze away from the lack of personalization and focus on her computer setting.

I bring my laptop out of my bag as well as the connection wire.

Plugging it into mine and hers, I bring up the diagnostic tools and get to work.

Her entire screen is blacked out, but when I glance at the back, I realize the primary connection isn't attached.

Rolling my eyes, I reach back toward the black connection box and push the plug back in.

The screens around her laptop immediately illuminates as they search for the monitors.

"I swear," she curses, and when I look up, her fingers are pinching the bridge of her nose. "I checked all the freaking connections before you got here to make sure it wasn't something stupid like that."

I snort, unable to hold in the humor of it all.

"Don't worry about it. Computers fear me coming, so they work their magic before I show up.

" She cracks a small smirk as she stuffs her hand into her pants pocket.

"Let me run a few diagnostic tests just to make sure everything is in order, then I will get out of your hair."

She nods, sitting down in one of the comfy-looking chairs on the other side of her

desk and scrolling on her phone.

I take a moment to look over her stoic features.

Something about her calls to me—a darkness within her that has me itching for more.

A simple glance up from her phone has her dark gray eyes, almost the epitome of darkness, staring directly into my soul.

With shoulders straightening, scowl deepening, she breaks the connection quickly and looks at her phone.

Exhaling softly, I ensure the rest of her stuff is fine before unhooking. “All is good; seems to have just been a loose connection. Don’t feel stupid or anything, and if something happens again, you know how to reach us.” She nods, looking anywhere except at me.

“Yeah, uh, thanks for the help,” she chokes out before standing next to the door. It’s clear she can’t wait for me to be out of her space, and with the air growing thicker and thicker, I can’t wait to be out of here either.

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Chapter Three

Nero

“ Y ou stupid fucking-” I growl as the rusted bolt snaps off. The old motorcycle sitting on the stand creaks as I contemplate throwing it into the middle of the ocean somewhere.

“Another one?” Viper asks as he saunters into the garage. My glare must speak a thousand words because he throws his hands up with a snicker. “If you would quit taking on junker projects, you might not get so frustrated.”

“Maybe if you minded your own fucking business, I might not consider introducing you to my fists,” I gripe back, grabbing the welder, a new bolt, and a torch. Setting the bolt and torch on the toolbox, I turn toward him. “Was there a reason for your visit?”

“Yeah, Shark wanted to see if you had time in your schedule for a pre-purchase inspection for a new bike.”

“He couldn’t ask me himself?” I cross my arms over my chest, my brow raised in suspicion.

“I would say he could, but apparently he is with the dude now, and they are talking about bringing it back to the shop. It would have helped if you had answered your phone, too.” Rolling my eyes, I move toward the second stand that’s empty.

“I will give him a call,” I say just as Viper’s phone rings. He grabs the device and smirks.

“Speak of the devil,” he answers. “Hey, boss.”

“Tell him that I’m available whenever today for him to bring it by.” I stop in my tracks when a leggy, raven-haired female steps into the garage. “Hi,” I breathed out, the words squished tightly in my chest.

She stares back at me for a moment, almost as if she’s just as stunned as I am. Height is her best friend because her toned legs tense even more in the tight jeans she’s wearing. High heels make her taller, but they seem to accentuate everything about her.

“Uh, hi?” she says back, which sounds more like a question than an answer. After a few moments, she shakes her head as if to clear out lingering thoughts. “My check engine light started blinking at me this morning. Regan said Maverick referred her to the shop...”

“Is your car here?” I question as I grab a shop rag to wipe the grease from my fingers.

With a look of lust and something else mixed in there, she watches as I work the grease off my fingers and then palms. Her tongue darts from between her lips for a moment before she inhales sharply when Viper steps up next to me.

Red tinting her cheeks, embarrassed to be caught checking me out.

Don’t worry, darling. The feeling is mutual.

“Uh,” she starts hoarsely then clears her throat. “Yeah, it’s right...” she jabs a thumb over her shoulder and looks anywhere but at me.

“Right, well, why don’t you pull it up to the third bay?

I will grab the scanner to see if we can do a quick diagnostic.

” She nods as I go to open the third bay.

Wheeling away a spare toolbox, I motion her forward.

White smoke billows from her exhaust as she accelerates, and just as she’s getting out of her car, a large tow truck rolls up with a bike on the back.

Shark grins from inside the truck as he rolls the window down.

“Look at this beauty!” He shouts over the engine. After a moment, he sees the woman standing in the bay. His mouth drops open in an ‘O’ before he smirks. “Want me to load her up and give you a minute?”

I feel my own blush creep up my cheeks. Must he be so fucking obvious? I nod, turning back to her.

“I would shake your hand, but I’m covered in grease. I’m Nero,” I introduce, giving her a single nod.

“I’m Irene. I work over at the Ride4Kidz foundation,” she responds, my mind racing to see if I remember her from any of the drops with the kids.

Whatever is on my face must give away that I have no idea who she is.

“I’m the head of social work, so I rarely come out to help as I usually work in the background.

Profiles, contacting families, the basics.

” I nod, furrowing my brows at the description.

She thinks that’s basic shit? If anything, her job might be harder than ours.

We just get the kids out of their situations.

They have to figure out what to do with them once they get back.

“Anything you can think of going wrong? Weird noises, indescribable shaking?” Her brows furrow at my question as she drops her keys into my outstretched hand. “Two-thousand-one Chevy Malibu?” I ask, and she nods with more confusion on her face.

I withhold my chuckle.

I know my cars, and thankfully, hers is a vehicle that is fairly simple to fix.

Sitting in the driver’s seat, I slot the key into the ignition.

It sputters a few times before finally turning over.

Just as she said, the check engine light pops on, flashing on the dashboard with a few other lights. Sighing, I shake my head.

Typical.

I carefully roll it onto the ramps, leaning my body halfway out of the door to ensure the two tires on my side are fully on. Grabbing the scanner, I grab the adapter and plug it in.

“It can take about thirty seconds to a minute if there’s a lot of stuff wrong,” I trail off, watching as code after code pops up. It takes everything in me not to grimace.

“That bad, huh?” She asks, her voice tight but forced to be happy. “I wouldn’t have brought it in if it didn’t blink, but Regan said something about it blinking not being good...”

“Well, none of these lights mean anything good,” I scoff, shaking my head as I fight against myself to say something snarky. I will never understand how people just let that shit go.

With a finalized beep, the scanner pops up twenty-two different messages for issues on the car. “Shit,” I curse as I tap through them all.

P0101 - MASS AIRFLOW SENSOR

P0300 - MULTI-CYLINDER MISFIRE DETECTED

P0420 - CATALYST SYSTEM LOW EFFICIENCY

P0128 - ENGINE COOL. TEMP. BELOW STAT

P0217 - CYLINDER HEAD TEMP OVERHEAT

P0325 - KNOCK SENSOR ABNORM.

“What’s the damage?” Her nail is between her teeth as she struggles not to bite it. “I’m usually far too busy to be worrying about my car, and when I remember about it all, it’s either too late at night or I’m in the middle of running errands.”

Viper appears next to her, slinging his arm over her shoulder.

Something inside of me screams to remove it for him.

Especially when I look at her face to find her even more uncomfortable.

He must take the hint when she drops her shoulders to let it slide off her back, and instead of being embarrassed, he laughs it off.

“I can see that,” I grumble, shaking my head in irritation. If she were my girl, this would never have happened.

Straightening my shoulders, I freeze with my eyes on the scanner.

My girl.

I barely fucking know her, so there’s no goddamn way she will want to shack up with my old ass. Plus, she seems so far out of my realm that making her mine isn’t a possibility I want to consider. So, I shoo the pesky thoughts from my brain and get back to work.

“You have a slew of issues going on, some of which are going to require some significant investigation. Any issues with it blowing smoke?” I know damn well what I saw earlier, but I’m more interested to see if she’s actually paid attention.

With the blush flushing her cheeks, I can guarantee that she has.

“I honestly don’t know. Like I said, I run around a lot.” She waves a hand toward the car. “That’s my only mode of reliable transportation.” Her eyes land everywhere except on me as she sways on her feet.

I can’t help but scoff. “This car is one run away from either catching on fire or breaking down with no chance of revival.” I grab the tablet from the counter and start

printing off the codes that were thrown.

“I have a car in the back that I can loan you until I can either fix this one or we can get you situated with a new one.”

“Whoa, I can’t do that,” she snaps as her head flips back and forth vehemently. “I’m not your responsibility, and this MC-”

“Is your family too,” I retort and turn toward her fully. The audacity to say that the MC isn’t for her is like saying that I’m a saint. It’s a lie through and through. We don’t fuck around with our own, and that includes the ladies over at the agencies.

“You have been part of the family for a hell of a lot longer than half the men inside the club,” Viper jumps in, his arms wide. “Whether you want to accept the help or not is fine, but with the way he is about to go off, you might not have a choice in accepting his assistance.”

Like looking into a mirror, my molars mash at the same time hers do. She’s the type of girl who doesn’t like to ask for help. I’m the type of guy who doesn’t like to offer help without need. Right now, she needs it.

Staring into my fucking soul, her gray eyes don’t budge, and I sure as fuck don’t relent.

“Your car has been running on fumes for a while, babe. Nero is the best mechanic in the state. If he says shit ain’t right, then shit ain’t right.

We can get you whatever you need. Plus, you have been putting miles on your car, which should mean that the club buys you a new one since it’s the reason it’s being run down,” Viper does his best to voice reason, yet I can tell that she doesn’t want to hear it.

Something about her demeanor shifts, a pain in her gaze nearly slipping before she locks it back up tightly.

After several moments, Shark walks into the shop and claps his hands together loudly. “What are we staring at each other for? Let’s get this show on the road so I can see if my new beauty is worth it!”

Irene breaks away first, rolling her eyes so far into her head that I think they will get stuck. “Then tell your man to stand down,” she grumbles, waving a hand toward me. “He’s demanding that I leave my car and use one of the ones around here, but my car is perfectly fine.”

That earns a celebratory scoff from me. Turning the screen toward our president, his eyes widen the longer he scrolls.

“Hate to say this, darlin’,” he starts, whistling low when he clocks the vehicle in question. “That thing isn’t worth the risk. Your car isn’t perfectly fine. It’s either gonna die or blow up.” His tone leaves no wiggle room, but she obviously isn’t used to being told what to do.

“I don’t care if it blows up, I can’t afford for it to be fixed to the extent that he’s saying.

Not only that, I can’t afford to buy a new car!

I don’t want a rental, I just wanted to know why my thingy was blinking.

If it were that bad, then I wouldn’t be able to turn the radio up over it.

Everything about this freaking day...” She heaves in a breath, ready to go again for round two, but I stop her.

“Look, I get you don’t want to ask for help. I have been in that boat with you, but I can’t safely let you leave with it.” Her eyes widen and her jaw slackens before the obvious gnashing of her molars hit one another.

“Who the fuck-”

“Alright,” Shark butts in, standing between us as he redirects Irene.

“Nero will work on getting your car figured out, you and Viper will go look at the loaners, okay? You don’t have to worry about buying another car, Irene.

The club has been your home and will forever have your back. Right now, you and Viper go.”

“But-”

“Are made for sitting, which is what you could be doing right now if we actually got moving earlier.” Viper slings his arm over her shoulder again and guides her from the shop.

“You are fucked,” he cackles, slapping my arm harshly. “The tension between you two...” he whistles low in appreciation.

I scowl. “There’s no tension between us. She came to get my professional opinion and then discarded it. That’s the tension that I have.”

“I bet if Viper and I weren’t here, y’all would have clashed in the middle of teeth, tongue, and cock.

” I’m seconds away from punching him in the face and saying fuck-all to the consequences, but a horn blares from outside.

“Shit, that’s probably the seller. We need to get the bike checked before I can consider the purchase. It will be a nice fixer-upper.”

“I fucking doubt that,” I mumble as I close the third bay door and walk to help him.

However, no matter what Shark talks about, my mind trails back to a fiery raven-haired girl who stands to give me grays before I turn forty.

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Chapter Four

Irene

“ H e what ?” Wini shrieks on the other end of the line.

I’m sitting outside the local courthouse waiting for it to open and staring at the interior of the brand new Toyota Accord they are ‘lending’ me.

Viper also hinted at my never touching my other car again, which almost made me cry.

I have had that car since StingRay, Shark’s father, bought it for me for my seventeenth birthday with the club.

Now, at twenty-nine years of age, it’s barely hanging on.

It was already used, but I loved it when I got it.

The thought of letting it go...it was the first thing that has my emotions triggered.

“Viper said they were ‘lending’ me the car but when one of the sales guys snorted...”
Wini cackles at the other end of the line.

“Yeah, that’s your car now!” I groan at her overexcitement.

I can’t let them buy me expensive shit I don’t need.

I also refuse to allow them to buy me anything, period.

If I have ever learned anything in this life, one of the key items is that gifts aren't free, nor do they come cheap.

People always intend them as a favor to be repaid later.

"Just go with it for now, not that you really have any other choice. It sounds like Nero, Viper, nor Shark were going to let you leave with your janky ass car."

"My car is not janky!" I exclaim with more frustration bubbling under the surface that no one is on my dang side about this.

"Whatever you say, girlfriend," she says passively. Voices in the background echo through my phone and into the new car speakers. "I have to run. Let me know if you decide to kick their asses or castrate them. I will video it for you later as spank-bank material." Without a goodbye, she hangs up.

Sighing, I drive to the local thrift store to pick up the newest donations. They have been partners with Blood Reapers MC since long before I joined, and they have continued to be a major contributor to the youth in need within the community.

"Irene, I didn't recognize you without your car!

" Abigail squeals as she throws herself into me, giving me one of her famous hugs that goes unreciprocated.

Everyone knows I hate being touched, but she is the only person I don't panic over when it happens.

Not sure what the psychology behind it is, but I'm not going to educate myself about

it.

Her hugs are nice, just not pleasant if that makes any sense...

She finally backs away and gives me space. "Yeah, the lights on the dash were flashing too much for me to ignore. The MC set me up with this for now while it's getting fixed," I sigh, still not happy about potentially never seeing my car again. She doesn't need to know that, though.

"I'm not surprised. It was blowing an unhealthy amount of smoke into the environment. Probably best that you replace it."

Yeah, against my will...

"The guys are grabbing the carts with the bins. When word got caught around town about the new takedown, we had so many additional donations that we had to put them in the shed!" She giggles, her head shaking with ease.

"That's amazing. Let Regan know who donated things.

She and the kids do group time a lot, so they can make thank you cards or something during one of their fun group sessions.

" Nothing sounds less fun, but Regan enjoys teaching the children to read and write, and enjoys being with them so much that she does it near-daily.

Abigail talks about everything as a few of the MC guys load the bins into my car. The last one barely fits, but they slam the door hard enough to make it work.

"Thank you again, Abi. This means a lot, and I'm almost positive the kids will like the clothing too. Don't forget to send Regan the names of donors." She gives me

another unreciprocated hug before pulling the guys back inside behind her.

Driving back to the agency headquarters, I try to think of ways to get those kids to open up to us.

Usually, it only takes a few sessions with them to get them to open up.

I can't meet with every single individual, but I have tried more than double my efforts than usual with no luck.

It's impossible to know whether they were threatened into silence, whether they just don't want to talk about what happened, or even whether they weren't mistreated at all.

Yet.

With the upward tick coming into view regarding children in rings, there are more and more children coming out of them unharmed.

The new ways are more daycare style, letting them live freely while also under strict watch and rule.

It's an odd mixture, but they don't know better.

They don't get sold out until their teens, when it's too late for them to want to run.

With a loaded exhale, I park next to a rumbling motorcycle.

It idles next to me with a teen on the seat.

He's probably sixteen or seventeen, with one of the guys.

He must be learning as he lets go of the clutch to let the bike slowly propel itself forward.

A second later, the engine roars, a loud backfiring pop rings out, and the bike shuts off.

With the long, defeated look on the kid's face, I would guess they had been at it for a while.

The door to my car suddenly jerks open. I immediately see Globe as he looms over me with a sly smirk playing on his lips.

He is one cocky idiot, but there is a carefree nature about him that wants to just wrap you up.

Minus the giant bulging muscles and tattoos that scream bad boy, he would make the perfect cuddler.

Behind him, Nero lingers with his muscular arms crossed over his chest. Something about the act makes me feel...

feral. Like he could easily overtake me, and quite frankly, I don't think I would be against it.

Instead, I power through these odd emotions.

"Shouldn't you be working on my car?" I snap, the wound of my car's near-death outing still fresh.

"The shop is closed, it's after hours," Nero shrugs, his expansive shoulders rising then dropping effortlessly.

Something about those strong, bulking shoulders has my thighs clenching harshly.

Furrowing my brows, I snap myself out of the lusty haze to glance at my watch.

Sure enough, it's almost eight at night.

The summer months are in full swing because the sun is barely setting.

"Winifred said you might need help bringing stuff in," Globe cuts in while gesturing to my very packed backseat. "It's incredible that we have so many amazing donors for these kids. They have gone through enough shit, worrying about clothes and food shouldn't be one of them."

Looking into his mucky brown eyes, they twinkle with ease, an ease that I'm all too familiar with as it masks our true feelings. It masks secrets. Maybe his aren't as dangerous as mine.

I can't stop the small smile that pulls at my lips.

They can't get too close.

They can't know.

Dropping my gaze, I wave for them to move away from the car so I can get out. They do so easily. No prodding or probing is needed. Nero's face is passive, yet his jaw is clenched tightly. He must have seen something on my face that he didn't like.

Lucky for me, I don't work for them. I work for the foundation that Wini, Mila, and I run with the board. Regan is making her way up there with us as an educational specialist, but she's not had any help from her four men.

Nero doesn't wait for me to give them the go-ahead. Totes are dragged from my car onto the concrete, stacked on top and side-by-side. The kid and the other guy, who I now recognize as Maverick, come over to us to assist.

"Ma'am," the kid says with a nod and then grabs two at a time. I haven't even gotten my butt out of my seat yet.

A blood-curdling shriek rings through the air followed by a gunshot.

I whip out of the car and slam the door to go inside the agency, only to be grabbed around the waist in a stronghold.

A piece of me I thought I buried a long time ago resurfaces, an old response I thought I worked through in the past roars out of me.

With more force given through adrenaline, I slam my head back into my intruder's face. They cry out, and I bring my elbow into their stomach, right by their ribcage. Air whooshes from their lungs as I'm able to break free.

I don't wait around. Instead, I bolt inside and am met with four other guys with their hands in the air.

Shoving past them is nearly impossible as they stand like a wall.

When I manage to get past, the sight makes me halt.

I have seen this girl around before, though she isn't one that I am familiar with.

"Rachel," I whisper. Whatever breeze is let inside carries my voice to the terrified girl.

She turns the gun away from one of the other innocent social workers toward me.

Her hands tremble while holding the weapon, and she shakes her head back and forth frantically as if she doesn't want me here.

A moment later, her finger moves from the side of the gun to lay flat on the trigger.

I don't pay anyone my attention besides Rachel.

Tears stream down her face with a wild look remaining in her eyes.

From the looks of it, she isn't sure what to feel right now.

A mixture of emotions, and that's a damn good thing.

She's at least emotionally fragile, not shut off.

We can work with that. Though, something must have spooked her, and I have no idea what that could be.

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Glancing to the side, I notice Wini. She looks scared as her tears trail down her face.

Something from a session they had must have pushed this poor girl over the edge.

An easy calmness falls over me as I briefly remember my predecessor, Ulia.

When my own family failed to take me back, not wanting anything to do with me, Ulia didn't hesitate.

She brought me here and worked one-on-one with me.

The calm she instilled in me is now coming back in waves.

"You are Rachel, right?" I ask as I move centimeter by centimeter away from her previous target. "My name is Irene. Do you have a name or nickname that you prefer to be called?" The words come easily to me as I recite my inner script.

"N-n-no," she stutters as the other men slowly circle her.

None of them are in my sight, and she doesn't seem to notice, so I sink to my knees where I am. A sharp inhale comes from behind her, and I curse internally that someone who isn't aware of the protocols is in my building.

She startles and then turns on them, but I keep talking quickly but calmly.

"That's okay, I don't have a nickname either. I always thought they were kind of lame anyway." Rachel looks unsure of everything, and I clock it was Matteo who put

it in her head with the inhale. If he hadn't, she would be none-the-wiser. Now...

"Get out," she whimpers as her finger puts pressure on the trigger. It's not fully pointing at me, but I can't stop trying to make her bring it back. I would rather it be me than someone else.

"Totally understand, but Rachel, I can't leave." She swings back fast, whirling toward me with a look between scalding and insanity, but she doesn't see me. She looks right through me and around the room like she's waiting for someone else.

"Get out!" She screams, and before I can de-escalate anything else, she squeezes the trigger.

Moving faster than a bullet is not humanly possible, and it proves itself real.

Fire burns through my arm as I charge her.

She doesn't get far as I tackle her to the harsh tile floor.

We grapple for the gun as everything fades away.

Finally, I pry her fingers off the handle of the gun and shove it away.

With practiced strategy, I twist her arms behind her back and then sit on them.

She tries to buck me off, but I remain heavily on her, not letting her get her legs under herself.

Wini finally comes forward with tears still falling as she mutters soft, calming things to the girl.

I'm not familiar with her, and that's not a good thing.

She should have been placed on the at-risk list. My brain quickly rolls through the names of individuals on that list that I have met with already.

None of them are her, so my brain comes back blank.

"You are safe," I say when a pair of cuffs clunks in front of me.

I take them, placing them securely over her wrists, and then get off.

Two of the guys grab her and haul her to her feet.

I don't feel bad about the way they handle her because, at the end of the day, she almost killed someone.

If I were several inches the other way, it would have been a straight-heart shot.

Not that I would be complaining. I would be dead.

Now, she will be in solitary for a while.

"I want CCTV pulled from the last hour," I tell the group, then hone in on Globe, Matteo, and Nero as they gawk at me.

"Send medical to follow up with her when she is stable. I want her medical chart on my desk in the next thirty minutes. I don't care who gets it for me.

If it's not there, it will get more complicated. Wini will field questions."

This is not the first and will certainly not be the last time one of our kids goes off the

deep end. It's also not the first time I have been shot by one of them. Now, we just have to take it in stride.

Waving my arm to the group dismissively, I register the graze wound on it as it burns brightly on my nerves.

Yeah, it definitely won't be the last. With a shaky sigh, I get to my feet, swaying slightly with each step toward my office.

Feet pound behind me, yet I ignore them.

Instead, I rifle through the mental list of things I will need to do now.

Call Shark to notify him;

Review her medical chart;

Write an incident report;

Notify and send the report to the board;

Research more into this young lady to see what we can work on to elevate her care.

"Where are you going?" Globe's deep voice calls from behind me. My brain is sluggish as I process his words, the finality in them going completely over my head. Palming the wound on my arm, blood seeps between my fingers as I carry on down the hall.

"Going to write my reports," I call back, but even I can hear that the words coming from my mouth are a bit slurred.

The world is slowly tilting on its axis.

Another step is all I take before I'm hoisted into the air with a shocked squeal, and I'm suddenly staring at a perky bubble butt.

Something inside of me screams, and who am I to not follow its commands?

"Hey!" Globe growls as I pinch his butt. Blood splatters on the floor as we walk, the crimson staining the white tiles unceremoniously. Who needs blood when every step causes his booty to jiggle? Usually, I wouldn't care about butts, but I can admit that his is round and voluptuous.

"I bet your butt jiggles when you get hit from the back," I giggle, my brain going in several directions. "Nice globes." I cackle to myself at the play of names while his shoulders shake from what I'm going to assume is amusement.

"She must have lost more blood than we thought," the familiar voice I now know as Matteo says.

I try to peek up at him, leveraging myself on Globe's perky globes, but it's no use.

The room spins as thoughts of playing with his butt take over my brain.

Not sure when he got here, but I'm not complaining.

He steps up next to me for a moment, and the perfect outline of his soft manhood is enough to have me drooling.

"Holy mama, that thing would destroy me," I sing-song, smiling happily at the thought of him using that on Globe. I smack his butt again and mutter something along the lines of getting it in his butt.

“Yeah, she definitely lost a lot of blood. She’s usually more...quiet than this. Has more hatred in her eyes. Right now...” Matteo bends down to my eyesight, but there are multiple of them walking along us. “She looks pleasant.”

“Well, the puddle where she was shot, then the exertion of blood that poured from her when she pinned that girl down...I would say she’s lost a lot.” I watch the red stream run down my arm with slight fascination, but my stomach suddenly turns and my brain goes fuzzy.

“I don’t feel good.”

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Chapter Five

Globe

Not even seconds later, Irene is passed out over my shoulder. She wasn't heavy to begin with, but now that she isn't squirming around, she's a lot lighter.

Walking to the main clubhouse is lengthy, and I'm pretty concerned with how much blood she's lost while still losing more. Since she's passed out and not able to say her needs, it increases the anxiety.

"Man, she seems like she's bleeding more," Matteo says as pressure lands on my shoulder, stopping me.

"Let's adjust her to a bridal carry instead, give her body a better ability to flow her blood.

"Not sure what exactly that means, but it sounds smart and makes enough sense to me.

Nero and Matteo both work to gently fold her over my shoulder and into my arms. This position isn't easy, but the color on her pale face returns slowly.

Matteo glances at the wound with fascination, an odd but familiar look crossing over his face as I hike her higher in my arms. He shakes his head, looking away from the river on her arm.

“I will hold her arm while you walk,” Nero demands as we start moving again.

“What do you think happened with the girl?” His question has been ringing in my head since the moment she ripped out of my arms to go check on that scream.

Nothing could have prepared me for seeing Irene being shot.

It didn’t seem fatal at the time, yet her being pale and passed out isn’t helping me feel any better.

Nero holds the back door to the clubhouse, letting me slide inside easily with him in tow.

“Not sure,” I answer, my head conjuring all sorts of things that are probably not even close to what happened. “Matteo, call Shark and let him know that shit hit the fan at the agency. Inform him we have Irene coming to medical. Nero, call Doc.”

Nero appears uneasy as he lets go of her arm but does so quickly to make the call. They both suddenly become frenzied in their conversations, and as we round another corner, we are met with another member.

“Shit, what happened to her?” Viper hisses as he pauses in front of me. I sidestep him and simply keep going.

I huff. “Walk and talk.” Fuck, medical should not be this far into the clubhouse. I swear I have been walking for twenty minutes. With limited lung capacity, I recount what happened from the time she flew out of my arms to right now.

“Let me go get Shark-” Viper starts.

“Already on his way,” Matteo says, cutting him off.

A clean bed comes into view, and my straining muscles thank me.

Setting her down as gently as I can, Doc storms toward us with a nurse on his heels.

Neither of them appears to be in a ‘fuck around’ mood, so I dive into what happened all over again.

“I want a CBC and BMP pulled for stat analysis, CRP, ESR, and PV pulled in twelve hours. Saline drip to start, and let’s grab an antibiotic...

does she have any allergies? Blood type?

” He asks the group as he and the nurse work side by side to prepare Irene.

They look like they are about to take her back for a fucking life-changing surgery, and my heart beats a million additional times at the thought of losing her.

“Iodine, penicillin, and plastic tape,” Shark reads off his phone as he comes down the hall hauling ass.

Nothing like learning about a person through a medical emergency.

“Swap the iodine swab for pure alcohol, clindamycin for the antibiotic instead,” Doc tells the nurse as she quickly works to swap the material cart out. As she comes back, whatever she sees makes her face pale to the shade of pure white.

“What?” I demand as the compulsion to protect Irene grows stronger, the pressure inside of my chest demands justice on her behalf. Bringing my fist to the spot, I find it does nothing to soothe the ache.

“The wound is deeper than I anticipated. The call did not make it seem this deep.

Nothing to worry about, though,” he explains confidently. “Prep three-zero absorb suture. Let’s do a deep horizontal mattress suture.”

“A-positive blood type,” Shark announces to Doc, who seems pleased.

“Thank you, Pres. That will be all from you. Please leave.” His hand waves toward the door as he focuses on her again.

Something inside of me wants to force him to let me stay, that she needs to have me there with her when she wakes to ensure she isn’t scared.

Before I can act on anything, Viper has a death grip on my bicep and drags me out.

I don’t put up a big fight. Instead, I let my mind wander to the female lying unconscious with blood pouring from a wound that didn’t appear too deep.

In my shitty thirty-two years alive, I have never once felt like this.

Fuck, not even my tattoos made me feel this alive when I was under the needle.

Nero’s hands rake through his hair in frustration, and I can’t stop the snarl that leaves my throat. “She shouldn’t have to be alone!” I bark out to the group, not really aiming at anyone in particular, but the look Viper gives me has my confidence waning.

The obsession.

“Shit, you have it bad,” he drawls with a shake of his head. “Doc is more than capable of taking care of her.”

Matteo stares at me as I fight the stupid feelings that are growing inside of me. His eyes look as if they are trying to see into my soul. Little does he know that my soul

has been ripped out by one accident and placed in the hands of the bleeding female.

Fuck, I'm usually not this chaotic. My thoughts are all over the place as I try to get myself together. What if she dies and I never get the chance? What if she doesn't feel the same? All it took was just a look for her to knock me off kilter.

"What do you have?" Maverick asks as he sits down next to me at my desk. I adjust my glasses and glance over at the screen.

"Kastilof is on the run again, but we are working to pinpoint his location once more. He realized we were onto him previously, so that forced him back into hiding." Cursing under his breath, Mav leans his head into his hands, almost like he isn't sure what to do at this point.

Honestly, I'm right there in the same boat with him.

Turning my attention back to the screen, I continue to keep the awkward encounter to a minimum.

"He frequents several locations around the area, even big-name casinos. Pretty sure Black Viper's MC spotted him yesterday at one of their local bars. We will find him."

The door to my office creaks open as a female walks into the room.

Her deep black hair almost looks blue, but her face is currently masked with utter frustration and irritation.

Her deep gray eyes threaten to swallow me whole if I look into them for too long.

Fuck, I must look like a fucking stalker because I have to literally rip my eyes away from her to stop myself.

How had I never seen her around here before?

Turning away from her, I go back to looking through footage on the computer.

“Maverick, here’s the paperwork you asked for.

Kastilof is a slippery son of a bitch, huh?

” She chuckles mirthlessly, and the sound has my head snapping back to her.

When she looks back at me, and our eyes connect, my entire body dances with electricity.

A second later, she shakes her head and steps away.

Mav and her exchange words, the file she is holding suddenly being slapped against his chest before she books it out of there.

“Who was that?” I ask in awe. She definitely wasn’t afraid to tell him off.

“Irene?” he responds, his voice rising in question.

“She works over at the agency. She’s the head of case management.

” Fuck, not only is she beautiful, but she’s fucking smart.

What can’t this female do? The feeling in my stomach hollows out as the temptation from within begins to set-in-stone. She is mine.

“Fuck,” I grumble and slide down the wall.

Plopping on my ass, I drop my head between my knees.

I'm never this far out of my field. I'm playing a totally different game with rules I'm not familiar with.

If I don't focus on something new, and fast, I might see myself going back there to ask if Doc needs an extra hand just to ensure my girl is safe.

Shaking the thoughts out of my head, I stand before I get too comfy. "Matteo, let's go work on getting that footage so Irene doesn't have a conniption." Matteo nods and follows me out, Shark's voice sending Nero off to do his own tasks.

"Who knew a flesh wound could bleed so much?" He asks after several moments of silence.

I hold our office door open and let him pass.

Even with his breezy demeanor, I can see his shoulders bunched under his shirt.

The light gray colored tee-shirt stretches tightly to the point I can slightly see the designs covering his flesh.

"What kind of tattoos are those?" I question, moving my thought process away from the terrors threatening to eat my mind.

The last thirty minutes have been us festering about her pale unconsciousness, the smooth skin on her body that was several shades too light for her natural complexion.

Her raven hair shimmering under the too-bright fluorescent lights cast an eerie glow, one that seemed to match her general mood.

It was almost a sense of déjà vu.

Matteo's brows pinch downward as he assesses his chest and shoulders. Obviously he's confused about how I would know since he's looking at himself while trying to piece together my question.

"They are geo-mandala style. The pattern looked dope in the shop. Got them before everyone else jumped onto the trend."

My mouth moves faster than my brain. "Can I see them?" Shock registers on both of our features as I attempt to backtrack. "Shit, never mind," laughing at myself as I turn on my heel and shut the door to my office.

I have no fucking clue what has gotten into me.

Ever since we brought Matteo into our group, I haven't been able to keep my thoughts clean.

They are dirty and wicked, which isn't professional and has no sense of reciprocation from him.

He's fucking hot, there's no squandering that thought, and with my openness to men, it doesn't affect me much more than usual.

However, I have no idea who he is attracted to, and I would much rather not have him tucking tail because of a slip of the tongue.

Lately, I have felt as if eyes watch my every move. Something inside me says they belong to Matteo, but my hopes aren't going to get too high.

For a split second, I give in to the possibility that they do belong to Matteo.

Sliding my eyes closed and tilting my head back, I let the fantasy take over.

I imagine myself sinking to my knees before him, but not before licking my way over his taut body.

My own cock stiffens at the thought of taking his in my mouth and swallowing it while Irene eats my ass.

Suddenly, the entire scene is in my head, playing to perfection.

Like a chain, Irene pounds into my ass with the perfect-sized strap while Nero fucks her perfect cunt.

My palm lands on my hardened dick, and I squeeze it, hoping to deflate it. I know it won't. The scene far too real for me to let this slide, and I moan.

"Globe?" A knock reverberates through my office and has me immediately snapping out of it.

Fuck. Think of anything else.

Granny panties?

Blood.

Fucking them all in the blood.

No.

Watching Irene roll around in the red substance while we drill into her with fervor.

“Globe?” He knocks again, his voice sounding desperate.

Clearing my throat, I sit up straight and tuck myself tightly under the desk. “Yeah?” I call and wave him in.

Matteo opens the door softly, and the fucking man basically presents himself for my perusing.

Shirtless and tatted, I’m fucking speechless.

Naturally tanned skin holds tightly against his perfectly sculpted body.

Geo-mandala patterns span across his chest and shoulders, my mouth watering at the sight.

Shit, he’s hotter than my imagination. Nothing in my head serves him justice. He doesn’t say anything as my eyes peruse the expanse of him.

“I got these right after my first run. It was the biggest cut of profit I had ever seen after being patched in,” he explains, his eyes burning into mine as I meet his stare. “The first run was almost my last...” there’s a haunted look in his eyes, one that I know far too well.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:54 pm

Chapter Six

Matteo

THREE YEARS AGO

THREE YEARS AGO

The guys smirk as we hop off our bikes and get the van parked for transfer.

Bloodshed is part of the promise with Blood Reapers, and nine times out of ten, we end up in gun draws.

My veins run cold as I look around at the eight of us, all silently assessing the openness of this drop sight.

It's too plain and too insecure for it to be a usual dropping location.

When Globe had informed us of the coordinates, none of us were any the wiser until it led us to an open field.

The terrain is flat with no hills or trees to find cover in the event that the inevitable happens.

Fuck, we are part of the one-percenters. We don't sit and twiddle our thumbs. We make shit happen, even if it's the last thing we do. The oath I gave and the blood I shed to be part of this club has made my stance that much more powerful. I refuse to

be the downfall of this transfer.

At six feet, three inches, I wouldn't say I'm a foreboding presence. Quite frankly, I match several of these other men in height except for one.

Nero.

Fucker is massive. If I remember correctly, one of the other guys said he was six-foot-seven. Standing a head taller than everyone else, with his cold and calculated stare into the world, he has me on edge.

Most people believe you have to have a shitty life to resort to joining an MC.

That's not the case for me. Before joining this club, I worked with my parents at their family restaurant.

As their second son, I wasn't set to inherit the businesses, and honestly, that was something I was perfectly okay with.

Nothing in this life had been called to me before the MC, so when the opportunity presented itself to join, I took it.

Since joining, I realize that I'm still not finding my niche.

I'm alright at everything here: shooting, fighting, tech, paperwork.

Anything I do, I can complete, but I'm not at the top of any lists.

Again, it's something I am perfectly happy with because at least I'm part of something that accepts me for my mediocrity.

If Ma and Pa could see where I am today, I know they would be happy that I'm content...

as long as we leave out that I'm part of an underground ring to end sex trafficking.

Which usually ends in bloodshed and lighting their corpses on fire. Honestly, it's fine!

The rumbling sound of motorcycles in the distance has all of us standing straighter.

Meeting with buyers is never easy, usually because they bitch about basic specifications, which results in us all getting into a standoff.

It's redundant to me, but it's necessary.

They have to see that we aren't going to let them fuck us off.

As they get closer, the feeling of shit not being right just heightens. Something is wrong, but by the time any of us realize it, we are shit out of luck.

Over twenty bikes roll into the expansive lot, their helmets covering their faces. Terror washes over us as we realize this isn't a trade. This is a setup.

"Fuck, get out of here!" Grizzly growls, hauling ass to his bike with the rest of us.

He pulls his weapon from the waistband of his jeans and fires, sending one guy flying.

Before Grizz can even get his leg over the machine, his body jerks as a muted shot rings through the night air.

He drops carelessly, and all hell breaks loose.

The van speeds away with the firearms in tow, but the whizzing of bullets cascades past us.

Grabbing my pistol, I open fire as I book it to my bike.

We all barely make it to our rides, yet none of us stop fighting back.

Men from both sides drop, none of us able to even stave off the rapid incoming of bullets.

Pain radiates down my arm as I ride hard and fast out of there, five out of eight of us barely making it out.

Shots ring into the night as we spend the next hour on the highway letting the adrenaline roll through our bodies.

Fuzzy and heavy, my head barely stays upright as we finally roll into the clubhouse.

Men are shouting as they storm out, most likely already having heard the debacle that went down.

Grizz was dead upon impact, but I have no idea about the other three.

As a patch with wet colors, I don't know the proper protocol.

Honestly, I was sent along to be a bullet catcher.

I should have fucking said something. I knew shit wasn't right, and yet I kept it to myself. For what? Just for the rest of the club to also be bullet catchers. None of us

deserved that bullshit, even so, I fucking neglected our club. I'm the reason we are in this fucking mess of blood and limbs.

"Fuck, we got a bleeder," a watery voice shouts from next to me.

It's a female. Looking up, deep gray eyes that appear onyx in the night stare down at me.

Her face is blurry at best, the features barely registering in my brain as she shouts orders to those around her.

I'm not sure how much time passes, but as my eyes sag closed, she smacks my face to ensure I don't.

"Just let me go," I slur, my eyes crossing and then creating two images of the swoony female. She shakes her head, an unsurprised snort leaving her.

"That's not how this works, tough guy..." Her voice trails off as she keeps talking, the words mushing together in my brain like she was swept away in a fast-running river.

Male voices disrupt the sweet melodic voice that begs me to stay, begs me to open my eyes and remain here.

I do my best to answer her, to let her know that I'm the reason we are all in this mess, let her know that if anyone deserves to die, it's me.

She doesn't listen to what I say though, because both versions of the woman's lips are moving.

I don't know what's happening or who that is, but if she's what I expect when I get to

heaven or hell, might as well take me now.

Do I want it to even take me? Looking at the female I have never seen before, I do my best to follow her orders to remain awake.

I don't want her last vision of me to be one where I bleed out while she begs me to stay.

Can't go traumatizing this beauty. She's beautiful in a girl-next-door kind of way.

Soft features, a warmth that fills her eyes with an edge of pain. Something I can relate immensely to.

"Fuck!" I roar as someone tries to move my arm. Weirdly, it almost feels detached from my body, but at the same time, every single nerve is on fire in my body. That single dose of reality has my body shutting down completely.

Chapter Seven

Matteo

S wallowing around the lump in my throat, I watch as Globe seems to admire my bare chest. His usually upbeat and carefree personality is out the window, and in its place, a man set to visually devour me. I will be a puddle of mush and desire if his gaze remains steady on me.

An awkward silence captures us both as I pull my shirt back over myself. Whatever daze he caught himself in is immediately gone.

He adjusts his glasses and clears his throat. "Let's grab that footage." He turns his back to me and sits at his desk. There's a tightness in his shoulders that has me hesitating. "It's pretty easy to grab, just have to wait for the bandwidth to catch up to us."

I hesitate. Nothing about him turning his back showed he was fine with what happened, yet there's this coolness in the room that I was not prepared for.

He must sense this because he peers at me over his shoulder.

"Pull up a chair and sit. It's the only way I can show you and help you get your feet under you.

" Rounding his desk uncertainly, he grabs the chair closest to him and yanks.

An unappealing shriek echoes across the room as the leg catches on the concrete floor. Tapping the leather top, he waits.

With a wave of finality, I sit. “So, what exactly are we looking for?” I question as he starts clicking into two different programs.

“Like a fucking idiot, I didn’t check the time when shit went down, so I have to rewind to the approximate time it happened until I’m able to catch glimpses of the armed female.

” He scoots over a bit so I can squeeze closer to the monitors.

Waving me forward, he shows me where to go and how to work the system.

He explains that the bandwidth isn’t big enough to accommodate moving the security footage, so it takes double the time to do anything.

“There,” he mumbles, and I stop the feed that shows the main hall.

A flash of blonde hair catches on the screen, and Globe writes the time on a sticky note.

“She came from the eastern wing, which is where the psyche area is. Go to the main line of a different screen and search a few minutes before this.” Entering the eastern wing cameras, it’s even easier to locate the female.

“How did she even get a gun?” I mumble as confusion mars my brain and features. She walks with it from the room, then seconds turn into minutes as I watch everything leading up to Irene getting shot.

The door to the office opens, jolting Globe and me as Nero walks in, a wild look in

his eyes.

“I thought-” Globe starts, but a growl works its way up Nero’s throat.

“You felt it too, right?” He throws out the question we all were thinking about but refuses to acknowledge. The question throws a lead weight into the air that crushes our windpipes. Globe sucks in a harsh breath as I watch Nero pace. “Tell me I’m not fucking crazy, someone.”

“You aren’t crazy,” Globe sighs, dragging his fingers through his floppy brown hair. A second later, like a switch flicking, a goofy grin covers his face. “Round two, huh?”

“Round two?” I parrot and look between the two of them. Globe chuckles as Nero shakes his head with a sly smirk. “Round two for what?” Both men glance at me incredulously.

“Remember Regan?” asks Globe, and I wrack my brain to figure out who that is. Unfortunately, I come up empty. He must read it on my face because he continues. “She runs the library and educational stuff on the other side?”

“That rings a bell.”

“That’s Viper, Mav, Ghost, and Warden’s girl.” His face is almost wistful.

Nero snickers. “Silly girl was snooping around and got more than she bargained for.”

Globe laughs loudly, the tone bouncing off the surrounding walls. “They are some possessive motherfuckers, too. Exactly how I feel now.”

“Me too,” Nero confirms, which causes them both to look at me.

“Shit, that’s how I feel for her too, like if she loses another drop of blood due to the hands of someone else, I would fucking kill someone...” I trail off, narrowing my eyes at them. “All three of us?”

Globe and Nero simply shrug. “Why not? If it works, there’s no point in not pursuing it. There are four of them to care for her, which means that she has someone almost at all times,” Globe explains with a pitch of longing.

“They aren’t jealous of one another?” Both men shake their heads at my inquisition. Fucking hell, are we really...

“Quite the opposite actually,” Nero explains while Globe wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. “I can’t handle another one of you fuckers, only us.”

I have no idea what to think about anything else at this moment.

The organ in my chest constricts with longing for the raven-haired beauty lying pale on the gurney in the medical ward.

The mirth in her eyes is long gone as rivers of red stream over her pebbled flesh.

Imagining sharing her blood with someone else doesn’t appeal to me, the calling to make her my own is far too harsh...

“Well,” I start, unsure where to begin or where I want to go with this.

“How do we know if she reciprocates these...feelings?” My question seems to have the impact I anticipated because they both look taken aback, the thought sobering.

Nero looks seconds away from blowing a fuse while Globe grinds his mullers.

How one female can wreak so much chaos within three men is boggling.

“Does she get a choice?” Nero growls as his eyes slant at us. His question is rhetorical, that’s for damn sure. “She could have died. This tightness...” he scoffs at himself as he shakes his head. Seconds later, he cracks his knuckles and nearly snarls at us.

My chest seizes at the thought of turning into a dynamic quad.

Possessiveness threatens to tear through me, but it’s not against Nero and Globe.

No, it’s possessive for them, too. It doesn’t make sense, and I know myself far too well than to even consider questioning it at this point.

Giving in to the feeling is a fuck ton easier than trying to fight it.

Before today, she was just a female that I longed for from afar.

Beautiful, educated, whip-smart, all of it.

There is a deep fire within her that I crave to ignite and mix with my own.

This feeling borders on obsession, and if it’s anything like I feel, my emotions will be raked over the coals before we find our peace.

The other side of my soul, the scared, scarred, and broken pieces, begs for me to let her go.

She doesn’t rest easily with the deep need for eternal satisfaction, which is evidenced by her hollowness.

So, my soul would rather we take the brunt of walking away.

I have been through more than enough shit for four lifetimes.

I don't need to drag and mix her darkness with my own.

But watching her blood scatter for me, for us...

Familiar feelings bubble inside of me, gripping my trachea with brute strength.

Lust for blood burns inside of me as I attempt to beat down the feeling.

Now isn't the time to be worried about how my demons threaten to tear me from limb to limb, but the trickle from the wound on her bicep to the tips of her fingers...

What I wouldn't give to drag that golden liquid around her body, push it back into her in more ways than one while we mark her as ours.

Her smooth, pale, scarless flesh is flawless to mar for our pleasure.

The perfect canvas to paint on with red.

Tidal waves of crimson pour down her back, legs, arms, really anywhere that we want her to bleed.

Glancing down at my palms, it takes a moment for me to register the oxidized blood-tinged brown on my knuckles. It's crusty and dry. With ease, I'm able to rub away some of the flakes, but it almost makes my chest ache with the lack of her marking on me.

"You good?" Globe questions as he looks from my face to my hands and back.

Swallowing thickly, I do my best to push the thirst for her down and away, compartmentalize it for another time.

A slap on my shoulder has me jarring harshly from my daydreams. “Come on,” Globe says, with a wicked smirk on his lips. “I will have Hawk take care of this. I think we have a craving that needs to be fed.”

Chapter Eight

Nero

Riding is something that has forever put me at ease. This time, however, it feels like my heart is being slowly ripped from my body with every mile we drive.

At this point, the hunger within us is nearly overwhelming, captivated in wanting to make this girl our entire world. My brain is on board with burning the world for her, but my heart is begging me to go back to her. It's a weird feeling, and I don't know how to combat it.

In my entire life, I have never once let a woman dictate my choices. At this very moment, I'm wondering if my need for blood trumps my need to be at her side.

"You there, N?" Globe crackles through the mic. Like a dumbass who isn't fully present, I nod. Then, I clear my throat.

"Yeah, just lost in my head, what's up?" I ask, hoping that they don't ask me about it. If they did, I honestly have no idea how I would respond.

Matteo chuckles. "With how slow you are pacing us, I would say you are definitely distracted." A rev from behind me is the only warning I get before Globe and Matteo shoot off ahead of me. "Let's go, the boys are taking the quick route there."

Scoffing, I grumble, "And that's why your bikes fucking break all the time."

” I slowly accelerate into third and then fourth gear and treat my baby with care, notching higher on the clutch with each whirl of speed.

The wind presses against my body as they race ahead of me, fighting to be in the front spot now.

The visor of my helmet fights the glare of the oncoming traffic on the other side, but when red and blue flash through the darkness, I know we are in for a treat.

“Coppers at twelve,” I roar down the line and jerk the accelerator back, kicking into fifth and sixth gear as I hit upward of seventy.

It takes a moment for me to adjust to the speed as I lean forward and cruise through cars.

The guys don’t fly out like I expect them to, so we end up uniformed until two more cops roll ahead of us.

“Shit, I’m gonna drag down the next road and hit the highway, you guys split after that!

” Matteo shouts down the comms before dropping gears so fast that his bike backfires, only for him to peel over a turn and shoot off again with a wicked laugh in his wake.

His end of the comm is static before his line beeps off.

A single officer catches notice of him, and the tires shriek as they turn abruptly.

“This is the police! Pull over!”

“Shit, you got a plan?” I ask, my hands slightly shaking. Adrenaline pumps through me, but running from the police has never been on my bucket list.

“Nope! Catch you on the flip,” Matteo laughs as he drifts around a sharp corner. Several officers go after him, and I decide I can’t risk prison.

Pushing the bike faster, I hunker down lower and swerve in and out of traffic. Horns honk, cars try to shrink together to the median in a good civilian attempt to stop me. Little do they know, I have no plans of being stopped either.

Heart beating erratically in my chest, I let the air whiz past me as I lose myself to the speed.

With how fast I’m going, the breeze rolling around me sounds like white noise.

Their lights grow darker and darker into the night as I break limits on my bike.

She’s gonna need a good scrub down when I get back to the shop, that’s for damn sure.

Peering over my shoulder to swap lanes, a black SUV speeds behind me, its lights blacked out.

Instead of hitting their lane, I ride the shoulder and speed past several vehicles.

Another look and the SUV is swerving in and out of traffic, laying on their horn and damn near running people off the road.

What the actual fuck is happening?

I can’t help but wonder if they are following me, or if it’s just coincidental that they

are speeding through traffic while narrowly missing other people.

This isn't a fucking coincidence.

Turning toward the road, I debate whether getting off the highway is worth it.

If I'm off, then I can figure out the back roads to the clubhouse.

If this person is even remotely concerned about getting caught, then they won't act up on the highway more than they are.

With that thought, I immediately strike off that thought.

I'm obviously their target, yet not a single thought pops into my head as to why me. It doesn't make any fucking sense.

The SUV quickly fades into the distance, the end of the back-to-back chases hitting me. Knowing I can't keep this speed up, I start to downshift as I don't want to risk getting injured.

Before I can register what's happening, another SUV from the next lane merges into my lane.

The vehicle slams into my leg and the body of my bike.

I can't stop the front tire from slamming to the side, and I'm sent flying through the air.

Time moves so quickly yet so slowly as I flail, almost as if I'm suspended for a blip in time.

Seconds later, my body slams onto the concrete, a resounding crack slamming through my head.

Chapter Nine

Globe

Matteo and I get to the meeting spot nearly at the same time.

I glance around, hoping to see Nero already perched somewhere, but he isn't.

Where the fuck could he be? We split up seconds after one another, and the highway leads right here if you take the last exit before the next town.

We have driven to this location for meetings time and time again, so Nero knows the way.

The problem is there's a level of uncertainty with everything going on.

Why do I care so much about him?

My brain bounces around as I attempt to grasp onto the answer to that thought. There are so many different reasons that I care for him, yet I cannot pinpoint the exact time when I realized that care turned into something more.

Matteo claps me on the back. "What's going on in that brain of yours?"

"His voice is chipper, but after spending more time with him than others, I can read the underlying tone.

We are all sitting in this middle ground of what to do and what not to do.

It's fucking with my head, and I have no clue where to go with it all.

"Nero should be here by now," I start, glancing down at my watch.

I have no idea what time we ended up splitting, but I know it shouldn't take this long to get here.

"I'm stuck in a roundabout of what I'm supposed to be feeling.

It's like being able to see someone on the other side of a piece of glass, but when you try to touch them, you are trapped. "

He says nothing in response, just gazes at me thoughtfully. I stand for another minute or two, the anxious feelings inside of me threatening to force its way up my throat.

Shark is tapping away on his phone when we walk up, his brows furrowing when he sees just the two of us.

"Where's your counterpart?" He grumbles, glancing behind us.

"We got split up because of some cops. He should be here pretty quickly," Matteo explains and pulls out his phone.

A weird feeling in my gut has my brain running ragged.

What if he ended up getting caught? Fuck, he wasn't the one breaking any laws, but cops don't give a fuck.

When they see bikers riding together, they will automatically assume that we are all

grouped.

That's not how biker communities work. If we see a fellow rider, we will group up until we have to part ways. It's just for the fun of it.

But now, there's something niggling at me that something isn't right. What it is, I have no idea.

"It's been almost twenty minutes, where the fuck is he?" Shark barks at us, causing several of the other guys that are lingering to snap straight. "You are a senior member, Globe. Where is your man?"

My man.

When I have more time, I will dissect that a bit more. How good it feels to put a claim on him...

An idea pops into my head, and it pisses me off that I didn't think of it sooner.

"Let me see if his phone is still tracking." Opening the simple app on my phone, I wait for his dot to load.

It was last refreshed thirty minutes ago when I updated the app.

"That can't be right..." I mumble to myself as the dot stays stagnant.

Despite refreshing the app multiple times, it remains the same.

Pulling up his number, I press call, only for it to go directly to voicemail. What the actual fuck...

“Well?” Shark snaps, his voice tight with frustration. Some of the others are swaying back and forth, shuffling uncomfortably on their toes as he waits for a response. Not that I have one.

“Can you try?” I ask Matteo, ignoring my prez for right now. He nods, grabbing his device and dialing out. Again, straight to voicemail. “We are gonna ride back, he must have gotten popped by the fuzz.” Shark rolls his eyes as he rounds up the others.

Unease tears in my stomach in the same way it did when I saw Irene get shot.

The thread of doubt that something is wrong cuts deeply, and it takes everything inside of me not to rally a fucking task force.

I make quick work of sidling onto my bike, putting my phone on the holder, and checking I have enough gas.

With about half a tank, Matteo and I peel out of the gravel lot and ride fast. Every few seconds I drag the screen down to refresh it, only for it not to move.

After the twentieth time, the dot suddenly disappears.

“Shit, I need to put the coordinates in,” Matteo mumbles understanding as we continue straight, the highway peacefully quiet since it’s almost ten at night.

The frog that’s lodged in my throat doesn’t move no matter how many times I try to swallow it away.

I have never been one to let emotions latch onto me, instead, they usually roll off my back easily.

This time...fuck, this is different. The mood shifted quickly from craving blood to

craving the presence of our man.

We are riding into the unknown, and it's pulling at every nerve ending in my system.

My brain feels like it's going to spaz out.

"There!" shouts Matteo as he points to where a bike peeks over a forest edge.

Cars fly around us as we slow down, honking and swerving as we attempt to get to him without crashing.

Metal and plastic smatter the roadway, but no one stops to check it out.

Everyone goes about their life while I'm fucking panicking about what it's going to look like on the other side of the ledge.

We end up going a mile before we can safely flip around and ride the shoulder back down. No lights or sirens are in the distance, none lighting up the night sky. The dot still doesn't pull up, so I can't even confirm if that's him, but those are the coordinates that I have for him.

I don't even slow down to kickstand my bike. Everything is fucking fixable.

"Nero!" I scream, my hands trembling as I fiddle to get my helmet off.

Whipping the visor up, I'm able to see a body at the bottom of the grassy area.

"Fuck, shit, fuck," I chant over and over as my fingers fail to cooperate with me.

Matteo steps up behind me, spins me around, and quickly works to get the straps undone.

The second they are, I'm whipping it off my head, tossing it on the grass by my bike, and taking off.

Matteo is right on my heels as we sprint down the hill, almost ending up in a barrel roll with how fast we are moving.

Rumbles of motorcycles get closer and closer, which means that Matteo probably let them know it wasn't good.

I scream for Nero again, my heart beating so fast in my chest that I'm not sure if I'm going to end up going into heart failure. There's no movement, and I swear to any fucking higher power that if he's dead...

Skidding to my knees next to him, I immediately assess for injuries. His arm is bent funny and his foot looks curved in a way it shouldn't, but I don't see any blood pouring from anywhere. My fingers wrap around his wrist carefully as I feel for a pulse, which is strong.

Letting out a harsh breath, I drop my head and grab my phone, calling Shark, who answers on the first ring.

"What happened?" He barks in a no-bullshit kind of way.

I start explaining everything that I can see, that his pulse is strong, but he seems unconscious.

Shark lets me know that there is a group of guys headed our way, and a second later, his phone dings.

"Dr. Darcy at Regional Medical is waiting for you guys to get there. Do we think we can get there without an ambulance?"

Matteo nods his head. “We will need the med van, but I think we should be fine.” Thank the higher powers of the MC that we are all partially medically trained.

“We will need a couple of splints and a backboard. Globe and I can clear the helmet off his head with simple stabilization, but we will definitely need a neck brace until the doc can further determine the injuries. I don’t wanna fuck with a spinal. ”

“Sounds good. I will have Doc round up a team to send with the van to head that way.” He ends the call, and the guilt continues to ride deep inside of me. I fucked up. If I hadn’t been so fucking stupid, this never would have happened.

“I know that look, and right now isn’t the time to get stuck inside your head.

Grab his throat so I can work on getting his helmet off.

” I move my hand to the underside of his jaw and wrap the other around the back.

With a tightness but no pressure on his windpipe or veins, I hold him still.

Matteo slowly rocks the helmet off his head, being careful not to jolt too harshly.

A few seconds later, it comes off with ease.

“Hey!” another voice shouts from the top of the hill.

Matteo waves them down as I slowly assess his face.

There’s slight blood trickling down his nose and trailing down his cheek, but other than that, there don’t appear to be any other outward injuries.

The guys move slower than we did, some of them stopping at Nero’s bike while

others come all the way to us.

“Do we know what happened?” Viper asks as he kneels next to the three of us. I shake my head, my eyes never leaving Nero. It feels like the moment I move them away, he will disappear.

“Let me-”

“No!” I snap, pulling myself closer and hovering over Nero. No one is allowed to touch him. “He’s mine,” I growl out, not even really sure what’s happening. It’s like my brain took a back seat while some primal part of me takes over.

“It’s alright, man. We will wait for the others to get here,” Viper pulls his hands in surrender but doesn’t move away. I can feel eyes boring into me, but I don’t give a fuck. I need to make sure he’s okay. He has to be okay.

Another individual comes down, but again, I don’t acknowledge them.

“It looks like he was side-swiped,” Shark says as he kneels above Nero. He reaches toward us, and it takes everything inside of me not to snarl at him. Though I can fume about the fact that some fucker decided they wanted not to look around them and cut off one of my own!

“I will track them down,” I ground out, my eyes searching Nero’s tan but pale complexion for any signs of life.

His chest is rising and falling, and that’s a fuck ton more than I could ask for.

“Matteo, text the other two and let them know to start pulling footage near these coordinates. I don’t care if they aren’t able to see anything.

I want a name, and I want it yesterday.”

Chapter Ten

Irene

Beeping and pounding are the two things I notice when I wake up. There's a shrill beep that echoes every few seconds, and the pounding is inside my head.

"Morning, sunshine," a male says with far too much enthusiasm and far too loud. He must see the grimace on my face because he tones it down. "It seems your being here has spurred the 'everything happens in three's ordeal."

"W-what?" I croak, my eyes puffy with crust and throat drier than the Sahara Desert.

The guy sits forward, his elbows landing on his knees as he reaches for a cup.

I'm mildly disappointed when I see ice chips instead of water.

Even more disappointing is that I have no idea who this guy is, and he's not one of the three that have been trailing me the last few days.

"You have been asleep for about a day and a half. Your body needs plenty of time to recharge," he announces as if that isn't a bomb to drop.

"What?" I parrot myself, blinking back the sleep and making my brain process everything. "Day and a half...happens in threes?" I crunch more ice, not really going anywhere in my processing.

“Yeah, with Nero-”

“I thought I heard talking,” a pretty female in pink scrubs sidles up next to me, shooting the strange male a scathing look.

Upon further inspection, I realize he’s wearing the Blood Reapers MC cut.

Bare minimum, I know I’m safe. “Glad to see you are awake. Hawk here was supposed to let me know, but it’s whatever.

Anyway, we don’t want to move you too fast, but Doc recommended that we get you up and moving sooner rather than later.

It will help pump the blood back through your system.

” She motions to the IV line in my arm that has a maroon tinge to it.

I shake my head, still not comprehending how the fuck I ended up here. “What exactly happened?” I ask, my brain failing to provide any details. “Last thing I remember is hearing a gunshot, then...nothing.”

“Yeah, it seems like the entire event was pretty traumatic. Thankfully, the three guys who brought you in were able to get you here when they did. It’s sad to hear about what happened to Nero, though.” Her voice trails off as if she’s reminiscing.

Bolting upright, my brain wavers inside my head as Hawk shoots to help. “Where is he? Where are they? What is going on?” Breathing seems to be a struggle as my airway feels like it’s locking shut.

The nurse takes a step back, and I’m pretty sure I’m not a sight for sore eyes.

“Easy there, spitfire, the nurse said you needed to move, not that you needed to run.”

“I want to see them now!” I snap, thoughts swirling rapidly around my head as I try to nail them down one by one.

I have to know that they are safe, that they are okay, that they are in one fucking piece.

If I lost the chance... I take a deep breath, doing my best to tame the fire stoking inside of me.

“I want to see my men now.” I shove his hands off of me and slowly work my way to the door.

My head continues to swim as blood rushes to new places, but as long as I don’t pass out, I will be fine.

Before I can touch the door handle, it’s slammed open, I’m hoisted into a pair of arms and their head lands in the crook of my neck.

Stiffening, I get a whiff of their powerful scent—pine and peppermint—and I immediately relax.

My arms wrap around him on their own accord as he carries me out of the room.

“What is happening?” I ask, my voice muffled by his scruff.

Globe sets me against the counter in the main area and steps back.

My ass is fucking cold, which means that I’m definitely nude under this stupid gown, but right now, I don’t care.

He shakes his head, and I swear there's moisture in his eyes.

Large hands cup my cheeks as he leans down and plants his lips against mine.

Not waiting for me to respond, he licks the seam of my lips then bites down on my bottom one.

With a slight yelp, I open up for him, and he doesn't hold back.

He kisses me like his next breath is from my lungs.

Fused together and not backing down, one of his hands tangles in my hair, and he keeps me locked in place.

A throat clearing has us pulling apart, but neither of us acknowledges them.

"You are mine. Ours. There's no going back, and I swear if you try to fucking run, all three of us will give chase. Am I clear?"

Everything inside of me wants to bite back, tell him he can't own me, that my body isn't for sale. Yet the other, more dark-romance-obsessed side, is telling me that this man will lay down his own life to save mine. Fuck, if it makes me want to-

The person clears their throat again. This time, I blush. It doesn't take me long to realize the state of us. My bare ass and vagina are plastered to this counter—thank goodness for medical cleanliness—and Globe is devouring me like it's his last night on earth.

"I see you are awake, dear," Doc says with a smirk.

"I believe I told McKenna to take you on a short walk, not allow you to conduct a

porno in my office.” The blush I had moments ago?

Yeah, the heat creeping from my chest takes the cake.

He points to the IV line in my arm and shakes his head.

“Thankfully Hawk didn’t allow that thing to rip out of your arm, though I do think someone might want to relieve him of his... duty.”

It’s Globe’s turn to blush, but instead of blushing, he grows a giant fucking grin.

“Thanks for watching over my girl, man. Can you let Shark know that I’m here with her?” Hawk nods, giving Globe a slap on the back before walking the other way with his phone out.

Doc looks back toward me with a single eyebrow raised. “How about you get back into the bed so we can go over everything, then we can create a plan of care so you can go see Nero.”

My brows furrow, and I open my mouth to ask what Doc means. Instead, Globe scoops me up again and marches us back to the room. He looks slightly scolded though, which I’m assuming is because of the IV thing.

Doc walks in a moment later and excuses the nurse, McKenna. He settles on one of the rolling stools and grabs the chart at the end of the bed.

“Want the good news first or the bad?” I glance at Globe, who shakes his head.

“I guess let’s go bad,” I say, though it sounds more like a question.

“Bad news is that you suffered a graze to your anterior circumflex humeral artery,”

Doc reads off, and I swear he just spoke a different language.

He must sense this, or my face must show it because he continues.

“The bullet nicked your artery, which isn’t good.

We were able to cauterize it and stop it, but you lost a lot of blood.

Your hemoglobin was just a hair under eight, which can be deadly.

You have been out for three days without induction because it was apparently what your body needed.

” My brain skitters to a halt. I swear I was just told that it was only a day and a half...

“And the good news?” I balk and hope that he gives me actual good news.

“The good news is that as long as your blood results come back above twelve. We can discharge you so you can go with Globe.”

“What was this that I heard about things happening in threes? From what Hawk said, I started it?” I ask, but both of them seem to just eye one another.

After another moment, Globe sighs. “There was a bit of a...mishap on a run that we did recently.” I wait for him to continue, but he doesn’t. Instead, McKenna happily storms into the room and provides Doc with a slew of paperwork, which I assume has my results mixed in there somewhere.

He hums and haws over the words, his brows raising slightly before dropping back down. He signs something on the form and then gives it back to McKenna.

“Your results are excellent, and that means you can go. McKenna will grab the rest of the stuff necessary to get you out of here. It seems your companion has a lot to talk about.” He nods at Globe with an odd look in his eye before turning on his heel and walking out of the room.

I gape at his receding figure, the door shutting behind him softly while I level Globe with a glare.

“Talk.” My tone is commanding, not giving him any room to breathe. He grabs my hands, his shoulders dropping slightly as his eyebrows pinch. His hands are clammy on my own, their grip slightly tighter than I’m used to.

Well, I’m really not used to any personal touch, outside of giving the kids at the agency a hug or two. Other than that, I’m not a touchy individual.

He inhales sharply, shaking his head. “After your...accident, Matteo, Nero, and I wanted to let off some steam. You were worse for wear, and none of us could handle watching you on the verge of death. Or at least, that’s what it felt like.

The three of us took a different route from the group because we were running behind, and we got intercepted by some cops.

Nothing crazy, it was definitely our fault for driving stupid.

I honestly don’t know what happened, but Matteo and I arrived at the meeting spot, Nero didn’t. ”

“Oh God-” I start, my hands yanking from Globes to cover my mouth in shock. He can’t be dead, there’s no way-

“I tracked him back a few miles where we found his bike crashed and his body at the

bottom of the ditch.”

Tears form behind my eyes, my body suddenly shaking with the fear of his next words.

“He didn’t-” I don’t hear the rest before a sob breaks loose. He cuddles me into him, shushing me as I let the events wash over me. From my own nearly dying to hearing that...

“How?” I choke and lean back, watching his face.

“He was sideswiped. The guys are working on pulling external footage to figure out what actually happened. Shark is working with them to get everything together while I take care of you and Nero.”

Burning rage echoes inside of me. The iced-out organ in my chest threatens to thaw and set aflame the world around us. He was taken from me before I even had a chance to make things right, before I was able to learn about who he is. I never got the chance...

“Whatever you all have planned, I want in.”

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Chapter Eleven

Globe

My girl's eyes are blazing hot, smoldering with an unabashed need to defend her men.

Fuck. Does this mean she's claiming us equally?

"There's not much of a plan right now," I'm cut off by my phone ringing in my pocket. I try to ignore it by silencing it, but when it ends only to start again, I pull it out.

Jones.

"What's up?" I ask him, keeping the phone to my ear.

Irene sends a glare my way, not liking that I'm not allowing her to overhear it.

I want to know what he says before I let her hear anything.

I may not agree with some of the archaic beliefs in our world, but I believe that hearing what Jones says before I can prepare her isn't ideal.

"You gonna just let me remain in the dark like a sexist prick, or am I going to be part of this team?" She spits, her glare burning a hole in my head. I refuse to make eye contact with her, but do as she asks because, let's be honest, I don't want to figure out

how bad her wrath would be.

Jones is laughing his ass off on the other end of the line. “Did she grab you by the balls or just give you blue ones?” Irene snorts and shakes her head.

I roll my eyes and turn to Irene. “Give me a second, woman. You were shot three days ago. Taking this call without you will be something you can survive from, I’m sure of it,” I tell her with a no-nonsense tone.

She huffs, her arms crossing over her chest. It causes her breasts to press together, even in the scratchy hospital gown.

She’s a fucking sight. Ripping my eyes away from her, I address Jones.

“One day you will understand. Right now, I need you to tell me what you found.” I can’t help but snap at the phone, my irritation rising as Irene smirks at the device in my hand.

It’s like she knows what the asshat said.

“Mountain Range Circuit is back in business from what Shark could see. I was able to match into some of the systems close by. At around twenty-two hundred hours, the black SUV blocked the three of you riding. I can’t speculate on how they knew you would ride that way or if they were just hoping, but they saw y’all.

Viper and Mav confirmed that it was Kastiloff behind the wheel through basic facial recognition software and photo manipulation.”

My vision blurs and my ears ring as terror sweeps through me.

That’s the same motherfucker that almost took Mav from us not even a few months

ago.

He must be trying to get a casualty where he can get one.

Unfortunately for him, he will have to catch all of us blind or dead before we will let him and his army get away with this.

“Was there anyone else?” Irene asks, and I meet her gaze. My phone isn’t even on speaker. I swear she has superhuman hearing. Her focus is sharply on me, searching my expression and matching one of her own.

“There appeared to be a few others in the vehicle with him. Mav and Viper were surprised that he was driving. He isn’t one to do his own hands-on work.

He moved up the ranks for a reason-” voices in the background cut Jones off.

They are too soft to be heard from this side, but that doesn’t stop Irene and me from straining to try, anyway.

“It’s Keres,” the gruff male on the other end announces.

“We are calling roundup right now. Haze is working through the details and putting funds into portals for us to hit the road. We got info from the Black Vipers MC that the same SUV was clocked heading east of their territory. Think you two can come to the main part of the house? Get her situated in a room and then meet for church?”

I break Irene’s gaze and turn it toward the wall, not wanting to witness her disappointment firsthand.

She and every other female on this premise know that women aren’t allowed to be part of the MC.

They can be part of the agencies and such, but the patriarchy from when the great-greats held rank stands.

Plus, we value the minds of our women far too much to put them in harm's way.

That isn't to say that I don't think they could do it. Christ, Leather from Black Vipers is a literal killer, yet you would never guess that from just looking at her now.

Jones talks more semantics while I nod along. None of that really pertains to my portion, but that's not to say it isn't important.

"We are ready to discharge, finally," the nurse announces while practically skipping into the room. Her bright smile dims a bit when she turns toward Irene.

I don't even want to know.

Irene clears her throat, though I still refuse to look at her. Call me a fucking coward, but she can be scary.

"Thank you for the hospitality, McKenna. Honestly, I think you have been more useful than he has." I drop my jaw, shock emanating from me.

"He has kept me in the dark, talked about me behind my back, and has decided that I am unfit because I have a pit between my legs!" She cheers with false enthusiasm.

"Whoa, hold on a second," I start, but she doesn't let me finish.

"No," she barks, holding up a hand and her face going beet red.

"I'm so tired of men telling me that I need to be put away before they can do shit.

I get that the patriarchy doesn't allow that.

But come the fuck on. It's twenty-twenty-five.

I can ride a fucking motorcycle and shoot better than half the men in that building, yet because I'm a woman, I'm more valuable to birth babies.

My arm is perfectly fine, my blood is moving the way it should be, and I honestly am tired of being put on the back end of things. ”

“That's not at all what I'm saying,” I scoff, doing my best to be understanding. She literally woke up not even a few hours ago from being in a self-induced coma for three days. There's no doubt that her entire system is all out of whack, I know mine would be too.

“Not only that but fucking Nero is dead,” a sob breaks free from her throat.

“I didn't even get a chance to fucking tell him how I felt!

The last thing I said to him was probably fucking stupid because I thought I had more time.

” She drops her face into the palms of her hands and weeps.

Her shoulders shake and tears leak between her fingers, it's devastating.

“Irene-”

“I want fucking revenge, and the one thing I can't do is avenge the death of him because you fucking idiots like my uterus more than my skills.”

McKenna and I stare at one another in disbelief, not really sure what to do. The only females I have been around and mastered are female plugs. Other than that, this is an entirely new ball game for me. Fuck, I don't even know what to say right now other than...

"He isn't dead," I start, shooting a worried look over my shoulder. McKenna doesn't say anything as we wait for Irene to register what I said.

Everything about these last hours has been an emotional rollercoaster, that's for damn sure.

First, she wakes up only to learn three days have passed, and then I somehow manage to get her in my arms and her lips on mine.

Which I do not regret one bit, but I do wish it were under better circumstances. And now, she thinks that Nero is dead.

What a fucking nightmare. All I can do is hope that my next move doesn't put me in the doghouse with the club.

Chapter Twelve

Matteo

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Shark shouts at Globe the next day, his face a deep shade of purple from the anger he spouts. I have never seen Shark this angry before, but when Globe came back with Irene in tow, shit hit the fan.

Thankfully, Regan, Wini, and Mila were here to sweep Irene out of the room to avoid watching the implosion occur.

One thing that was ingrained in us during initiation and patching?

No females. Partners and agency workers, all were allowed except for MC members.

They told us from day dot that females are not allowed to know the ins and outs of what we do because a lot of us don't have spousal protection, blah blah.

A bunch of other stuff that I didn't listen to because I honestly thought I would remain single for the rest of my days.

Now, all I can think about is being ridden by the raven-haired girl who got shuffled out of here like the room was on fire.

“I was thinking that Irene is smart and able to help as needed. She's got a fire to burn with the trafficking circuit, and she needs to let off steam. Mav and his crew are working on getting flesh for the team, so really, it's not as massive as you are making

it seem!”

“Maverick and his team have their own quarters where they conduct business. That is their secret place where they can freely do what they please. This is the MC we are talking about, Globe. You know the fucking rules, or else you wouldn’t be sitting as an officer!”

“She doesn’t need to fucking travel with us!Fucking hell, Shark. Stingray kept his women on a leash, which you are so keen to follow in his footsteps on. Why don’t you understand that them having the burning desire to kill people that hurt them makes them valuable to the team?”

Shark pinches the bridge of his nose while everyone around them waits with bated breath, myself included.

Shark has the ability to get rid of any one of us for any reason.

If he wanted to get rid of Globe for talking back, only a select few would bat an eye.

While it’s not great, it’s the way the hierarchy works.

Globe is taking several deep breaths while I stand at his side, silently taking a pledge to him in this situation.

Shark may be right that Mav’s team is fairly independent, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be.

The catacombs aren’t the only place that has seclusion.

“You know, I can hear everything you are saying,” Irene snaps as she is trailed by the girls.

Mila looks like she's ready to kick anyone's ass for questioning them, but Regan and Wini look unsure.

I can tell that Regan wants to go to her four men for protection, but also wants to stand strongly on her own two feet with this.

There's shit that none of us know about when it comes to each other, but I can tell that this is more than just her taking a stand for herself.

"Irene, please leave," Shark bristles, his eyes narrowing in the women's general direction. "This is-"

"A man's job? Not my business?" She snaps back, her head half-cocked and hands on her hips.

Irene isn't here to play. "You want to know what's funny about all of this?"

The agency is what makes this work. You bring them down?

Great! We need fewer fucking perpetrators in this world.

But without the agency? Your world would be fucking rocked. "

"Irene-" Globe starts, stepping toward her. She snaps a hand up, stopping him with the singular move and commanding the room.

"No, I'm tired of being some female," she spits, "that sits on the sidelines because I'm supposed to nurture these kids back to their daily lives.

You aren't the only group of fucking psychos here.

Don't get it twisted either that I'm ungrateful or some bullshit.

These women know the shit that I have been through, and yet I'm pushed aside to enact my own sense of revenge because I have a pussy between my legs? ”

My jaw drops, as several others do, and some inhale sharply as they process the tongue-lashing she just gave our president.

Glancing over at Shark, his face is a mix of rage, embarrassment, and maybe even a little amusement.

“You want to shed blood so much?” He asks, his body slowly rolling up to his full height, which is easily six foot five.

A moment later, a wicked smirk plays on his lips as he swaggers closer.

Irene doesn't waiver, doesn't let him posture her into a corner.

“Then how about it? You are fired from the agency.”

“Woah,” Wini jumps in, her round eyes snapping between the two individuals from behind her glasses.

“She's one of the operating officers, you can't just fire her.

It needs to be brought before the board-” she prattles on and on, though it's clear that Shark isn't listening.

It's almost as if Wini is begging Shark to knock it off, something in her eyes telling him to tip the scale back in her direction.

It would have worked.

The second Wini stops her babbling, Irene scoffs. “You obviously value this agency so much and have zero understanding of how it works.”

Haze cuts in. “Ulita was smitten with her, Shark. Don’t do this. She also has the most knowledge of the markets of the trafficking circuit...” Another plea to fall on deaf ears.

The stare-down doesn’t last long before Shark dismisses the crowd with a sneer. “Get her out of here.”

No one moves a muscle.

“Now!” he barks, causing Globe and I to snap into action.

“You really going to do this? Because I brought her to a meeting, and she wants to fucking avenge Nero?” I snap, finally sick of the stupid mind games.

Globe shakes his head at me, but I don’t let him stop me.

I refuse to continue to be a fucking mud mat.

I have all my fucking colors. “I guess we will be finding our own accommodations then. Call me if shit pops up, and I will be here. What time do I need to be here for the roundup later?”

Shark scoffs and then looks down at his watch with a heavy sigh. “They are still working on getting funds transferred for us to ride. It will take another hour or two.”

“Sounds good,” I acknowledge, grabbing Irene’s hand and turning toward our Pres.

“For now, I’m officially moving out of the clubhouse.”

I turn on my heel and force us to walk out of the clubhouse.

Luckily for her, I know the perfect place to go.

Chapter Thirteen

Irene

TWELVE YEARS AGO

T WELVE YEARS AGO

Ulia sits with us in the passenger van, chatting away happily as I groggily attempt to gather my surroundings. The road under us is bumpy, and my head flops back and forth as if I have no muscles in my body. Terror electrifies me once more as I realize who I'm with.

“You tricked me,” I snap, though it's barely above a whisper.

Tilting my head toward her, she looks almost sad.

“I didn't...” something lodges itself in my throat as I try to talk through it.

She raises a hand, and I can't help the instinctive flinch I give.

Unfortunately for everyone in this van, they have seen a lot more of me than I wanted them to.

I try to blow away a piece of hair from in front of my eyes, but it falls right back where it was.

Uliah sighs and moves her hand toward my face slowly, cautiously.

“I did not want you to harm yourself, dear. There was a lot going on, and your brain was telling you that all involved with threats. I did not trick you, I simply ensured your safety in that moment.” She sweeps a piece of matted hair away from my eyes, tucking it gently behind my ear.

“You remind me so much of myself, young lady. So brave, loyal, and just a smidge of trauma that will forever hang onto your soul.”

“We are here!” A male bellows from the front, catching all of us off guard. I duck my head, attempting to put it between my knees in an effort to make myself smaller.

“Please don’t!” One of the girls shrieks as the doors are slammed open. Horror grips my chest in a vice-like hold as guys surround the opening. My eyes screw shut, and nothing about the next however long is going to be okay.

“Let’s take a moment,” Uliah bellows out from next to me, her hand landing on my back. I shriek and throw myself out of her touch, not making it a foot before the chains on my wrists stop me.

“No!” I scream immediately, working to get my thumbs free. I can’t let them hurt us, can’t let them take more of ourselves. We have already given up too much. I have to protect these girls. Protect myself. I have to kill them!

The bone and joint pop in my hands, then I’m sliding free. I bolt past the girls and attack the giant male standing next to the door. He seems shocked to see me flying at him, but his arms wrap around my waist as I scratch, bite, and punch everything in my way.

“Let us go! Leave us alone!” I shriek as I feel more hands grab onto me.

Yells from around me take root as I struggle against the others trying to peel me off of him.

If I let them, we will all be dead. It's him or me, and I refuse to let them sign our death warrants again.

Oddly, the man doesn't fight me, he simply holds my body to his and whispers things I can't process. He lets me do this.

"That's it, take a breath," he coos as I finally take a moment, the panic receding and letting me breathe again. "There you are. You must be Irene. Ulia said you were strong."

There's a soft edge about him that I didn't realize when I first...well, attacked him. His dark blue eyes capture me, but not in a weird, lovey way. This guy is a man, and that's not really a gender I want to be around right now.

"What do you want with us?" I whisper, pulling back slightly as I plant my hands on his shoulders. For a brief moment, I glance back at the girls in the van. They stare at me like they are waiting for the verdict on whether it's okay to come out or not.

The jury is still out.

Something about my question must be hilarious because he sets me down and then starts in with a full belly laugh.

Everyone around him smirks and shakes their heads, but I can't help the mortification that passes through me.

Taking a couple of steps back, a small hand lands on my shoulder.

One of the girls that I don't know the name of, but I do remember that she was supposed to be up for action last night.

"Uliah told me that's the president, Stingray," she whispers as her eyes glance toward the laughing older man. I don't know how much more embarrassed I can be, but let's just say that it is absolutely possible.

"How old are you, kid?" he asks me, his gaze never leaving my face. It's almost as if he's trying to show me that he isn't interested in me, or any one of us, to be exact. If they truly saved us, then they will expect something in return. What that is, I don't know.

"Uhm, I think I'm sixteen if I'm anywhere on target... I was born on November first of nineteen-ninety-six." My hands shake as I recall the day I was grabbed all those years ago. Birthdays are overrated anyway.

"You would be sixteen then, for another few months," says another guy.

Dark-rimmed glasses and acne make up a good chunk of his features, but the searing brown gaze that connects with mine has me halting my brain.

He can't be much older than me, but he matches a couple of the other people who look similar in age as they are kind of scrawny.

The only difference? He's freaking tall.

"Oh-"

"You have about three months to go before then, but we don't want anything from you or the other girls except to be safe.

We want to know more about you, but we need your help in gaining information, okay?

” Stingray asks as I leave the gaze of the scrawny kid.

I nod along as I think about the task at hand.

There’s nothing new with guiding others on the girls’ needs.

I’m the senior of the group because I’m the only one who wasn’t sold off or killed after the third try.

I have no idea what they did or why I was kept, but I did what I had to do.

That being said, I also don’t want to continue to be that person.

“I will help however I can,” I push out, the words barely getting past the saliva lodged in my throat.

“We appreciate it.” He nods to the others around him, who quickly disperse.

“We work with teens and kids who come back from negative situations, similar to yourself, and bring them peace. Whether that’s going back with their families or having them integrate into the MC, we work side by side with the agency to get the ball rolling!

” Ulia tells the group of us as the others unload from the van.

Having the men gone, it gives me room to breathe, if only for a moment.

A finger taps my shoulder, and I nearly jump out of my skin as I spin around,

immediately on guard.

“Sorry to scare you,” he says as he adjusts his glasses higher up his nose. He’s definitely boyish, and I would say only a few years older than me, if not only a couple. He looks...nervous. “I’m Globe. I’m still a prospect, but...”

“Globe, you got company!” One of his friends laughs as a pretty girl walks through the group.

She wears an outfit that would get her sold in a heartbeat and shoes that make my ankles roll just looking at them.

I shake my head immediately, attempting to banish those thoughts. They don’t belong here anymore.

The kid, Globe, narrows his eyes at the girl before turning back to me. His hand comes to run the back of his neck sheepishly before throwing a thumb over his shoulder. Opening and closing his mouth a few times, he finally just turns on his heel and walks over to the group.

“Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get you settled in,” Ulia says, grabbing my hand gently to bring me into the agency warehouse. “This is your family now. Just know that we will be here for you through thick and thin.”

If only I had known that my life would never have been the same again.

Chapter Fourteen

Irene

I try to shake off the memory as Matteo walks me down a long hallway.

Does Globe even remember the first time we met?

I remember watching him kiss the girl and then loop an arm over her shoulder and walk away.

For some reason, I thought my luck had changed that day.

He didn't look even remotely the same. Colorful tattoos adorn his perfectly sculpted muscles, but they aren't bulky.

He's lean, tall, and perfectly tanned with the softest brown eyes that can turn into melted chocolate when...

"Here!" Matteo stands us in front of a locked room, and the door almost looks like one of those bank vaults. Glancing at him over my shoulder, his grin is wide as he shakes my shoulders with glee. Jesus, why is this man always so happy?

"Wow!" I gasp, hoping that my enthusiasm sounds real.

It doesn't.

He laughs as he comes around me, turning the handle until a click sounds, then he turns it the other way.

“This place is old, yet it’s probably the safest place you can be right now.

” He continues to move the handle until it creaks, then he turns another small handle on the side. Suddenly, it pops open.

“Shit,” I mutter with awe, shocked at the whole place. When you first walk in, there’s a completely decked-out kitchen. Looking over my shoulder, I look at the alleyway that led us here. Dark and gloomy, it would absolutely get you lost if you didn’t know where you were going.

“You like?” He asks as he shoves me forward.

I take note of the light gray walls that surround the kitchen, but of a dark brown color almost blending in with the dark brown wooden cabinets that adorn the place.

A marble slab sits on the island with a sink that ties the look together just a few feet away from the other cabinets.

A few stools rest under the lip of the other side of the island, and honestly, it’s the nicest kitchen I think I have ever seen.

The clubhouse isn’t dirty or gross by any means, but it is a bachelor pad through and through, even with couples walking the halls.

I take note that there're no windows yet the home appears just as bright as normal daytime.

“It’s so nice,” I whisper as I drag my fingers across the soft marbled top. I look over

my shoulder and see him at the entrance of another room to the left. Following him, I realize that there is also a living room. “How did you find this place?”

“I accidentally stumbled upon it,” Globe’s voice startles me, and I turn to see him leaning against the doorjamb from the front entrance.

He pushes off, walking to the living room and sitting on the dark blue couch that is perched against the back wall.

He waves his hand to the loveseat adjacent to him, and I walk slowly over, sitting on the matching furniture.

Right across from me is a massive built-in bookshelf that’s half-filled with books. Globe and Matteo follow my gaze.

“Regan helped us fill that,” Matteo says with a smirk on his lips. I furrow my brows and smile, waiting for someone to start talking about what the fuck happened earlier.

“The club went on a weapons run a few months back to exchange goods with another MC. When we got there, they told us that they were looking for a new home base and that they had some property for sale. Immediately, all of us pretty much passed on it. What did we need with that when we were happy to remain in the club? Fast forward coming back, Matteo and I took a scenic route back to the club because other shit was going down that I didn’t need to be a part of.

We rode into this alley area where we were told it was a speak-easy.

I knocked on the main door, and a man with a bright face answered and let us in.

The second I saw the vaulted door, I knew it was ours.

” Globe glances over at Matteo, who is looking at his hands.

I ask the question that’s pounding a hammer into my verbal filter, the one that makes the ooey gooey part of me want to melt like chocolate on a warm day.

“Ours?”

Globe levels me with a heated look, one that forces me to remain in contact with him.

“Ours,” he affirms, then shifts his gaze to Matteo. “Ours.” I don’t know what it is, but that same soft spot inside of me snaps.

I pounce.

“Mine.” I rasp then slam my lips against Globe’s. He doesn’t take any time to think before his hands are wrapping around my waist to bring me in close. My body moves of its own accord, grinding against his cock as I kiss him like he might disappear from underneath me.

His mouth tastes like spearmint and whiskey, an odd combination, but as his tongue tangles with mine and my hands wind through his lush brown hair. A groan echoes behind us, forcing me back into my head.

I go to scramble off Globe, but he holds me tightly.

“You think you are going to straddle my dick and press those soft tits against my chest and then pretend to be some innocent virgin?” Globe growls then leans forward and nips my bottom lip between his teeth.

It’s a pain that rockets right down to my core, and I can’t help myself from putting more pressure on it.

In a split second, his fingers tangle in the base of my hair, and he yanks my head backward, forcing us to be eye to eye.

“Please,” I whimper, yet I have no idea what I’m asking for. Do I want more? Less? He must know because he gives a dark chuckle.

“Good girls will get what they earn. Naughty girls will take what we give them.” A second set of hands roams over my shoulders, keeping away from any distinct spots that might shove me over the edge of need.

“What do you say, troublemaker? Do you want to play?” Matteo groans next to my ear, the hot air breezing over the shell of it and sending shivers wracking through my body. Attempting, and failing, to nod, they both seem to get the hint.

A sharp smack lands on my right breast before another smack lands on the other.

“Words are the only way we know what you mean,” Globe admonishes as he tsks. “Not so brave now, are you?” A sob leaves my throat, a sound of pure want. Need. Matteo’s rough hands skim over my shoulders, the calluses catching slightly on the material of my shirt.

“What about...” I breathe out, words jumbling in my head and stumbling out of me. “You...Nero...”

“I already pinned spots for him, and the team is working on getting Kastiloff here,” Globe explains, but the words sound muddled as I work them through my brain filter. In a move that I can’t explain, Matteo helps Globe throw me over his shoulder.

I gasp, caught off guard as the world tilts around me. “Where are we going?” I shriek, the fire in my belly only ramping up with the perfect view of Globe’s ass. Matteo trails behind us, and when I see his bulge beneath the denim material of his pants...

“Fuck.”

As my eyes drift up his impressive, muscled body, I catch the beginnings of a smirk. With clear intent, I drift my gaze back to his impressive length, and his hand covers it, giving it a white-knuckled squeeze. I can't help the moan that leaves my throat as my mouth waters.

Just as I open my mouth to taunt him, I go flying through the air. “Shit-” then land harshly on a plush bed. Both men stand at the foot of it, taking me in with lust in their eyes.

“You like to be in charge, but here, you do as we say,” Globe grunts, his dark chocolate eyes grazing over my body like he is hungry for me.

A moment later, he meets Matteo's dark ocean blue eyes.

Like a tennis match you can't look away from, I volley between the two as heat radiates between us all.

“You are mine. Ours.” Globe takes a step over to Matteo, grabs the back of his neck, and plants his lips on his.

It takes Matteo a moment to come to his senses, but it doesn't take any time for either of them to start grabbing at each other.

“Fuck, get it off,” Globe growls impatiently.

In a split moment, Globe grabs the front of Matteo's shirt and yanks.

The material gives way easily with a sharp rip, then shoves it off Matteo's broad shoulders.

His golden complexion practically fucking shimmers in the dim lighting of the room.

Shadows cast defining glows across his rigid abdomen, and with each intake of air, they ripple.

Sexually charged energy winds inside of me, wrapping around me tightly until I can't help but wiggle on the bed.

My thighs shut on their own accord, attempting to gain the friction that it's being ignored.

When I realize that isn't enough, I slide my hand down my stomach and over my mound.

A moment later, reality snaps through me, and I jolt.

"What?" Matteo asks, his whole body suddenly turned toward me as he tries to figure out what went wrong. Redness deepens across my cheeks as embarrassment flows through me.

"I, uh... this all happened really fast, and I haven't had the chance to...you know," I stutter, trying to just fucking speak.

Globe furrows his brows, but Matteo barks out a laugh.

"You think we fucking care that you haven't showered?"

You think we mind hair covering that sweet cunt of yours?

"I can't take my eyes off the dominating male in front of me.

Globe must have understood what was happening because he's crawling to me on the bed.

"Your juices flooding your sweet, creamy pussy? Sitting and marinating for us to fucking eat?"

I honestly don't know how to react to that.

Globe doesn't give me a chance before my thighs are ripped apart, my hand swatted away, and his face dives between them.

My back bows off the bed with a sudden zing of pleasure.

Drastically different from his words, his fingers caress my breast lovingly, gently pinching my nipple.

Until a moment later when his touch moves away only to land harshly on the sensitive skin.

"Oh, fuck," I detonate. My pussy clenches on nothing, the empty feeling slowly climbing through my limbs as my body begs to be filled, fucked, and bred. "Again," I whimper, barely able to catch air as another swat lands on my chest.

"She's fucking soaked," Globe grumbles against my sensitive center, his tongue lapping at my clit with fevered need. "Your pussy is desperate, needy for more."

"She's being such a good fucking girl," moans Matteo as his mouth suddenly latches onto my nipple.

Globe shakes his head, abandoning my clit before smacking it.

“She hasn’t fucking done anything to deserve to be a good girl,” he grunts, then slams two fingers in my entrance.

My back bows off the bed, my entire body lighting on fire as I tightly clench on his invasion.

“Fuck, you are such a good naughty whore,” he growls out, repeatedly battering and pushing them as he adjusts, and adjusts, and-

“Oh God,” I scream as liquid flies out of me, my orgasm ripping through my body as I beg mercilessly.

His fingers don’t give my body any reprieve as he relentlessly slams that sweet, sweet spot inside of me.

Never letting up, never stopping, he drains and reams and drags more than I thought I was able to give to him.

Globe withdraws with a deep, hoarse groan. “Look what we have here,” Matteo rasps, though it’s deep and almost...animalistic. He drags his fingers through my slick folds, and I look down only to see Globe’s face completely bloody.

“Who started the bloodbath without me?” Another baritone voice says from the doorway. My eyes widen as I take in the man standing there.

Holy shit.

Chapter Fifteen

Nero

THREE HOURS PRIOR

H ands graze across my stomach, causing me to clench. The reaction is almost involuntary, the softness is extremely foreign to the otherwise hardness of my life.

“Only good boys get rewards,” a feminine voice I would follow anywhere whispers.

Her body stands next to me, bare of any clothing, and she is a true vision to be seen.

I swear light casts around her like a halo as she smirks down at me.

“Do you think you are a good boy, Nero?” She coos at me, a mock pout forcing her bottom lip to jut out.

“If you think he’s anything but a naughty puppy, then you are sorely mistaken.” I whip my head to the other side, an overcast face moving from the shadows to reveal...

“Matteo,” I say on an exhale, Irene’s fingers gently working my length with tight precision. He smirks as he takes in my knotted position on the Andrew’s Cross. Eyes dancing with mischief, he walks easily toward Irene and wraps his arms around her torso.

He whispers something in her ear that I strain to hear but can't before a hand lands painfully on my abs. "Shit!" I shout, the pain mixed with pleasure ripping through the sting.

Globe lands another harsh slap to my pubic area, his handprint being left behind on the sensitive skin. A moment later, he's smoothing that harsh burn and trailing it up and up and up-

"You are a nice handful," Globe grins as I inhale sharply. His fist tightens around my dick, his fingers threading between the piercings of my Jacob's ladder.

"Nero."

"He's being a dirty puppy, not listening when we tell him that he can't touch," Globe chides with a wicked smirk tugging at his lips.

"Nero."

"I bet Irene's pussy is fucking soaked just watching me use your cock as my own personal dildo.

" My eyes glance over at the woman in question.

Her thighs are spread wide, Matteo's head pressed between them as he goes to town on her cunt.

She doesn't look at him, though. She looks at me.

Eyes clashing, she fights against the urge to shut them, not wanting to break this connection.

“Do you want her pussy?” Globe taunts, letting go of my cock.

Matteo suddenly pops off her pussy with a wet sound, his brows furrowing as he glances over his shoulder.

“Nero, you need to wake up.”

I blink.

“What?”

Matteo’s ass wiggles in the air as Irene bends down to spread his ass cheeks apart. A black loop sits between his pasty ass cheeks, begging for it to be replaced with my cock.

“You need to wake up,” Irene says, her eyes begging to cum while her words throw me for a loop.

“Nero!”

My eyes pop open with immediate regret.

“Shit,” I drag out, my eyes slamming shut again and pain radiating from my skull and abdomen.

“Let me get the doc,” the familiar male voice says as he quietly moves his chair backwards and heavy boots hitting the ground follow. I slowly adjust to the bright ass lights above me, and when I finally manage to blink my eyes open, they are being dimmed.

“Thanks,” I croak, my body partially unfurling. A straw suddenly jabs its way

through my lips and within seconds, I'm gulping.

"You should slow down, you don't want to log yourself down.

" Shark yanks the straw away and sets it on the small table next to me.

He doesn't say anything for several long minutes as he assesses me from head to foot.

Most of my body is covered in a blanket, but that doesn't seem to stop his perusal.

"Look who decided to join the land of the living!" The doc says quietly as he comes into the room, an older nurse trailing behind him with a laptop.

The nurse, whose name tag says Sage, rolls her eyes at the doc, and her lips tip with a smirk.

"Don't mind that ole' crazy back there. She's just cranky because she doesn't see the charm of my ways anymore. "

Shark chokes on a laugh as the doc pulls up a rolling stool and sits next to my head.

"Oh, you hush now, Dr. Darcy, or that pretty wife of yours might be bribed away from this place." She sends a spicy wink my way, and the Doc sends her a mocking, horrified look.

"You wouldn't dare." His eyes narrow on her. She shrugs at his futile attempts at scolding her. He huffs, his fingers are obviously itching to grab his phone to call the women in question, but he thankfully doesn't. "Well, we will go over some pretty basic questions and then move on, sound good?"

"Yeah..." I pause, glancing around the room again. "Where are-"

“Don’t worry about them right now,” Shark interrupts, his thumbs typing away on his phone. “Irene woke from her dramatic nap, and now they are exploring the house.”

My brows pinch downward, my irritation ramping up. Why would they show her the house without me?

“We will get to that in a bit,” Doc says, snagging my attention again. “How are you feeling?”

I take a moment to assess how my body is reacting.

Slowly, I move my limbs and realize that a few bits and pieces of me are definitely sore.

“My back, lower leg, and head hurt, but other than that, I think I’m alright.

” I shrug and look toward Shark. He doesn’t seem to acknowledge what I said until a little nod and shift of his eyes has me reaffirmed.

“That all sounds about normal,” Doc says, jotting notes down on a small pad while the nurse types away on her computer. “On a scale of one to ten, one being the least and ten being the worst, how would you describe each part?”

I shift my back slightly, cringing at the simple movement. “My lower leg and head are the only two things that seem to hurt right now. They are around the four point five pain level.” Doc nods again, shifting his gaze away and writing more.

“Perfectly normal,” he repeats, looking toward Shark then me. “Are you okay with having him here while we go over your radiology and blood work results?”

Shark doesn’t look at me when I look at him, his lack of eye contact means that he

doesn't want me to feel swayed.

"Yeah, he can stay." I affirm, shifting again on the most uncomfortable bed on planet Earth.

"Well, I am happy to inform you that your blood tests came back great. You are pregnant!" Dr. Darcy smiles widely, the nurse choking on her own saliva as she cackles. I swear I pale for a moment before I realize that none of my body has the ability to produce a little gremlin.

"Jesus Christ," Shark mutters under his breath as he chuckles along.

I don't laugh. I'm sure it will be funny when I'm no longer in pain and feeling like part of my world is missing as we speak. The longer I'm sitting here, waiting for my results, the longer I will have to be away from the one person who makes me feel whole.

Irene.

They said she was discharged? Or that she was doing better, at least. What follow-up did they have? What was the outcome of her wound? Were they able to ensure that she got enough blood in her system?

"Earth to Nero?" Dr. Darcy calls, waving a hand slightly in the air near me. I zone back into the conversation, the room no longer happy-go-lucky like before.

"Sorry, I spaced out for a minute there," I say, covering the fact that I would absolutely rather be with Irene and the other guys than to be here right now.

They are supposedly showing her the house.

When Globe showed it to me, I knew that was our stopping point as a group.

It was perfect, and I knew Irene would love it.

“Your radiology came back fairly clear. You suffered a stable spiral fracture of the tibia, which I would say is pretty darn lucky to be the only major thing wrong. Due to the swelling at the time of the event, it was hard to see the ligaments and where they lay next to the fracture. I would like to see you back in about two weeks for follow-up imaging to make sure everything is healing smoothly. Keep that leg elevated for several days, and for several hours, if possible. No lifting anything more than fifteen pounds, and no over-exerting yourself. You will be in a splint for the first two weeks, then we will assess if a walking boot is an option. Right now, no walking on it. Sage has a crutch order for you at the pharmacy, and they will bring it down in a few. Otherwise, Nurse Sage will start the discharge paperwork, and you are free to go!”

“What about sex?” I blurt out, my brain not even giving my filter a chance to relay the information. Dr. Darcy smiles, not even fazed by the question.

“I would definitely advise against anything rough or strenuous. If your partner is willing to do the work, then that’s alright.

If your head continues to hurt, I would also advise against it due to the exertion and blood flooding in your system.

” Dr. Darcy points at the nurse, who nods and types quickly.

After a moment, she gives him a thumbs-up.

Doc pulls out his phone from the fancy pocket in his smock.

“She’s printing off your release documents now.

I'm prescribing you a month of Celebrex capsules for the swelling and pain if needed.

It's completely optional to take, but I do recommend taking one tablet in the morning, then an additional dose twelve hours later.

The pharmacist will be down shortly to go over these instructions with you.

Additionally, I am going to prescribe you a week's worth of Flexural, a muscle relaxer. That one is to be taken only if you feel like you need it."

I glance at Shark, who I find is glancing at me. He's typing on his phone and gives me a single nod, which I hope means he is taking notes of everything the Doc is saying. Doc talks about more shit that I tune out of, and honestly I'm just ready to go home.

After what felt like hours, but really was just one, Shark finally helped me break out of that prison. We sit quietly on the truck ride back to the house the guys are showing Irene at. Something about knowing she's in the space we deem safe for her has my cock hardening.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:54 pm

“We are here!” Shark announces, throwing the truck into park next to the main alleyway. “Do you need help, or you got it?”

“I should be alright, thanks for your help.” I say, grateful to have my team at my back.

“You should know that Globe and Matteo were trying to create a riot amongst the men today,” Shark laughs, shaking his head.

“Irene wants her revenge, which I get, but I’m not going to go against generations of politics for one person.

Once you are done with your welcome home party, maybe you, the guys, and I can meet at the clubhouse to go over what possibilities there are for Irene to feel... included without breaking bylaws.”

I have no fucking clue what he is talking about, but it is something I can get behind.

Instead of saying anything, I just nod and grab my crutches, shoving myself out of his truck.

Shark waits until I shut the door to the main area before leaving.

Turning the handle, I unlock the vault door and hobble my way inside.

“Oh, fuck,” her shrill tone bounces off the surrounding walls, seeping into my pores with desire.

She says something else, her voice a needy tone that has my cock immediately inflating to full mass.

Moving forward, I don't even attempt to adjust myself.

Crutches make shit shift, and I'm not about to stop every fucking step to move myself around.

"She's fucking soaked," Globe grumbles down the hall, his voice leading me straight to the main bedroom. The bedroom we deemed as the sharing room. "Your pussy is desperate, needy for more."

"She's being such a good fucking girl," moans Matteo, and whatever he or Globe does next has her crying out for more. She's merciless to their rampage, and that's only from the shit I can hear. I'm just outside the door, my body hesitating for a brief moment.

"She hasn't fucking done anything to deserve to be a good girl," Globe grunts, followed by the distinct squelching noise of a pussy being finger-fucked. "Fuck, you are such a good naughty whore."

Ecstasy licks through my bones, and I'm moving to the door without thought. The sight has me halting again, but this time? It's because she's fucking glorious.

"Oh God," she cries as liquid flies out of her puffy cunt.

Globe's fingers don't give her body any time to slow down as he relentlessly slams into her. She bows off the bed, trying to wiggle her hips away from him while trying to keep him latched on at the same time. He doesn't let up for her to breathe, and her sounds...the whimpers of need.

I take a single step into the room, removing the crutches and quietly leaning them against the wall.

“Look what we have here,” Matteo rasps, though it’s deep and almost...animalistic. His fingers run the length of her pussy, coming up bright red and dripping. Looking at Globe, you would think the man was a vampire. Face covered in blood, he licks his lips and smiles dangerously.

Fuck.

“Who started the bloodbath without me?” I sneer, my pulse thrumming wildly through my body and creating an almost buzzing feeling.

“You...” Irene gasps, her body jolting as her eyes widen. Furrowing my brows, I’m not sure how this scene is supposed to play out. She was just spread-eagle for my brother, and now she looks...concerned?

“I told you he wasn’t dead,” Globe gripes and attempts to dive back between her perfectly creamy thighs. Thighs that are smeared with residue from her menstrual cycle and creating naughty images inside of my brain that we may have to play out later...

She shoves the two men out of the way, both of them huffing as she flings herself into me. Thankfully, the wall is there to stop us, and it breaks my heart not to be able to cradle her body into mine the way I want to.

“I can’t hold you, baby girl,” I mutter as I right her onto her own two feet.

She juts her bottom lip out in a pout, but when I bend to her level and stare her down, it gets sucked back in.

“That doesn’t mean I won’t devour you. Consume you so entirely that you have no other choice but to bum oxygen out of my lungs to fill yours. ”

She inhales sharply, her pupils spreading so largely that the pretty gray is completely consumed by the black.

My fingers dance across her naked torso, her full breasts begging for my mouth on them as her nipples sway with her intake of air.

“Gorgeous,” I sigh, trailing my fingers lower still. When they slip between her precious thighs, reality seems to slam back in.

“Wait,” she pants, her hand grabbing my wrist as I circle her swollen clit. The bundle of nerves are hard under my pointer finger, bending back and forth as I circle it. “I can’t.”

“You can,” I say with a conviction so profound that she rears back slightly.

“You can, and you will. You think we aren’t savage beasts?

We may have a soft spot for our purpose in this MC, but make no mistake, little tulip, we plan to deflower you so fully that your body knows nothing else except the pleasure we give it. ”

Chapter Sixteen

Globe

A shiver runs down Irene's spine as she takes a single step back. Then another one. And another one.

Blood seeps between her lush thighs, and I'm held captive by her body. There's no telling whether she actually knows the effect she has on me, on us all. If she does, she sure knows how to have us eating out of the palm of her hand.

And her pussy.

She crooks a finger at Nero, curling it toward her in a beckoning call. He doesn't waste any time as he advances, his hobble slowing him slightly as he touches the middle of her chest and pushes.

"Open those fucking legs," he orders, his tone guttural and untamed. She immediately complies with his order, her thighs opening to reveal her bloody flower. "Fuck, look at you. Ripe and swollen just for us."

She nods her head, not saying anything as he visually devours her. I stand up, moving to be next to him so I can see what he does. And all things that are holy, she's glistening.

"You shouldn't be standing," Irene coos, her eyes grazing over his bruises and beaten body. "Let me do the work, let me be the one to take your pleasure. Force your cock

to be as deep as it will go, then stuff me so full of your cum that your essence drips out of me.”

“Can’t let good cum go to waste,” Matteo mutters, his eyes glancing over at me and Nero.

He smirks before stepping back with his hand outstretched to her.

She takes it and lets him haul her out of the bed.

Irene helps him shed his clothes, leaving his muscular back on display, his tattoos molding across its broadness as he flexes for her.

I touch between Nero’s strong shoulders, gently shoving him to take her spot on the bed.

A sharp smack emanates through the room, immediately followed by a yelp of surprise.

Nero gently scoots on the bed, moving back until his head hits the pillows.

Putting his arms behind my head, we watch as Matteo kneels behind Irene’s ass, eating her out from behind.

Her head is tilted back, face features contorted with pure bliss.

When her eyes open, they are blown wide with pleasure, her raven black hair tousled messily around her head.

I lean over her back, reaching around and tucking a piece of that silky, knotted hair behind her ear.

“Go sit on his fat cock, little raven,” I mutter in her ear, eyes connecting with Nero as I smirk.

Goosebumps rise over her skin as she nods slowly.

Matteo sits back and taps her wet pussy, the sloppy sound echoing in the room as she lifts one knee onto the bed, then the other.

She crawls toward Nero, placing her legs on either side of his hips.

“Make sure you are gentle. We don’t want to hurt him.

” Irene smirks at my words, her eyes flitting over her shoulder to wink at me before moving back to her.

She won’t hurt him, but in a scene this deep, I want to make sure that caution is voiced.

Nero’s large body tenses and his muscles ripple as she grinds her bloody cunt across his erection. Her movements hardly make any noise, but since we are so hyper-focused on her and what she’s doing, it’s easy to hear whatever we want to.

His hands finally move from behind his head, and his large hand wraps around the front of her throat.

“You are ours, little tulip,” he grumbles, his fingers closing around her throat as he brings her closer.

She says nothing, simply releases a breathy moan from between her plush lips.

Her hips speed up tempo, rocking along him frantically.

I climb onto the bed with them, my cock bobbing and slightly painful.

Wrapping my fingers in her locks, I wait for Nero to release her throat, then I yank.

“Fuck!” she shrieks as her gyrating stops.

I shove my cock between her smooth ass cheeks, letting the dry friction heat my skin with each shallow thrust. “Who told you to ride him like that? I don’t think I told you to put your puffy cunt on top of his dick, did I?”

” I ask, pulling her head back further until she’s extending her breasts to the ceiling.

It takes me a moment to realize it, but there’s a small barbell in her left nipple.

I don’t know how I didn’t notice that before when I had my face literally plastered between them, but who am I to complain? “What did I tell you to do?”

“You told me to sit on it,” she whimpers, her eyes hazy.

The long look in her gaze is key for my understanding.

I remember a seminar a couple of years ago when we visited the Dirty Sinner MC that gave us clues into subspace.

With the way her eyes fade out, her compliance in our hands, I would guess she is probably pretty close to subspace. “That’s what I did.”

I realize my mistake but still swat her ass.

“You are right, I apologize, little raven. Let me be clear this time...” I shove her forward into Nero, and he catches her around the throat, his gaze piercing into hers.

“I want you to stuff his big dick inside that tiny cunt and tell us how it feels. Don’t pull that ‘it won’t fit’ bullshit.

You stretch, and you will revel in the burn. ”

I look over my shoulder at Matteo, who is sporting an impressed expression. Little does he know that Nero and I both know what he craves...

“Do you want Matteo to take your ass, pretty girl?” I shove my fingers into her mouth, and her tongue immediately swirls around my digits.

Without warning, I push a third finger into her mouth and go until she gags on them.

The sound is catching, one that I fantasize she makes while my cock is deep inside of her throat.

She nods her head as best as she can, her little claws digging into Nero’s bruised chest. He doesn’t say anything or try to stop her as she slowly rocks along his length.

A moment later, Nero slithers his hand between them and positions himself at her entrance.

I back up and get the perfect view of her small opening stretching to his entire length.

Each barbell of his ladder slowly notched into her.

“Oh,” she moans out, long and low as she owns his cock as her own.

“What do you want, vixen?” Matteo asks, his voice surprising me with how beastly he sounds. “Is that too much cock for you? Is your pussy not giving enough for him to enter? I thought you were a good girl, but Globe might be right...you may be too

filthy to take him.”

She says nothing but acknowledges that she hears him by sinking down suddenly. The force of her hips slapping Nero’s makes the resounding smack all that much sweeter.

“There you fucking go,” I growl, loving how her blood coats Nero’s balls and tinges them brightly. “Where do you want his cum to go, baby? Want him to fill your cunt with his spunk? Own you entirely, then let the rest of us chain you down and have our way with you?”

“Yes,” she whispers, then says, “sir.” Her body suddenly crashes down, and Nero devours her mouth. I laugh wickedly at her submission. I expected her to put up more of a fight, but with how excited she was to see Nero...

Everyone is here.

I reach into the nightstand next to her bed, grabbing the small bottle of lube and squirting a small amount onto my fingers.

Matteo pulls apart her ass, her puckered hole on display for me as I coat it with lube too.

She mewls, her hips rocking into my touch.

Instead of forcing my way inside her, I hold my fingers to her asshole and let her ride them inside of her.

With a particularly hard downward motion, two of my fingers breach her seal.

“Oh!” she cries, her body jumping forward and further into Nero’s embrace.

With my free hand, I snake it around to her front and play with that special bundle of nerves.

Within moments, her body relaxes into Nero's, pliant once more.

It takes several long minutes of her rocking over Nero's length and me working my fingers inside of her for her body to fully relax.

With a heated look at Matteo, I mumble, "One of these days, I will be fucking your ass just like this." With a gulp, pink tinges his cheeks and he focuses back on her ass.

"I bet Irene would love to take you from behind too, wouldn't she?"

"Removing my fingers from her ass, I bring my hand down on her luscious cheeks, watching them bounce then turn pink.

"Yes, sir," she cries as I shove a fourth finger into her harshly. She doesn't jump away like she did before, but her inhale of air is all I need to know.

"Matteo would love to have his asshole fucked by your fake cock while I pound into you from behind. Maybe he will suck off Nero while we fuck him." Matteo moans, his eyes closing as he reaches to his own dick and strokes harshly.

"Fuck, I can't wait to feel this tight hole swallow me, but I think I want to take your throat this round.

"Matteo snaps his head toward me, confusion etched on his features, but he doesn't ask.

I nod forward, and he immediately crawls forward.

He lubricates his cock fully before pressing in.

“Yes,” Irene drags out. She and Nero both still so that Matteo can inch inward. She pants against Nero’s face, their eyes locked together as Matto works her over, all the way until she’s fully seated on both men.

“Fuck,” Nero croons, his eyes rolling to the back of his head. “That’s a tight fit.”

“How do you feel, vixen? Is that too much cock for you?” He taunts, slowly backing away and letting her hips chase him. “Shit, she’s clenching.”

“Fuck, she’s gonna break my dick,” Nero laughs slightly before grunting. His hand swipes upward on her ass, the contact causing her cheek to jiggle. “Be a good girl and stay still.”

They meet eyes over her shoulder before they pull out and shove back in at the same time. Her body inches upward. I watch them together, momentarily stunned that this is currently my reality.

“Her throat is awfully empty,” Nero calls, pulling me out of my trance. His hand squeezes her throat, keeping her in place as he challenges me to get moving. I kneel next to her prone figure, her eyes glossy and hair messy from being fucked into oblivion.

“Does our dirty girl want one more?” I ask her, already knowing the answer. Nero lets go of her throat, and she nods. “Then you need to fucking beg me for it. Tell me how much you want it.”

I can tell she’s fighting a small part of her brain that wants to remain dominant. Then, a split second later, she’s giving in.

“Please fuck my throat, sir,” she begs, her gaze fluttering up at me through her lashes.

“I need you to punish my throat for getting me into trouble earlier.” Oh, she knows I was pissed off about that, and I will admit that this is the perfect way to punish her for talking out of turn with our Pres.

I debate inside my head whether I want to start slowly or just fuck her throat like I would her pussy. She leans down, sucking my tip in her mouth and shoving any plotting out the window. Fisting her hair, I hammer into her throat. “Fucking swallow,” I demand, and she does exactly as told.

“Shit, she’s coming,” Matteo growls, his cock pumping without mercy into her tight body. “We can wring another one from you, vixen, I just know it.”

Her throat is hot, wet, and fucking perfect. Just like the rest of her. The guys and I set a distinct rhythm, where when they are pulling out, I’m shoving myself so deep she gags.

“Fuck, I’m close,” Matteo announces, slurring how tight she is and that she’s perfect. He’s definitely a praiser. Irene nods when I retreat for a moment, saliva dripping like a chain from her chin and then dropping onto her ample chest.

“Please, I need to come so badly, sirs,” she begs. I cut her off with another downward thrust into her mouth. Her eyes flutter shut as she takes the pounding, but Matteo slips his hands around her waist. When she jolts forward and her eyes flash wide, I know he’s found his target.

“Come, little tulip,” Nero demands, dragging her eyes back to him while she takes a facial pounding. “Force me to give you all of my cum.”

She swallows her moans around my cock, the vibrations rolling up my spine, then

right back down and straight to my balls. I yank out of her mouth, hold her hair in one hand and jerk myself harshly with the other.

“I’m going to paint your pretty face with my cum, mark you as ours and show everyone that you are not up for debate! “Ropes of cum shoot out of me as stars explode from behind my eyes, and her shrieks of pleasure become a distant sound as my body expels all its energy in one fell swoop.”

Fuck, I think we are all in trouble.

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Chapter Seventeen

Matteo

My phone buzzes in my pocket, the vibrations startling me from my computer screen.

Shark:

Church.

The one word is all we get, and honestly, that's really all we need.

Glancing toward Globe's office, I realize that he's staring right back at me.

I smirk, the last few days replaying in my mind.

Everything has been amazing with Irene since Nero came home, and at this point, I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I was raised with my brothers at the MC through adulthood, and looking back, I realize my childhood was alright, though it wasn't great.

That didn't mean that stuff wasn't going on, though.

Ma stayed home and waited for Pop to get home.

When he did, if he was in a good mood, then we sat around the table and ate the scraps we could afford.

But when Pop came home from a bad day? You could tell before he even darkened our doorstep that night that his mood wasn't great.

He would grumble and gripe, take more food than what we rationed because "he worked for it".

There was always something about him we needed to walk on egg-shells with, but he never hurt us physically.

Just...took our money and gambled it away.

Ma would look at me with a sad smile and sacrifice her meal for me.

She would tell me that one shoe fits snugly while the other one was just a size too big, always waiting for it to fly off the foot of the one wearing it.

It never clicked that she was basically telling me to sleep with one eye open.

Since then, I never fully trusted when the going was good.

Has that led to a bit of self-sabotage? Yes.

But it was easier to end things before they began versus getting attached and then being broken.

Just like my Pop did to Ma, broke her in two before she could warn me...

"You coming?" Globe asks, his hand landing on my shoulder. I follow the line of his

arm upward, drinking in each dip and valley of his muscular arm, appreciating the colorful tattoos that are inked in.

I blink a couple of times, pulling myself out of the slight trance. “Yeah, I was just thinking.” I don’t elaborate before standing up. Globe doesn’t let me get far before his hand lands on the back of my neck and swirls me around.

Lips landing solidly on mine, he kisses me like his life depends on it.

Like this might be the last kiss he ever gets from me.

Something inside my brain argues with the logistics, but his kiss captures both mind and body as his tongue swirls with mine.

My arms reach around him, one hand slipping to his delicious ass and the other to grip his back.

He fights for dominance in this kiss, and I fight back.

“Fuck, I can’t get enough of you,” Globe grunts along my lips, his mouth pulling away and sucking down the column of my throat.

“I don’t know what took me so long to realize...

” he’s cut off by the vibrating of his phone.

He groans, sucking in a deep breath and stepping back.

“This isn’t over.” His gaze pins me to my spot, and that’s enough to completely silence my overactive thoughts. For now.

My phone starts buzzing a moment later, and when I reach into my pocket, there's another text.

Shark:

If you two could keep it in your pants until after, the rest of us would appreciate it.

I grin at Globe, and he shakes his head. Taking my hand in his, he walks us from his office to the place we hold church. Once Globe and I enter, the doors are shut after us.

"Now that everyone is here, we can get started. There have been sightings of Kastiloff in a cage match about three hours from here. I don't know why he's sticking so close to home, but that's not the problem.

He is scouting for more recruits to assist in getting victims into his trade since we have been blowing up operations left and right.

" Shark explains, motioning for Globe to take his seat at the head table.

I sit next to Ghost and Warden, neither of them saying anything to me as I come over.

Globe looks over the reports and boots up the laptop sitting at the head of the table. He works for a few moments before the projector places the map onto the screen.

We have a blue dot to show where we are located in Indianapolis, and then shows the small colored dots around the maps.

"Red is for newborn to two years, purple is three to five, green is six to fifteen, and black is sixteen and up. Last time we saw this map, there was a slew of red splattered across the board. Reports have amped up for purple age ranges. When talking with

the females, they indicated that it is possible that they are taking three to five because they are more likely to be manipulated. Infants can be difficult to care for, but three to five still have the ability to manipulate the way they understand things around them.”

My stomach sinks as I think about all the reports I have had to process about these kids. It’s so fucking sad that local law enforcement isn’t taking this shit seriously. Thankfully, that’s why we are here.

“The problem we are having is that Kastiloff isn’t as trusting as he was before.

Something happened, which we can’t get intel on, but he had stopped recruitment until this last cage fight.

He put feelers out for newbies, and those feelers got back to us.

I need someone to go into the matches and try to convince him to take them under his wing,” Shark announces, looking around the room and taking a moment to stop at each and every one of us.

Unfortunately, I can feel there is something he isn’t saying. No one else speaks up or seems to have the same inkling of suspicion, but my gut feeling is suddenly voiced into fruition.

“The officers have spoken in depth about what we wanted to do. We thought for several days and tried to work out any kinks, but we always rounded back to the same conclusion. We decided that it would be best to have a female candidate go into the matches and attempt to obtain information from Kastiloff,” Keres, our VP, announces.

Immediately, there’s an uproar.

“That’s not safe!”

“None of the females are trained!”

“Bylaws prevent female intervention!”

On and on, they shout their concerns at Shark and the team. I look at Globe, his brows drawing together before he leans into Shark. They exchange a few words before Globe nods once.

He’s pissed.

He doesn’t say anything else as everyone prattles on. Shark lets the chaos ensue for a few more moments before slamming his fist onto the tabletop.

“This is not something we are going to put to a vote, not something we are open for discussion on. Because of the necessary circumstances, we are invoking Bylaw zero-three-two-one, subsection G. We have deemed that this passage will be read and sworn for this cause only!” Keres shouts over them, his hulking size suddenly standing abruptly from the table.

“Bylaws state that we can invoke this section if there is a safety or security measure that can only be completed or conducted by a female, and it meets extenuating circumstances. With the numbers rapidly increasing again, we are hereby invoking this right.”

In my years of being here, I have never heard of anyone invoking any necessary bylaw stand-ins like this.

Honestly, I didn’t think they existed. The individual in question has already been confronted and asked, and they have agreed.

They have been prepping for about a week and feel they are able and ready to take on this task. ”

Globe and I lock eyes, unsure if they would ask Irene to do something like this. With her history, I don’t think she would be able to successfully complete this mission. That, and I don’t know if Kastiloff would remember her.

A moment later, the door opens, and another female walks into the room. I know she works at the agency, but I can’t put my finger on her name.

“No!” Cobra shouts, rocketing out of his chair. “Absolutely not, Shark.” My eyes widen as I look between the two. She has a gentle blush on her cheeks, but that’s all I really notice as she walks to the front.

“It is not up for discussion,” Shark snaps, his voice hollow and his eyes empty.

Like a tennis match, we all look between the two men as they posture at one another.

“She will continue to train with you all to learn the ropes and get a better understanding of her assigned tasks. The next match is not for another three months. We ride tomorrow morning to one of the bases that Kastiloff uses to house teens for transport. For now, please welcome Mila into the fold as our first and only female to be allowed into the MC.”

A slow clap starts, then whistling and cheering ensue. Cobra shoves his brothers out of the way, grabs Mila by the waist, tosses her over his shoulder, and exits Church without a look back.

Chapter Eighteen

Irene

A week later, Mila asked to meet us at the cafe. A moment later, she drops a bomb. “I’m helping the MC take down traffickers from the inside,” Mila says confidently, but her eyes don’t meet any of ours. “I was asked about a month ago.”

Wini, Regan, and I sit around the table and stare at Mila. Shock, anger, confusion. We all feel it, and she must feel the weight of our stares, because she shifts in her seat under our scrutinising gaze.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Wini shrieks, finally coming out of her haze of shock. “Do you realize how dangerous this all is?”

My heart pounds frantically in my chest. Thinking about having to go back there...

I shudder. I know I talked about helping with club affairs, but thinking about going back there has flashbacks surfacing almost immediately.

With each blink of my eyes, I can see my abusers, see the way they smiled at me with malice when I fucked something up, can hear their screaming...

Blink.

“You fucking cunt!” Beaker snarls, his fist raising and coming down to connect with my jaw.

Blink.

Crack! The whip lands on my back with force too hard, my skin seering as it tears in two. Midas and Snob laugh at my tears as they fall.

Blink.

“Next time, you will do well to remember your fucking place, bitch,” Bacon roars, the whip snapping on already torn skin, and warmth radiates through me.

Blink.

“You have one last chance to be sold off after that?” Kastiloff grins, his orange teeth illuminating in the dark tunnel as he leans close. “After that, you are mine.”

A hand lands on my shoulder, and I swear I jump ten feet in the air.

“Hey,” Regan asks softly, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“You all right?” Mila and Wini continue to bicker in the background, but I can’t seem to focus on anything.

My brain is hazy, the coffee chai tea in front of me is suddenly bland on my tongue.

I try to clear the foggy feeling on one, two, three blinks.

“No, I don’t think I am,” I mutter back, placing my head in my hands and taking a few deep breaths.

For several years, with Ulia at my side, I worked through the trauma of what I went through there.

She helped shape me into someone I'm proud of, guided me to help others and showed them that their past isn't what makes decisions for them.

I thought I was over it all, put that all behind me.

Apparently, it's still like a fresh blade slicing through my resolve over twelve years later.

My trauma should not force people to walk on eggshells around me, should not be the driving force to stop hard conversations. Yet, knowing that sweet, innocent Mila is going to be walking straight into the lion's den...

Air seizes my lungs as I fight to breathe.

With everything I can, I fight to inhale.

I refuse to let my demons tangle back into my present peace.

After a few moments of failing to get air, I reach up to my throat as my panic swells further.

Panicked voices ensue around me, and I'm frustrated because I know I'm okay, but that old feeling of fear never leaves.

Warm hands clasp my cheeks, pulling my head up and toward them.

Through blurry vision, I can barely make out Nero's face.

His lips are moving, and his words are drowned by the blood rushing through me, the ringing in my ears.

With a movement that looks similar to inhaling deeply then exhaling, I watch his chest rise and fall.

He smiles, and his words finally sink into me as I work through everything internally.

“That’s a good girl,” his voice wavers through the rush in my ears. “More air in those lungs, and you will be set.” I nod along with him as I double down on air intake. Looking around, I see the girls have made themselves scarce.

Setting my elbows on the table, I drop my head into my hands. “What even happened? One second Mila was telling me about her new assignment, then the next...”

Nero sits next to me on the bench, wraps his arm around my shoulder, and brings me into his body. Kissing the top of my head, I can’t help but melt into his warm embrace.

“It’s a lot to process, that’s for sure,” he starts, trailing off for a moment.

“It’s something you will never get over.

You worked with Ulia over several years for a reason, but that doesn’t mean what you went through will go away.

” He looks down at me, his eyes hard but soft, his tone rough but gentle.

It’s obvious that he is upset on my behalf.

“What happened to you?” I ask quietly, moving my gaze away from his assessing one. I watch people mill around the cafe, happy to be meeting friends for coffee, people working on their laptops, some just watching others mingle. He takes a deep

breath, his hold tightening ever so slightly.

“None of us commented, but we saw your scars. You haven’t seen me fully nude because of our quick everything, then me getting hurt...

” an older woman smiles at us as she makes her way to the counter to order, a small child trailing behind her with their own wide smile.

“We have matching scars on our backs. Well, close enough to matching.”

I sit silently, waiting for him to finish speaking. Several minutes pass by before he opens his mouth, but it’s not for what I thought it would be.

“I want to show you something.” Standing from the bench, he grabs my hand and walks us out the door. I wave at the teenager behind the counter as Nero holds the door for me. He walks over to his bike, which has two helmets on the back of it.

“What do you think you are doing?” I ask, though there isn’t any heat behind it.

He chuckles. “I have been in far too many accidents to let this one take me out.” Walking toward me with one of the helmets, he doesn’t wait before turning me around and plaiting my hair. I don’t comment, a mixture of shock and something else racing through my body.

Heat.

Yep, I’m horny for this man.

“The splint on your leg doesn’t really let you shift,” I comment. He looks down at his leg, then smirks.

“Good thing this leg isn’t the one I use to shift then, huh?

” A moment later, he’s easing the protection over my head and weaving the straps into place.

He grabs my hand and holds it as he sits on the seat.

Propping down one of the footrests, I take my cue to throw myself onto the bike.

It’s not as graceful as I would have liked, but I’m on. And we’re off.

Chapter Nineteen

Nero

I have never had a female on the back of my bike. It's not hard, and she's skilled to know to just let your body ride.

Her smart mouth has me wanting to put her over my knee, but I don't.

Not yet. For now, I let her relax against my back.

Her warmth warms me against the slight chill of the wind.

We take back roads to the clubhouse, and she doesn't flinch as we hit a few road bumps along the way.

She takes it all in stride, which makes me appreciate her all that much more.

My stomach is in knots thinking about what's waiting for us there. Another mission, but this one is just for her.

Slowing down, the prospects nod as they open the gates to the clubhouse to let us in. Patience hasn't been my strong suit in this life, and just waiting to surprise her has me practically vibrating.

Shark, Keres, and a few others are standing at the entrance of the clubhouse in greeting. Their faces are stoic, none of them giving away anything. I can tell the

moment she clocks them because her entire body goes rigid. She's mumbling to herself, that much I can tell.

The kickstand is dropped, the bike is shut off, and all that's left are the birds chirping in the distance. I kick my leg over first, helping her take her helmet off before hauling her off the bike.

"What's going on?" She asks me quietly, her eyes scanning the group of five. "I thought you were going to tell me about your past?" I shake my head.

"You will see," I mutter back, a smirk on my lips that seems to partially put her at ease. "I don't talk about my past, and I rarely ever think about it. It's too much for me, so I just move forward." She nods, then chews on her bottom lip.

Shark takes a step forward as we get to the bottom of the stairs, his shoulders rolling as he stares her down.

"Let's go," he snaps, turning on his heel and walking away.

She glances at me nervously, the confusion evident on her face, and the urge to flee is fairly obvious.

I don't let her hand go as I have to practically drag her inside.

Everyone is in church, the one place that is usually forbidden to anyone that isn't a patched member.

There are very few times that we make an exception, and this is one of them.

Globe sits at the head of the table where Shark and Keres meet him.

Irene's eyes glare daggers into my head as I approach the table with her at my side.

They assess her, Globe's face even blank from its usual happiness.

I let go of her hand and walk around the side of the table, taking my seat near the end.

"Irene, we are here because it has come to our attention that one of the individuals involved in Nero's near-fatal crash was also one of the men who harmed you?"

"His voice doesn't waver, his eyes remain hard, and I can see Irene's breath catch in her lungs.

She sways slightly but locks her knees and nods.

"Yes." A simple but effective answer.

"How would you feel about assisting Mila?" Air leaves my lungs. What the fuck? I open my mouth, but Shark's hand shoots up. "We don't need you inside, but we need someone who knows the players better than all. We talked about it, and we realized that you could be an asset to the team."

"You have the option to say no," Keres says, his eyes slightly warmer than Shark's. "You have no obligation to this club, but we know how important this is to you."

Irene turns pale, her knees no longer staying locked. I rush to her side, pulling her body into me to keep her from collapsing.

"You don't need to answer now--"

"Yes," Irene says, her voice wavering harshly but her eyes obviously clear. "Yes, I will help."

"I think we should talk about this," I whisper to her, and she shakes her head.

“No, this is my club. The one who raised me when my own family didn’t want me. I want to help however I can, and if I need to point out special players, then I will.”

Shark nods, a grin on his face as he stands. “We also voted on a few other things...” he stands and holds his hand out to Globe. Globe’s face finally breaks that harsh characteristic as he stands.

He’s in front of us in a second, his hands holding leather.

“Your club has voted that you are worthy of this vest. You wear it with honor, pride, and will vow to bleed in the name of brotherhood, now sisterhood. You are the first female to ever receive a cut with full colors, honor of this club.” Tears spring to her eyes at Globe’s words, but she does her best to reign them in.

He helps her place it over her shoulders, the vest contouring amazingly to her body.

“You have shown courage, grace, and strength that we need. So, for that, we are also giving you a name to match. Preference to solitude, but not afraid to use your teeth...” Shark says, looking at me for the go-ahead.

“Welcome to the club, Taz.”