



Xavier (Kiss of Death MC #5)

Author: *Marteeeka Karland*

Category: Romance

Description: Xavier may be an ex-con, but he's strong, protective, and totally sexy.

He's my hero.

Tillie: At the lowest time in my life, I realize I might have gained my very own guardian angel.

I never saw Xavier as more than a friend, but then he went to prison for me.

I'll never forget his sacrifice.

He's the one person I can tell anything, the one person I trust above all else.

He's also the man I've built up in my little fantasy world as being the perfect husband.

Only problem is, I forgot he's still a killer.

How can I be with a man who's capable of taking a life?

I'm torn between my growing feelings for him and my fear of what it means to love a man like Xavier.

Xavier: Did I have to kill the man who beat Tillie? No.

But I'm headed to prison anyway, so why not get an added bonus? Tillie defended me to anyone who would listen, but I still never expected she'd be almost religious in coming to see me every Saturday.

I also didn't expect to fall in love with the beautiful, spirited woman.

Seeing her smile now is worth the extra time I'm spending away from my brothers in Kiss of Death and the comfort of home.

Unfortunately, my little Tillie is a magnet for trouble.

Good thing she has me to protect her, because there is nothing I won't do for Tillie.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:15 am

Xavier

“Hey, Sugar.” The one bright spot in my life was Tillie St. Martin. Ironic, because the night I found her was in the middle of the worst damned storm I’d ever tried to drive through. That was also the night that changed both our lives forever.

I think I had a weird sort of connection with her from the second she looked at me over her shoulder, soaked to the skin in ripped and blood-stained clothing, with an angry-looking bruise forming on her left cheek.

She was walking down a two-lane country road at one in the morning.

Nothing good happens at one in the morning if you’re forced to walk on a deserted road in the middle of a storm.

“I did it, Xave!” She grinned brightly at me through the bulletproof glass. She had the wall phone to her ear and looked so happy my heart was breaking.

Then I frowned. “Wait a minute. You’re not moving to San Diego with that creep you were telling me about last month, are you?”

“What?” She jerked back, a scowl on her face. “You honestly think I’m that stupid?”

I had a moment of panic. Clearly, I’d fucked up. I just wasn’t sure how. “Of course, you’re not stupid!” I rubbed my hand over the back of my neck. “But I’m not sure what I said to make you think I’d think you were stupid?” She raised her eyebrows. “OK, clearly, we need to start over.”

She broke out into giggles. “You’re so cute when you think I’m irritated at you.”

“I kinda thought I’d said something to thoroughly piss you off.”

“Pfft.” She waved away my words. “I could never be pissed at you. You’re my hero after all.”

“Aww, Tillie. You have no idea... Seeing you smile, how much happier you look now... You kind of gave me a whole new outlook on life.”

“Oh?” She was still smiling but she looked genuinely curious. Not like she was humoring me. “What’s that?”

“Sometimes, the outcome is worth the fuckin’ consequence.

” I grumbled out the words, but it was the fucking truth.

Yes, I was in prison. Would I rather be on the outside with my brothers?

Sure. But I could pull my weight with the club in prison same as I could out.

Given that I had some good connections here in Terre Haute, I figured I’d make the best of a bad situation.

Like I said, some things were just worth the cost.

Tillie’s face softened and she put her palm against the window.

I put mine over hers against the glass. I’d never actually touched her skin, but I could imagine how her hand would entwine with mine.

She was twenty-three years old. Way too fucking young for me when compared to my thirty-eight years, but her life experiences made her seem older sometimes.

“You ended my nightmare, Xavier. I will never take that for granted. I’d be dead if it weren’t for you.”

“Only thing I ever want from you is for you to be happy. You never have to come back here, Tillie. I know this is a scary place sometimes. But if you do come by occasionally, I hope you always have a smile this bright on your face.” That got me another beautiful smile, but also a trembling chin and two tears from her pale green eyes.

“So. If you’re not moving to San Diego with Dipshit, what’s got you all smiles, Sugar? ”

She gave a watery laugh as she swiped at her tears. “I did it.”

“Well, yeah, you said that.” I grinned, trying not to chuckle but failing miserably. “Gonna have to give me an antecedent to go with your pronoun, baby.”

That really got an amused laugh from her. “Really? Antecedent?”

“Hey. You’re the author between the two of us. You should know those kinds of words, what they mean, and how to avoid making me say them.”

“Fine. It refers to buying a house.” She bounced in her seat excitedly.

I grinned. “You’ll have to show me pictures when you get moved in.”

“Oh, I will.” Her grin got even wider. “Want to know the best part?”

“What’s that, sweetheart?”

“I’m moving to Terre Haute.”

OK, this was unexpected. She lived an hour and a half away but had never mentioned she was moving, let alone anywhere close by. “Honey, why would you move to Terre Haute?”

“Two reasons.” She straightened, her smile still really wide. “First, Terre Haute has way more affordable housing. I found a house for half the price in Terre Haute than I could find in Indianapolis.”

“I could see that.” I tried to keep a lighthearted expression on my face, but I could tell something was up. “But why get a place of your own at all? I thought you were happy to stay with your folks.”

“Well, that’s the second reason.” She still smiled and still seemed happy, but also... sad? Scared?

“Tillie...” I gave her a stern look, knowing something was off. Every instinct in my body was now screaming at me. Not because I thought she was in danger. Because, I knew with every fiber of my being, someone had hurt her feelings. And that simply was not acceptable. “What. Happened?”

She gave me a nervous laugh and I noticed her chin trembling again.

“So, Mom found out I’m an author.” She smiled again, but I could see tears gathering in her eyes to spill over again.

“She wasn’t really impressed with the kind of books I write.

” She nodded her head, not meeting my gaze as she tucked a lock of strawberry blonde hair behind her ear.

“She didn’t understand how I could write about such...

uh... graphic things after what happened to me.”

I had to take a deep breath. It was paramount to keep calm when expressing negative emotion around Tillie.

Anytime in her life someone had been upset with her or raised their voice, she knew she was going to get hurt.

Given the way we met, I’m surprised she wasn’t terrified of me.

Maybe because I was behind bulletproof glass now and she knew I couldn’t get to her.

I hadn’t hurt her, but the situation had still been a violent encounter.

If there was anything about that night I regret, it was that Tillie saw how violent I could be. Or, at least, she saw the aftermath.

“You told me several months ago you were thinking about movin’ out. Only reason you didn’t go then was to take care of your parents since your dad broke his hip. I thought they wanted you to stay with them.”

“Yeah.” She shrugged, smiling even as she wiped tears from her cheeks with her fingers again. “They indicated they didn’t need my help anymore. I might have told them to go take a flying leap. But I plead the fifth.”

“Good for you, baby.” I smiled with her, surprised at how proud I was of her for taking up for herself. It was something she had trouble doing. Tillie was a pleaser. “So you found a place you could afford?”

She took a breath and continued to compose herself.

I could practically see the emotional release as she told me about the little house she’d found on the outskirts.

The longer she talked, the more she relaxed, and I could see that, despite being hurt by her parents’ rejection of her, she was genuinely happy about this change in her life.

Personally, I wanted to howl with relief.

She’d stayed with her parents after her husband had been killed, but they had never been fully on her side.

At least that was the way it seemed to me at the sentencing.

Their body language was very standoffish and both of them looked at her like they’d just stuck lemons in their mouths.

It had seemed to me then they were more upset with her for speaking up than they were because she’d lost her husband.

“Oh!” She shifted around in her seat happily.

Thank God she’d shaken off her sadness. I wasn’t sure how I’d have managed if she cried anything other than happy tears.

“I have a cell phone now. Do you want to write the number down? I mean,” she ducked her head, looking both shy and embarrassed, “I know you can’t just pick up the phone and call me all willy nilly.

” She gave a nervous chuckle. “But, you know, in case you can call. Or need me to bring you something.”

I smiled. “I’ll remember if you want to tell me. I can write it down when I get back to my cell.” She rattled off the number, which I committed to memory. Phone numbers were a quirk of mine. I remembered them easily. I had no idea why, but I was fucking grateful for the ability.

“You have five minutes remaining.” The automated voice interrupted us, meaning we needed to wrap things up.

“I guess that’s all for this time.” She gave me that soft look she always gave me when the time came for her to leave. “I’m so sorry you got involved in my mess, Xave. You don’t deserve to be here, and I feel like it’s my fault.”

“Look, honey.” I put my hand back up on the window between us.

“I want you to listen to me and really hear what I’m telling you.

” She put her hand against the glass over mine once more and nodded.

She looked so lost and riddled with guilt I wanted to see her husband dead all over again.

“I chose to stop that night when I saw you on the road. I chose to offer you a ride. I chose to ask you to take me to the bastard who’d beaten and terrorized you.

Then I chose to kill the son of a bitch.

Me . You didn't ask me. You didn't force me.

And I didn't ask you if you wanted me to kill him.

I'd never seen you before in my life that night I picked you up.

But I never pick up hitchhikers. I'm also never in a car or a pickup because I'm always on my bike.

Even in the rain. So me driving that old Ford Ranger the night I found you and actually stopping to pick you up?

The whole thing should never have happened.

That means things happened the way they were supposed to.

Seeing you here when you come to see me with that big smile on your face, seeing you truly happy, is worth any amount of time I have to do in here, honey.

" I grinned. "Besides, the food's hot and mostly decent.

I pulled a few strings to get my own cell.

This ain't the Hilton, but it's a hell of a lot better than where I sent that bastard.

" I shrugged, trying to lighten the mood. "No pun intended."

She teared up again but giggled. "I don't know when you'll be out, but when you are I'll help you any way I can, Xavier. A place to stay, money, a job... I'll share

everything I have with you.”

“Don’t worry about me, darlin’. I’m not alone. Even in here, my brothers are looking out for me.”

Her eyes widened. “They are?”

I grinned. “Yeah. Do you have a pen and paper?”

“Yeah.” She shifted in her seat and pulled out a small notebook from her back pocket.

“One of the perks of being a writer. I’ve always got something to write with and on.

” She held up a... crayon? At my confused look she grinned.

“I’m not allowed to bring sharp objects in here.

I have to wait sometimes, so I brought something to write with. Just in case.”

I just chuckled. She was too sweet for words.

“I’m going to give you a phone number. Keep it with you.

If you ever need anything, call that number.

Tell whoever answers you’re a friend of Xavier’s.

” I gave her the number. She jotted it down, then repeated the number back to me.

“Good. When I say anything, Tillie, I mean if you’re short on gas money or need groceries, if you don’t feel safe for any reason, anything at all you need, you call that

number.

They will come to you, no questions asked. ”

“Why?” She glanced at the clock frantically, using every minute she could. “Why would you do all this, sacrifice a big part of your life? Give me a number if I need help? For me?”

I didn’t flinch. “Why not you? Could have been anyone on that street, but it was you. It was me. You needed something I could help with, so I provided.”

“Xavier, I swear, no matter what happens to either of us in the future, I will never forget what you did for me. I’ll pay it forward as best I can and I’ll make your sacrifice count. And I will never, ever not come to see you. I owe you my life! The least I can do is come visit.”

It should have sounded like a cheesy movie, but the sincerity in her voice and her tears were heart-melting. “You just keep writin’ your stories. Live your dream.”

“Your time is up. Please exit to your right.” The automated voice cut us off, but Tillie sat there, her hand still against mine with the glass between us. She hung up the phone and kept her gaze on me for long moments.

She turned her head and nodded at someone, then looked back at me. “Thank you.” I couldn’t hear her, but I read her lips easily enough. I nodded at her and hung up my phone.

Tillie never left the cubby before I left the room. I imagined she wanted every possible second with me. I touched the glass under her palm once more then turned and left.

It was Saturday afternoon. Tillie always came on Saturdays.

Every week since I'd gone to prison, without fail.

I always told her not to come. Since the first time she showed up, I tried to get her to stay away for her own good.

But she kept showing up. And I soaked up each visit like a sponge to water.

As I approached the guard, I looked back over my shoulder one last time at Tillie. I had to top off my fix of looking at her. It could be the last time I ever saw her. One day, she would take my advice to heart. I just wasn't sure what I was going to do when she did.

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Tillie

I wished with all my heart I could have met Xavier in another life.

Or, at least before I'd met Paul St. Martin.

Paul had been charismatic, handsome, and way out of my league.

But we'd met at church and my parents had loved him.

Mostly because he had money and owned a local meat processing plant.

My father thought Paul was his path to easy street.

My mother thought her standing with the church women would rise.

I let them push me toward him, never seeing the monster hiding under his charming exterior. The worst part was that no one believed me when I told them he'd hurt me. At least, I'd thought it was the worst part. I found out how wrong I was when word got back to him of my accusations.

I shook the memory. The very last person I wanted to think about today was Paul.

Saturdays were my happy days. I got to spend an hour talking with Xavier.

There was always the glass between us, but it still felt personal.

He'd sacrificed everything to free me from hell.

Me. A stranger he'd come across on the road during a raging storm.

The least I could do was come visit him once a week.

As I got in my car, I pulled my notebook and crayon out of my back pocket and set them down.

Then I started the engine and adjusted the air conditioning before taking my phone out and putting the number Xavier had given me into my contacts.

I doubted I'd ever use it, but the contact was one more tie I had with Xavier and, right or wrong, I wanted every tie to the man I could get.

He was everything Paul was not, and everything I never knew I wanted.

My new home was only twenty minutes away from the prison property.

I hadn't done it on purpose, but when I found this small but wonderful farmhouse with thirteen acres of land at such a reasonable price, it had seemed like fate.

This was where I was supposed to be. And really, I could write anywhere in the world I wanted to.

Sure, electricity and the Internet would be a huge help but weren't strictly necessary.

The fact my place was off by itself where no one would bother me guaranteed I'd spend many days and evenings on the front porch with my laptop.

* * *

It had been two weeks since I'd told Xavier about my house. I'd printed out pictures to show him last week. I'd hoped to print out a few more before I went to see him tomorrow.

I'd taken actual possession of the property yesterday morning.

I hadn't brought much with me because I didn't have much.

My clothes, laptop, office chair, a makeshift desk, and my car.

That was all. My mother and father had sold off anything I got from Paul's estate as payment for me living with them after Paul's death so while I had a bit of cash and a decent vehicle, I had very little else.

Thank God for that money, too, because I'd been living in a hotel for two months before I found and bought this place.

The cash payment I'd offered was the only way I'd managed the purchase.

The owner came down on what I thought was an already pretty good price and let me have the keys a week later once the paperwork had all been filed.

I sighed happily as I pulled onto the long drive to the house and into the attached garage.

This was my new home. I was proud I'd been able to buy the place by myself.

If the money I'd used to make the purchase had come from my dead husband, I'd still count it as buying the house with my blood and so much pain.

Besides, I might not make much money as an author, but I made enough for

payments on this house even if I'd taken out a mortgage.

I counted that as proof I was a success.

Small-time, maybe, but a success nonetheless.

Saturdays were devoted to Xavier, but Sunday through Thursday brought me back to the real world.

Figuratively speaking. Because my world was pure fantasy.

Literally. I could make up any world I wanted and that was my reality for the next six days.

The only time I had to poke my head out into the real real world was to go to the grocery on Friday mornings.

Technically I also went out on Saturdays to see Xavier, but then I didn't think about anything other than my time with him.

It was important to me to make every minute count. For both of us.

* * *

It was now Friday afternoon, over a month since Xavier had given me a way to contact him. I hadn't needed to use the phone number, obviously, but I liked having that connection in my hand. I often stared at the number I'd labeled "Xavier's Friends." It made me feel less alone.

I always allowed myself Friday afternoon to do whatever I wanted. I'd read or binge-watch a TV show or bake something. I'd just come from doing my weekly shopping

and was going to make my favorite recipe of egg noodles, cheese, ground beef, and tomatoes. It was my comfort food.

Tomorrow was my hour with Xavier. It wasn't as long a day as before I moved to Terre Haute, but I liked to have a dinner I could heat up quickly at home.

Not often, but occasionally, they extended visiting for an additional hour or two.

Sometimes, that additional time wasn't in the same block.

So I might have to wait a couple hours between them.

Having leftovers made one less thing for me to have to do when I got home.

Without fail, I was always emotionally exhausted.

Because, the fact was, I couldn't imagine my life without our visits.

Before I entered the house with my groceries, a chill went up my spine. I froze, key in the lock, looking around the area. The garage door was off the kitchen with a covered walkway between the two. I stood in the walkway and set my bags on the concrete.

"Who's there?" I called out, not sure what I expected to happen but really hoping I was being paranoid. Sometimes, going to the prison was more than a little scary, so it was certainly possible I was imagining things. "Hello?"

Just as I was about to relax, a large figure stepped part way out of the shadows, enough for me to see the imposing figure in dark jeans, a dark, long-sleeved shirt, and black leather gloves.

I couldn't see his face or any identifying marks, but surely there couldn't be many

men as large as this guy.

“You’re not to go past the fuckin’ fence in the backyard.

If you do, you won’t fuckin’ live to get back inside the fuckin’ fence.

” When I said nothing, he shifted his weight and I shied away instinctively.

“Understand, girl?” I nodded, but he clenched his fists in anger.

“Bitch, say you understand,” he snarled.

“I-I under-understand.”

“Don’t leave this fuckin’ house until Monday. Go inside and don’t leave. Don’t get your fuckin’ mail. Don’t answer your door if anyone comes the fuck over. Understand?”

I nodded again before finding my voice. “Yes. I understand.”

Then he stepped into the shadows and disappeared.

For several long seconds I stood frozen in place, unable to make myself move. My heart pounded so hard I could feel my throat throb as well. Was I hallucinating? Had I imagined the entire encounter?

But the faint scent of sweat and stale cigarette smoke lingering on the soft breeze confirmed I hadn’t dreamed the encounter.

Someone had been waiting for me outside my house.

Warning me not to go past the fence. I wasn't sure what to do.

I didn't want to stay here, but it sounded like it might be safer to do what he said.

One thing was for damn sure, I wasn't going past the fucking fence.

I had no one to help me, and after my experience with the police when I was with Paul, I couldn't make myself call 9-1-1 for help.

At least I'd had cuts and bruises to prove Paul had been hitting me.

How was I going to prove someone had been outside my house threatening me?

When I finally spurred myself into action, I unlocked the door with trembling hands and nearly tripped over my grocery sack I'd set next to the door.

Thank God, it was only one large sack. I was able to loop it over my arm while I stumbled inside and shut the door, pushed the deadbolt closed, and turned the lock on the knob.

I dropped the sack before rushing through my house and turning on every light in the place. I checked in every closet and cabinet, every hidden nook and cranny I knew about.

I hurried to check the front and back doors.

Both remained deadbolted and the knob locks were engaged.

There were no broken windows or anything indicating someone had been in my house, but I was still officially freaked the fuck out.

I wasn't sure how safe I felt here but, unless I called the cops, I was stuck for now.

Pulling out my phone, I pulled up the app controlling my lights. If the guy had someone watching the house, the last thing I wanted was for them to know which room I was in. So I shut them all out at once and crouched in the corner by the stove, a cast-iron skillet in my white-knuckled grip.

The kitchen floor was cold against my bare legs as I huddled there, trembling. Part of me wanted to crawl into a closet, but I couldn't make myself move from my spot. Every creak of the house settling sent fresh waves of panic through me.

I'd survived Paul. I'd started building a new life. And now this?

My phone glowed in the darkness as I stared at it. The screen dimmed, then went black. I tapped the screen awake again and pulled up my contact list. My mother. My father. Right. No help there.

Xavier.

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No. No way. Not again. The man had literally sacrificed his freedom to help me once. I couldn't ask him -- or his friends -- to do anything more for me. Especially since this could really get someone hurt. I'd hurt Xavier enough. I didn't need to destroy his family as well as his life.

My stomach clenched painfully. I needed a different option, but who could I call? My only friend in town was a barista I'd talked to three times. Even if I had a friend nearby, I didn't know anyone who would know what to do in a situation like this.

The number Xavier had given me burned in my memory. He'd been insistent. "Anything at all you need." Could I really call? Wouldn't that mean I was using him yet again?

Outside, a branch scraped against the window. I nearly dropped the skillet as I jerked toward the sound. My heart hammered wildly in my chest, and I could feel sweat erupt over my skin as I fought to catch my breath.

I couldn't take it anymore. Maybe I was the most horrible person imaginable to take advantage of someone's kindness, or to take a chance on getting Xavier's friends hurt, but I knew I was going to make the call.

With shaking fingers, I pulled up "Xavier's Friends" in my contacts and hit "Call." The phone rang three times before a deep, gruff voice answered.

"Yeah?"

My voice caught in my throat. What was I supposed to say?

“Hello? Who’s this?” The man’s tone sharpened.

“I -- I’m Tillie,” I managed. “A friend of Xavier’s.”

There was a beat of silence, then the man’s entire demeanor changed. “Shit. You all right?”

“I-I don’t kn-know.” The relief coursing through me made me lightheaded. I could also feel myself start to lose any control I had.

“Where are you? What’s the address?”

I gave it to him. “Be careful. I came home to find a stranger waiting for me. He told me not to leave the house, and he didn’t seem like the type of person to ask questions before he started shooting.”

“Understood. Are you armed?”

“O-only with a cast-iron skillet.”

The guy on the other end coughed a couple of times. “Good, honey.” He cleared his throat again. “That’s good. Is your phone charged?”

“Yes.”

“OK. I’ve got some guys in Terre Haute I’m sending your way. Don’t hit one of ‘em with that fuckin’ skillet.” He sounded amused, though I wasn’t sure why.

“I’ll try not to.”

“Just keep the phone with you and stay where you are, honey. They’ll be there in less

than fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you.” My voice cracked on the words. “I’m sorry to --”

“Don’t apologize, Tillie. Xavier would have our heads if we didn’t help you, and rightly so. You’re family now. We protect our own.”

I sobbed out a muffled relieved cry, putting my hand over my mouth. I didn’t want to make any noise if I could help it. I kept my voice as soft as I could.

The line was silent for a moment before he spoke again, his voice gentler. “Stay on the line with me until they get there, all right?”

“OK.” I clutched the phone like a lifeline, still gripping the skillet with my other hand.

“Name’s Knight, by the way.”

“I’m Tillie.”

“Yeah, honey. I got that. I’ll get word to Xavier we’re going after you. He’s gonna want you to come back with my guy. Will you do that?”

“G-go with a s-strange man?” My voice got higher as fear bit me hard.

“Hey, hey. It’s all right. Would it help if Xavier told you himself what he wanted you to do?”

“Xavier? But... but he’s...”

“I know, honey. I can get a phone to him. Tiny was on the way to Xavier, anyway.

They can both come to you.”

“What?” I thought my heart would stop. “What does that mean?”

“Honey, he wanted to surprise you when you visited him tomorrow. The truth is, we knew there was trouble headed your way, so a guy we know moved up Xavier’s release. Him and Tiny are headed your way now. Fifteen minutes tops.”

I couldn’t help it. I let out a sob of relief. “Xavier.”

“Yeah. I’ve got him on the line now. He wants to talk to you.”

“Yes! Xavier!” I was officially losing it. I was going to dissolve into hysterics, and there wasn’t a Goddamned thing I could do about it.

“Tillie? Baby, it’s me.” Xavier’s deep voice washed over me, steadying me like nothing else could.

“Xavier, oh God, I’m so scared! There was a man. He threatened me. Told me not to leave the house until Monday.” The words tumbled out between hiccuping sobs.

“Listen to me, baby.” His voice had that deadly calm I remembered from the night we met. “I need you to stay exactly where you are. Don’t move, don’t make noise. As long as you don’t move or try to leave the house, you’ll be OK. Tiny and I are almost there.”

“You’re really coming?” I whispered.

“Yeah, baby. I’m really comin’. I’ll be there before you know it.” Xavier’s voice held a fierce promise that warmed me despite my terror. “Stay put and keep that skillet handy, just in case.”

I nodded before realizing he couldn't see me, then I whispered, "OK."

Minutes stretched like hours until I heard the faint crunch of tires on gravel. My breath caught. The instinct to run out the door to Xavier was so strong, I nearly managed to get to my feet before falling back on my ass.

"Xavier? Is that you?"

"Yeah. It's me. Stay where you are. I'm coming to you."

I pulled my knees to my chest. I still clutched the skillet. From a seated position, there wasn't much I could do, but it seemed better than nothing.

The front door opened. I heard the click of the locks as they slid out of place, then the soft thud as the door was shut again. There was a soft murmur of male voices, then I heard footsteps going through the house.

"Clear."

"Clear here too, Xavier. Let's get your girl and get the fuck outta here."

"Tillie? Come on out, honey."

I stood, the skillet falling to the floor. Later, I was sure I'd be embarrassed at how I acted, but I threw myself at Xavier, wrapping my arms and legs around him, and sobbed into his neck.

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Xavier

I'd never been so glad to have Tiny as my backup as I was now.

Standing in the little farmhouse with Tillie wrapped around me, clinging to me like I was her whole world, felt like nothing I'd ever imagined existed.

I could savor the moment, and Tiny would watch over us.

I glanced at the big guy and he nodded before going outside to give us a moment.

For a hot minute, my mind drifted to possibilities I knew better than to dwell on. Sure, I was out of prison now. Had no plans on that changing. But this girl... This fucking girl... She deserved everything in life I could never give her. Like this fucking house.

What were the odds Tillie had been the one to buy this property? No one had made it past talking to the real estate agent in years. Sure, the owner desperately wanted rid of it, but there was an old maintenance road along the southern edge of the property he didn't own the right of way for.

That road was like the fucking Autobahn for smugglers from Mobile to Indianapolis as a way to be off the radar. The interstate was the preferred route, but the more experienced mules used that small road to bypass the interstate in and around Nashville.

Because the road was no longer necessary after the coal mines were closed, the road

wasn't on modern maps. A cartel presence in the area maintained the road, but as long as no one got in their way they didn't hinder anyone else.

Eventually word got around and the locals stopped trying to buy the property. Those who either didn't know or were too stubborn to believe the stories soon got the same warning Tillie just got.

* * *

"Thank fuck we got here when we did." Tiny spoke softly as he took a hard left, weaving in and out of traffic. "Sorry as shit we didn't get there sooner, man."

"We got here before she was hurt. That's the main thing. It's my fault someone wasn't already here waiting to get her to safety. I should have realized when she told me the house she'd bought was in Terre Haute."

"Did I do something wrong, Xavier?" Tillie and I were in the back seat of the big F-150 Tiny brought for the trip here.

Tillie was still plastered against me, chest to chest, with her arms wrapped tightly around my neck, straddling me.

Her voice was barely above a whisper. She sounded so Goddamned fragile it was breaking my heart.

"No, honey. There's no way you could have known about that property. I'll explain all that later. For now. I want you to stay right where you are until you feel like moving."

"Shouldn't I sit in the seat and buckle up?"

“Only when you’re ready. Tiny’s our road captain for a reason. He’ll keep us safe.”

“Once we get on the interstate I’ll ease up,” Tiny said. “They won’t follow us even if they were watching, but I’m not taking chances.”

“You leave a calling card?” I met Tiny’s gaze in the rearview mirror.

“Yep. They ain’t comin’ after us.” Tiny adjusted his grip on the steering wheel. “Even they know better.”

I expected Tillie to question us or at least ask where we were going, but she seemed content to stay silent and where she was.

The slight tremor of her body told me she was probably in shock and still terrified.

I reached for the blanket I’d put in the seat beside us.

It was one she’d brought me, and I got the impression she’d liked it herself.

I draped the throw over her, so she was covered from the neck down.

The large blanket even draped over her feet and legs.

I held her securely, rubbing my hand up and down her back, needing to soothe her as much as I could.

“It’s all right now, baby. You’re safe with me,” I murmured into her hair, inhaling her scent. Vanilla, and something uniquely Tillie. It was intoxicating.

She nuzzled closer, her breath warm against my neck. “I was so scared, Xave. I thought... I thought he might...”

“Shh. I know. But he didn’t. And no one’s gonna hurt you now.

” My arms tightened around her instinctively.

The thought of someone threatening her made my blood boil, but I kept my voice steady.

I felt like this was at least partly my fault.

I should have had Knight keep closer tabs on her.

If I had, I’d have known she was headed toward trouble and kept her away.

“Knuckles is sendin’ an escort in our direction.” Tiny spoke softly, respectful of Tillie’s fragile state. “Said Venus and Piston will be joining us shortly, and will have our six until Chains and Oktober meet us and bring us home.”

I snorted. “They escorting us to safety or just out of their territory?”

Tiny shrugged. “Does it matter? Even if they’re makin’ sure we’re just passin’ through, they’d be good to have at our back in a fight.”

“Fair point.”

“Wh-where are we going?” Tillie still shook, but the soft rhythm of mine and Tiny’s conversation seemed to have settled her somewhat.

“Nashville, honey.” I tried to soothe her as best I could when this kind of care wasn’t in my nature. She seemed to need the gentle caresses, and I didn’t blame her.

When she didn’t say anything more, I thought maybe she’d settled enough to drift off.

Sleeping off adrenaline drop was the easiest way to feel human again.

I was wrong, though. After a couple of minutes, she spoke again. “That was my home. I don’t have anywhere to go.” She sounded so forlorn it tore at my heart. If we were right and the Menendez family had sent a goon to scare her, I was going to make someone bleed.

“Yeah, you do, honey. You’re stayin’ with me. You trust me. Right?”

She lifted her head to look straight into my eyes. The pain, fear, and absolute devastation was so stark in her expression I wanted to kill someone. “I think you’re the only person in my life I do trust, Xave.”

Christ, this girl! “Good. Then stay right where you are. Let me hold you as long as you need to feel more like yourself. We’ve got a four-hour drive.

Take all the time you need. When Tiny thinks it’s safe enough to stop, we’ll find a fast-food place and grab a bite and take a piss.

” As I hoped, that got a small giggle from her.

“There’s my girl.” I gave her a light, reassuring squeeze before resuming my steady rubbing up and down her back.

“Talk it out if you need to, honey. Or sleep. Or whatever you need. I’m here. Ain’t lettin’ anyone hurt you.”

She was silent for a long time. I actually thought she’d gone to sleep. “I just wanted a place that felt like a home should.” She spoke so softly I barely heard her. “I’ve never had a place I felt like I belonged. Mom and Dad basically used me as a transaction, and Paul...”

“I get it,” I said, not able to stand her bringing up that fucking monster.

Any man who could hurt a woman as sweet, giving, and caring as Tillie deserved to die fucking hard.

I’d shot the bastard, but if I had it to do over, I’d draw out the process and no one would ever have found the body.

But there was more to that story than I ever wanted Tillie to know.

“You figured if you weren’t born with a proper home, hadn’t been able to find a proper home after you got hitched, you’d make your own fuckin’ proper home.

” I growled out my interpretation with a bit more anger in my voice than I wanted, but Tillie either didn’t notice or didn’t take my tone to mean I was upset with her.

“Yes!” She sat back a little so she could study me closer.

Her eyes were wide and a pale silvery-green that’d mesmerized me from the day I’d met her.

“That’s it exactly! I was going to make my own home.

A place I always felt safe and like I was in charge of my life because I could do anything I wanted.

Go to bed when I wanted. Eat junk food all day in front of the television if I wanted.

If I didn’t want to get dressed, I could wear my pajamas all day and no one could say one Goddamned thing!

” By the end, tears were streaming down her cheeks and those gorgeous eyes of hers were swimming in a luminous pool of tears.

The headlights from a passing car made her eyes shimmer almost like glitter.

I couldn’t stop myself from brushing one tear away with my thumb as it rolled down her cheek. “You’ll have all of that and more, baby. I swear on my Goddamned life.” Why the absolute fuck had I said that out loud?

Didn’t make the statement any less true, but I’d have preferred we were alone when I told her I was claiming her.

Now, with Tiny here, giving me a look in the rearview mirror, I knew I’d fucked up.

Not necessarily in a bad way, but in a way that would get me picked on mercilessly if Tillie didn’t want me to claim her.

Her eyes widened in shock. “What?”

“Don’t worry about all that right now.” I tried to steer the conversation to something else, needing some time to really think about this because, honestly, I’d never considered I’d be in a position to actually make Tillie mine.

If not for the threat to her, I’d still be in prison.

The second I realized there might be a problem, Knuckles started working on getting me out.

The man had some serious pull in and out of the system.

Someone who had enough power to get me an unscheduled release in hours rather

than days, weeks or even months.

“Why wait?” Tiny gave me a shit-eating grin in the rearview mirror. Bastard. “Got hours before we get home.”

Tillie narrowed her eyes, giving a wary look. “I just told you you’re the one person in my life I completely trust. Did I misjudge you?”

“No, honey. You didn’t misjudge me.” I tugged her back to lie against my chest. She resisted at first, but then melted against me, burrowing her face in my neck once more.

I wanted to leave it at that. Let her rest. Fuck that bastard, Tiny, anyway.

But my mouth had other plans. “You’re the woman who’s haunted my dreams since that fuckin’ day I met you.

I’m a son of a bitch on the best of days, but I’m your son of a bitch. Leave it at that. For now.”

She trembled in my arms, but she didn’t pull back. Instead, her fists bunched in my shirt. She heaved in a shuddering breath before letting it out. “You swear?”

Christ.

“Yeah, baby. I fuckin’ promise. On my fuckin’ life.”

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Tillie

I should be scared.

No. Scratch that.

I should be fucking terrified right now.

Maybe?

To my parents' way of thinking, this man -- who'd killed my husband -- and his club -- my parents would associate any sentence with "club" at the end with "gang" -- were all terrible people.

The problem with believing my parents were right and that I shouldn't trust Xavier was the fact they'd shoved me into an unwanted marriage for their own financial benefit.

They would not believe me when I told them Paul had been the one to break my arm and bust my lip.

Xavier not only believed me, he'd taken care of the problem.

No questions asked. Irony was the pink elephant in the room. So to speak.

Instead of being terrified, I felt safer than I had in years, wrapped in Xavier's arms and surrounded by his scent.

He was older than me by a good fifteen years and had this air of calm about him I'd never felt from anyone else in my life.

A man my parents would call a criminal, a man who'd spent time in prison for killing my abuser, felt like my safest harbor.

What did that say about the people in my life?

"What does that mean?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. "You being my son of a bitch?" I felt his chest expand with a deep breath. His hand never stopped its soothing motion on my back.

"It means I protect what's mine. You're mine, same as I'm yours.

It means no one touches you. No one threatens you.

You're gonna be safe and fuckin' disgustingly happy.

"He sounded disgruntled, but also so sincere I felt my lips tugging into a smile.

I had talked to the man every week for more than a year.

I knew when he was uncomfortable with his feelings.

"You don't sound too happy about this, Xave."

"Ain't." He glanced down, meeting my gaze briefly. "Don't change nothin'. You're still mine."

His words were both soothing yet painful.

They felt like an electric blanket on high when the house was cool in winter.

Not strictly necessary, but so good ! They were more freeing than I wanted to admit.

I should have been offended at being claimed like property, but there was something in his tone that made me feel like this was about protection rather than possession.

Besides, he'd told me about his club. At least the finer points of belonging to a brotherhood of found family.

I knew what being claimed was and I knew what an old lady was.

What hurt was the fact Xavier didn't seem to want me like I wanted him. Not for the long term, anyway.

"Why aren't you happy?" I asked, keeping my voice low even though I knew Tiny could certainly hear us.

Xavier sighed, his chest rising and falling beneath me.

"Because you deserve better than a fuckin' ex-con with more enemies than friends.

But that don't change what is." His hand continued its steady path up and down my spine.

It was soothing. Lulling. "I swear to you, I'll make you happy, Tillie. Give me a chance. Yeah?"

"Yes," I whispered, not hesitating. Maybe I should have.

Maybe I should have asked for time to think about it.

But honestly, what was there to think about?

I'd spent a year visiting this man every week, pouring out my heart to him, learning about his life, sharing mine.

I'd never felt as wanted, understood, or safe as I did with Xavier.

"You sure, baby? This ain't somethin' I'll let you take back later."

I shifted in his lap so I could see his face better.

His dark eyes were intense, searching mine for any sign of doubt.

I found none within myself. "I'm sure," I said, my voice stronger now.

"You saved me, Xavier. I have no idea how much of an inconvenience it was for you either time -- other than the prison sentence obviously -- but you came for me when I needed you most. Not once, but twice. I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

The corner of his mouth ticked up. "Good." He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead before pulling me back against him, and I felt the comforting warmth of his body spread through my body.

Safety. Security. Xavier was a man who absolutely would keep me safe.

I didn't want to lose his friendship for anything in this world.

I needed him in my life desperately! While I wasn't entirely sure about a sexual encounter, I knew Xavier would let me have the time I needed.

Why? Because he knew exactly what I'd gone through with Paul.

From the front seat, Tiny cleared his throat. "Hate to break up this touching moment, but we've got company."

Xavier's body tensed beneath me, his arms tightening protectively. "How many?"

"Two bikes, about a quarter mile back. Been following us since we hit the highway."

"Venus and Piston?"

There was a pause before Tiny answered. "Unless there's another pink monstrosity claiming to be a Harley, yeah. It's Venus and Piston."

I felt Xavier's deep chuckle where my front was plastered against his chest. "I'm tellin' her you said that."

"I'll deny it." Tiny didn't sound angry or annoyed, in fact, they both sounded amused.

I heard the loud rumble and moved my head to look out the window.

Sure enough, a bright pink motorcycle eased beside us.

The rider was the most remarkable woman I'd ever seen.

She was slight of build but with finely muscled arms left bare by the vest she was wearing.

It matched the color of her bike. As did her leather pants, and her motorcycle boots.

And her hair. The woman gave us a two-finger salute before easing back to join

another bike behind us.

I couldn't help but stare as the pink-haired warrior woman fell back behind us.

Her companion was almost her opposite. He was big, with wide shoulders and heavily muscled arms. He wore a short-sleeved black shirt under his vest while his bike was black and chrome that gleamed even in the dim highway lights.

"That's Venus," Xavier explained, his breath warm against my ear. "Don't let the pink fool you. She's the deadliest fighter in her club. I've heard she was once an assassin, but I can't confirm the rumor."

"And she likes pink," I murmured, still watching the rearview mirror where I could occasionally catch glimpses of them. It seemed like an inane thing to say, but that's what came out when I opened my mouth.

Xavier laughed, a deep rumble that vibrated through me. "Yeah, baby. She likes pink."

"Actually," Tiny interrupted. "I heard the coloring had something to do with some kind of spy tech in the form of contact lenses or some shit. Apparently, they don't come in anything but pink, and she was trying to blend in."

That got a startled laugh from me. Xavier joined me with a warm chuckle. "I don't even know why that was funny. She reminds me of an anime heroine or something."

"The guy with her is Piston," Tiny added from the front seat. "Ain't exactly sure what he does, but he protects Venus like a rabid guard dog."

"I thought she was an assassin." I turned and saw Tiny's mischievous grin in the rearview mirror.

“Oh, she is. Piston’s just overprotective. Doesn’t mind her gettin’ in fights. In fact, sometimes Venus is the one to pick the fight. Piston just wants everyone to know he has her back. That way, they’ll think twice about trying to ambush her.”

I turned to Xavier. His smile was soft, and he stroked my cheek lightly with his thumb. “Is she part of your club?”

“No.” Xavier took up the explanation. “But she and Piston represent a coalition of motorcycle clubs. They all operate independently but help each other out if necessary. We aren’t part of them, but our former president used to be vice president of a club in their coalition.”

I nodded, taking it all in. These people, these dangerous, capable people, were here because of me? Because Xavier had asked them to be? The realization was both humbling and overwhelming.

“You okay?” Xavier asked softly, his fingers gently kneading my tight muscles.

“Just processing,” I admitted. “It’s a lot.”

“I know.” He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “Just know you’re safe. Everything else will take care of itself.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I whispered with a smile, laying my head against his chest.

The steady rhythm of his heartbeat was comforting, proof I wasn’t alone anymore, that someone was in my corner.

Outside the window, the night scenery blurred by, lights from passing cars occasionally illuminating the interior.

My muscles were now the consistency of goo in the warmth of Xavier's embrace. This was where I wanted to stay.

It was strange how quickly my life had changed. This morning I'd been grocery shopping, planning another quiet weekend with my Saturday visit to Xavier. Now I was speeding down a highway with him, flanked by motorcycles, running from threats I didn't understand.

"You should try to get some sleep," Xavier murmured against my hair. "We've got a long drive ahead. You want to lay your head on the seat? You can put your feet in my lap."

"I don't want to move. Feels too good." My eyelids felt impossibly heavy. The adrenaline crash was hitting me hard.

"How about you just close your eyes for a bit," he coaxed. "I'll wake you if anything happens."

I wanted to protest, to stay alert, but the rhythmic motion of the truck and Xavier's steady heartbeat were lulling me into a drowsy, contented lethargy.

"Xavier?"

"Yeah, baby."

"Am I dumb to trust you like this?"

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he paused in his rubbing of my back for a couple of seconds before he started up again. "What do you think?"

"You're the only person who's ever supported and protected me. You're everything

my parents would hate, but you're the one person who's been there during the scariest moments of my life, doing what needed to be done."

"I think that should tell you what you need to know."

"Yeah." I lay my head on his chest. This time, Xavier put his other hand on the back of my head to hold me to him.

"I've got you, Tillie Girl. I've got you."

Those were the last words I heard before I surrendered to sleep, Xavier's steady heartbeat coaxing me to drift...

Until sleep took me.

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Xavier

A couple hours into the drive, four more bikes pulled up beside us.

I was surprised that Venus and Piston didn't veer off and leave the escort to us, Kiss of Death, but Oktober moved alongside Piston; the two fist-bumped in greeting.

The whole convoy continued on like nothing was amiss.

I had to smile. Prison had been hard. Fuckin' hard.

But the connections and family I'd made there were the closest and most supportive I'd had.

"Two escorts," Tiny chuckled softly. "Right. Bet they had to make the rest of the guys stay home."

I was grateful Tiny was considerate of Tillie and kept his voice down. She was sound asleep in my arms. Once she'd finally settled against my chest, she didn't move except for her steady breathing. If she let out a small, delicate snore now and then, I'd never tell her.

"Fuckin' missed the guys. And home."

"You had a job to do. And you know you could have come home once you finished. Why the fuck did you stay in that hellhole so long anyway?"

“You really have to ask me that?” I glared at him over Tillie’s head.

“Yeah. You coulda been home instead in some cell like a fuckin’ animal.” Tiny frowned at me through the mirror. “Her?” I knew what he meant.

“Yeah.”

We were silent for a while before Tiny spoke again. “Worth it.” It wasn’t a question. Tiny could see me. He’d always seen me, even when no one else could. We’d been in the same foster home as kids and had stuck together. Even when sticking together meant we both got in trouble with the law.

“Was.”

Yeah. We were guys. Why waste breath on a full sentence when a couple words would do?

We stopped an hour outside of Nashville when Tillie stirred. “Where are we?” She didn’t lift her head, just shifted her position slightly and snuggled in deeper. I grinned, rubbing her back again.

“Just pulled into a truck stop,” Tiny supplied cheerfully. “You ready for some chow?”

Then Tillie stiffened, her eyes flew open. “Ohmigod!” She pushed up but I held her still, not wanting her to bump her head on the roof of the truck.

“Easy, honey. What’s wrong?”

“How long have I been asleep? And straddling your lap?” She sounded so mortified I couldn’t help but laugh.

“You were sleeping so peacefully, there was no way I was waking you.” I helped her sit up slowly. “Besides, I liked knowing you were secure where you were.” I smiled at her as I brushed a lock of hair off her cheek.

She gave me an adorably confused look. “But I was sitting in your lap.”

“Exactly.”

Her eyes got wide and she snort-laughed before covering her mouth with her hand. Tiny chuckled and I knew my grin got wider.

She scowled and wagged her finger to scold me. “It’s not nice to laugh at someone when they accidentally snort.”

That tickled even me and I chuckled, pulling her to me so I could drop a kiss on her temple. “Come on, Little Piggy. Let’s get you some chow.”

Tillie sighed, shaking her head. “That’s not going away anytime soon, is it?”

“Honey.” Tiny turned to look at us from the front seat as he spoke.

“You’re about to enter a place where every single man in the area is going to look at you and see a little sister.

We are gonna bug the shit outta you. We’re also going to protect you with our lives and run off any potential boyfriends on general principle. It’s what big brothers do.”

Tillie looked from Tiny to me and back. “I don’t have siblings.”

“You’re fixin’ to, baby.” I gave her ass a light swat through the blanket still draped around her. “Go on, then. Up you get.”

Tiny opened his door and hopped down to fuel us up, leaving us in the truck to untangle and get out at our leisure. Tillie slid off my lap. As she did, she rubbed over my cock for a brief moment when she shifted her weight. She sucked in a breath and stiffened when I hissed in surprise.

“I’m sorry!” She looked panicked, holding her weight on her knees, still on either side of my hips. “I didn’t mean --”

“Shh, baby. It’s fine. Normal reaction to a beautiful woman.” I rested my hands on her hips lightly. “I’m not gonna jump you or hit on you or do anything else to make you uncomfortable. OK? I just want you safe and comfortable. You were so sound asleep, I hated to wake you to make you move.”

Her breath came in deep, rapid breaths for a couple seconds, then she nodded her head.

I could visibly see the second she saw the sincerity in my expression.

“I’m sorry. It’s not that I think you’ll hurt me, Xavier.

Of all the people in the world, you’ve earned my trust. I guess I just wasn’t expecting you to...

” Her face grew red and she waved her hand in the air.

“You know.” Then she gave a nervous, embarrassed smile.

“I suppose a woman straddling you and plastering herself against your body, any man would have the same reaction, huh?”

“Don’t kid yourself, honey. I most definitely want you.

Just because I ain't acting on it don't mean I don't want to.

But you need a friend right now. Not a horny biker trying to get into your panties.

"I leveled my gaze on hers and held it, needing her to see my sincerity.

"If you decide you want me too, you make the move. Know upfront that I will not reject you, Tillie. But I ain't bringin' you home to fuck you.

I'm bringing you to my club so you're safe and protected until I can get this other shit sorted out.

After that, you can stay with me, or I'll help you find a place you like where you feel safe.

"I brushed my thumb across her cheek and smiled at her.

"Now let's get you some food. You must be starving. "

She climbed off my lap with a shy smile, carefully folding the blanket and setting it aside. Her movements were measured, deliberate, like she was trying to regain her equilibrium after our conversation.

When we stepped out of the truck, Venus and Piston were already lounging against their bikes. Oktober, Chains, Moose, and Griffin formed a loose perimeter around the truck and the gas pumps next to us.

Tillie's eyes widened as she took in the gathering. "Are they all here for us?"

"For you," I corrected, placing my hand at the small of her back. The gesture was both protective and possessive.

Venus pushed away from her bike and sauntered over, her pink hair gleaming under the harsh truck stoplights.

“So this is famous Tillie.” Her voice was surprisingly soft for someone with such a deadly reputation, her Russian accent evident but not so thick I couldn’t understand.

The smile she gave Tillie was warm and inviting, despite the freaky-as-shit pink eyes.

“This one” -- she nodded at me -- “called Knuckles S.O.S., demanding we send someone to your new house double time, to get him out of prison, and get him ride straight to you.”

Tillie started, her eyes widening as she swung her gaze from Venus to me. “What?”

“I know it sounds creepy, but I wasn’t about to let you get hurt if I could help it, Tillie.

” I wasn’t sure of how she’d take this part, but that wasn’t really what had me worried.

I knew I’d have to tell her, but I had thought I’d have time to figure out how to word my explanation.

Then I figured out what property Tillie had “purchased” and had to have Knuckles pull a miracle out of his ass.

Which he did. And, honest to God, there was never any doubt on my end.

I knew Knuckles would take care of everything I couldn’t.

“I called my president, and he took care of the rest.”

“But how could he get you out of prison?” She looked at me with hesitation but not fear. Just like a child might look at a doctor after he promises not to give the child a shot if he’ll cooperate. She trusted me but was suspicious.

“I’ll explain it all once we get back in the truck. Tiny is certain we won’t be followed, but I don’t like being stopped too long just in case.”

She nodded. “You’re right. And I trust you.

Even if this is kind of sounding a little creepy.

Sounds like you could have gotten out of prison any time you wanted.

I never kept my life secret. You knew where I lived.

Where I worked. You knew it all. If you meant me harm, you’d have done something long before now. ”

Venus gripped her shoulder in a gentle squeeze. “You keep believing in him, little sister. He is good man, if unorthodox.”

Tillie gave Venus a solemn look. “I know he’s a good man. He’s the only person in my whole life who’s ever taken up for me or cared if I was happy. He never let me leave our visits any way other than with a smile on my face.”

“These men at Kiss of Death make up their minds on spot. Expect Xavier to follow you around like puppy dog from here on out.” She winked at Tillie before sauntering back to Piston and looping her arm through his as they walked into the store.

I leaned in to kiss Tillie’s temple. “Come on, Miss Piggy.”

“Nope.” She shook her head almost violently. “Not happening.”

God, she was fun! “We’ll have to put it to a vote. You know. After I get someone to make you giggle-snort.”

“That’s diabolical.”

“Never said I played fair.”

“I’d be concerned if you tried to convince me otherwise.” Any suspicion or wariness she might have had earlier melted away and she gave me the brightest, most beautiful smile I’d ever seen.

God, I’d never wanted to kiss a woman more in my life!

I could almost taste her sweet lips, feel their softness against my own lips.

I even thought I could trust myself to keep things light, but I was not about to break my word two seconds after I made it.

Instead, I took her hand and tugged her toward the convenience store area of the truck stop.

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They had an array of gas station roly food -- taquitos, tornados, and various sausages -- as well as hot sandwiches, salads, and cup desserts.

I snagged us a bunch of everything and some drinks while Tillie and Venus went to the restroom.

The guys would want to take five minutes in the parking lot to wolf something down, but Venus and Tillie might not want to inhale their food.

I unloaded my cache of goodies onto the counter to pay when Tiny came up behind me. "Do you even have money to pay for all that?"

"Nope. Knew you were on the way. Figured by the time the young lady finished ringin' everything up, you'd be here to foot the bill."

Tiny stared hard at me while we stood there as the girl totaled everything. "This is payback for me laughing at you earlier. Isn't it?"

"Ain't sayin' it is, and ain't sayin' it isn't. But I will say I feel a whole lot less bad about makin' you pay."

Tiny barked out a laugh even as he pulled out his wallet and handed the clerk some bills. She sacked everything up, and me and Tiny waited for the women. Piston stood at the door keeping an eye on the parking lot.

As we approached the older man, Tiny shifted his sacks to one hand. "What is it, Piston?"

“Not sure. Just a feelin’.”

“While you were taking care of Tillie,” Tiny said, “I captured one of the guards and tied him to the tree stand they were using to keep an eye on the road and the farmhouse. I made sure he understood Tillie was under our protection and they were to back off. Menendez’s men know better than to tangle with us because of our relationship with the Miles family. ”

Piston grunted. “Menendez has been getting cocky. Don’t count him out yet.”

“The cartel doesn’t care if people stay away from the place.” I shook my head. I wasn’t going to borrow trouble. “Menendez just doesn’t want anyone messing with that road. With Tillie gone, that’s a win for him.”

Piston took in a deep breath and held it before letting it out slowly. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Now I looked at the shadows in front of the parking areas with suspicion, seeing threats where there were none. “Maybe we shouldn’t linger.”

Tiny nodded. “Yeah.”

Venus and Tillie emerged from the bathroom. Venus quartered the area as they walked the length of the store toward us. Venus’s gaze landed on Piston’s, then mine. Her face hardened and her eyes grew even more focused than usual. Tillie seemed oblivious to the undercurrents surrounding her.

We all exited the store, headed to the truck and bikes. Then, the glass storefront of the truck stop exploded, raining shards across the sidewalk, and the sudden crack of gunfire shattered the night air.

“Down!” I shoved Tillie to the concrete, covering her body with mine as bullets

peppered the ground around us.

The gas pump next to Tiny's truck burst into a shower of sparks.

There must have been an emergency shut off tripped somewhere, or we were just lucky, because the place didn't erupt in an explosion that would have leveled a whole fucking city block.

A black SUV with tinted windows roared past, muzzle flashes illuminating the dark interior as the shooters unloaded in our direction. Venus hit the pavement and rolled, coming up on one knee with a pistol already drawn. She squeezed off three shots at the retreating vehicle.

"Fuck!" Chains bellowed, blood streaming from his upper arm as he ducked behind a concrete barrier. "Menendez cartel!"

The SUV screeched around the perimeter of the truck stop and came back for another pass. Oktober and Griffin were already moving, weapons drawn, taking positions behind parked semis.

"Stay down!" I pressed Tillie harder against the ground as another volley of bullets ricocheted off the metal fuel pump above us. Her body trembled beneath mine, but she remained silent, her arms going up to cover her head instinctively.

"Xavier," Tillie whispered, her voice barely audible over the chaos. "What's happening?"

"Not sure, honey." I kept my body covering hers, my eyes scanning for an opportunity to move. The SUV was coming around for another pass. "When I say go, we're making a run for Tiny's truck. You stay low and do exactly what I say, understand?"

She nodded against my chest, and I could feel her heart hammering wildly. The rhythmic thud of boots on pavement told me our backup was repositioning.

“Piston! Left flank!” Venus’s voice rang out, clear and commanding despite the mayhem.

The SUV’s engine roared as it accelerated toward us again. I moved Tillie to the wall at the corner of the building and pinned her between the hard brick and my body, covering her as completely as I could.

Several gunshots rang out in the night as all around us, people screamed and ran for cover.

Piston waited until the vehicle was clear of the pumps and any bystanders before he fired off a shot at the same time Venus did.

Each of them got one back tire and the SUV skidded as it made the turn out of the parking lot and onto the interstate ramp.

“They won’t get far,” Piston growled as he holstered his weapon.

“Come on, Tillie.” I snagged her hand and tugged her along with me. I heard Tiny giving Knuckles the rundown on the phone as I lifted Tillie into the truck and followed her. “Are you hurt, honey?” I tried to keep my voice calm to reassure her. The woman was going to be scarred for life after this.

“No. I didn’t get hurt. I promise.” Her eyes were wide, but she didn’t seem like she was on the verge of panic. “I thought I heard someone yell during the... commotion.”

“I think Chains got hit, but it looked more like the bullet grazed his arm.” Tiny said as he ended his call. “All in all, we got out unscathed.”

“What about all these people?” Now Tillie looked concerned. “Won’t they tell the police?”

“Likely. But don’t worry. Knuckles will take care of everything.” I smiled down at her. “Buckle up. Tiny’s gonna speed things up just a hair. I don’t want to take any unnecessary chances. OK?” She nodded and did as I told her.

Once we were peeled out of the parking lot, we came across the same SUV on the side of the road. “Fuck,” Tiny swore softly. “Wanted to take the state road because it’s less likely to be watched, but I ain’t takin’ chances with these fuckers still out there.”

“At this point I think speed over stealth is the better option.”

“Yep,” Tiny agreed. “I think you’re right.”

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Tillie

I'd always heard it didn't matter if you were speeding down the interstate, you could only go so fast. The likelihood of you making it to your destination more than a couple minutes faster than anticipated by speeding is slim to none.

Math is involved, and I could never be bothered to work it out.

It was obvious Tiny had never heard of this rule.

"Who's he talking to?" I was afraid to speak too loudly. The last thing I wanted to do was break Tiny's concentration. I sat in the seat behind Tiny while Xavier sat next to me. I gripped his hand.

"Likely Knight. Knight will have eyes on us and can keep the police away from us. Don't ask me how, because I have no idea. But he'll let Tiny know which way to go if he needs to take an alternate route." Xavier squeezed my hand and met my gaze. "Everything's going to be fine."

I nodded and squeezed his hand back. I wasn't sure I had the correct words to tell him what he meant to me and how grateful I was for his help and protection. "I owe you so much, Xave."

"Not another word, Tillie." There was fire in his eyes. "You owe me nothing." I could tell he was serious, but I didn't agree with him. There was nothing he could ever say to convince me our scales were even. Then he pulled my hand to him and kissed my fingers.

That simple gesture sent a rush of warmth through me despite our dire circumstances. I could feel my cheeks flush as his lips lingered on my skin. When he lowered my hand, I didn't pull it away. He didn't either.

The highway stretched before us like a black ribbon, illuminated only by our headlights and the occasional passing car.

Venus and Piston had fallen back slightly, keeping a protective distance behind us while the others had moved into position at various points in front of and behind us, keeping us in the middle and other traffic away from us.

"That's twice now someone's either threatened or tried to kill me," I murmured, the reality of the situation finally sinking in. "And I still don't understand why."

Xavier's jaw tightened. "It's not you they're after, exactly. It's that property."

"A farmhouse? Why would anyone care about my little farmhouse?"

Xavier exchanged a glance with Tiny through the rearview mirror before facing me again. "That maintenance road at the back of your property isn't on any maps, but it's a main smuggling route for the Menendez cartel. They've been using it for years."

"A drug cartel?" My voice rose an octave. "In my backyard?"

He winced. "Yeah. And it actually is as bad as it sounds."

"But I was leaving! Why would they have followed me all this way?" Now that we were on the road, I expected a letdown like before, but I was fucking wired.

Xavier scrubbed a hand over his face. "Because you left. We took you away from there."

“I thought that would have been the goal.”

“Yeah, but they also told you to not leave the house. My guess is they were moving a shipment and didn’t want you to see them.”

“Why not kill me?” I winced. “Never mind. I’m grateful they didn’t, so who really cares why?”

He gave me a slight smile. “I know. They don’t kill people first. They have a loose agreement to warn people instead of killing them. They’ve been pretty good at sticking to the agreement, but they only give one chance.”

“Fuckin’ scum shoulda left her alone after we let them know she was under our protection. Knuckles ain’t gonna be happy about that.”

“Tiny.” Xavier glared at the other man where their gazes met in the rearview mirror. We were all silent for a long time after that. Tiny spoke occasionally to whomever was giving him instructions, but otherwise we were all silent.

About two hours later, we rolled through the gate to a motorcycle club.

I was sure there was a way my parents would expect me to feel, but their feelings and mine weren’t even on the same planet.

The second we were through the gate, I relaxed at the same time I felt the tension leave Xavier’s grip on my hand.

I turned my head to see his expression. His look said everything I needed to know about my surroundings.

I’d been going to see Xavier every week for almost a year and a half.

I'd memorized every expression, every crease on his brow and around his eyes and what they meant.

This was the first time I'd seen him truly relaxed.

"You have complete faith we're safe here. Don't you, Xave?" I kept my voice down, mainly because the guys had been silent the entire second half of the trip and I didn't feel right about breaking the silence too much.

"It's home," he said simply, his voice low. "And these men are my brothers. We protect each other."

As Tiny parked the truck, I could see a group of men emerging from the clubhouse. It seemed this place grew them one size, and that was fucking big . All of them wore leather vests similar to Xavier's. Their expressions were a mix of concern and what looked like relief.

"Come on," Xavier said, releasing my hand to open his door. "Let's go inside. We'll find a place to get you settled."

That alarmed me. "What?"

"There's plenty of room. Each building has apartments on the top floors. Most of us prefer the single-room apartments but there are larger ones in several of the buildings."

"Oh." The punch of hurt hit me out of nowhere when I had no business being hurt by what I perceived as rejection.

"What's wrong, Tillie?" He'd been about to open his door, but he stopped and turned to face me more fully.

“Nothing! Everything’s fine! Thank you for making sure I have a place to stay.” The last thing I wanted was for him to think I wasn’t grateful for everything he’d done for me.

“Are you sure? I want you to have your own space, but I’m not going to be far away.”

“Yes.” I let out a breath, needing to take a moment.

As much as I really didn’t want Xavier out of my sight, I knew this was for the best. I needed to take time to process what had happened over the past few hours, as well as really think about this fantasy I had where Xavier was the perfect suburban husband, catering to my every whim.

Even considering what he’d done for me, Xavier didn’t seem the domesticated type.

“I’m sure. Thank you.” I squeezed his hand reassuringly. Time to put on my big girl panties.

If I’d expected some kind of male bonding reunion or something, I’d have been disappointed. Instead, the guys put me and Xavier between them and hurried us inside and didn’t stop until we were on the second floor in the middle of the big, open room. Then everyone started talking at once.

“Holy shit, man!”

“Talk about a welcome home.”

“‘Bout time you got your ass home, Xavier.”

Several of the guys clapped Xavier on the back. A couple of them gave me respectful nods and introduced themselves. Then four women pushed their way through the

gang of men catching up with Xavier.

“Don’t mind them.” A slender woman with light brown curls smiled and held out her hand. “I’m Hannah. Knuckles is my husband. These are Pippa, Carrie, and Violet.”

“Welcome to the jungle, honey.” Violet gave me a quick hug. “We put a care package together until you can get anything you’re missing. We all know about life on the run or making a quick exit.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t want to put anyone else in danger, especially not people I’d never met.”

“Don’t you dare be sorry,” Pippa said, a fierce, almost pained expression on her face. “These guys are a tight bunch. You mean something to Xavier, so they have a driving need to help Xavier protect you.”

“Sounds like something out of a fairy tale.” I could feel tears pricking the back of my eyes.

All my life I’d been weak. I let my parents push me around.

I stayed with Paul after he hit me more than once and didn’t try to leave until the night Xavier found me.

I absolutely would not show weakness in front of these women by crying now.

But, Goddamnit! What Pippa described sounded like my most fervent dreams!

“Takes some getting used to,” Violet said with a soft smile. “I’m still learning.”

I ducked my head. “Thank you for coming to meet me here. All the testosterone is a

bit overwhelming.”

Carrie laughed, her smile bright and beautiful.

“I had about the same reaction. Though, to be fair, I freaked them out more than they freaked me out. Long story, but I watched the movie Carrie the other night with Riot like everyone kept telling me to, and I finally understood why poor Chains is afraid of me.”

A thought occurred to me. “I don’t wish ill will on anyone, but please tell me you at least looked like you had blood all over you.”

Carrie laughed gleefully. “I totally did! When Chains found out my mother’s name was Margaret, he started sprinkling holy water over mine and Riot’s door.”

OK, there was no way to contain my laughter. “That’s a story I’ve got to hear soon.”

“Once you get settled in and get some rest, we’ll take you to Oasis Number Two, drink too many margaritas, and we’ll tell you about it.

” Hannah handed me a phone as she spoke.

“This is yours while you’re here. The guys want us to use clean phones when calling or texting inside the compound.

Everyone here has been to prison. Knuckles knows every single one of them personally, or they don’t get in. ”

Hannah continued with the explanation. “Knuckles has extreme pull with local law enforcement. He prefers not to leave any openings if he can help it.”

“All our numbers are programmed in” -- Pippa handed me the phone -- “as well as Xavier’s new number.

You can reach out to any of us if you need anything at all, or if you’re uncomfortable with anything.

Especially the guys. They absolutely will not do anything you don’t want, but that’s not to say they won’t flirt their asses off.

If someone won’t back off, you call one of us or Xavier. We’ll shut them down for you.”

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All I could do was move my gaze from woman to woman, trying to see if they were playing me. The only thing I saw was complete sincerity. They meant every word. “Is this place even real?”

“Oh, honey.” Violet gave me a sympathetic smile.

“I know exactly what you mean. My advice is to just roll with it. I promise you this is the real deal. I can honestly say they’ve been the best role models for my son.

Way better than his own father.” A shadow crossed her face, but she smiled, pushing through whatever memory had dampened her mood.

“Xavier saved me.” I whispered. “My husband would have killed me, but Xavier made sure he never hurt me again. Just like he promised that night when he...” I took a breath before letting it out and slumping while I smiled up at Carrie, needing to change the subject before I said too much.

Or, worse, cried. “What and where is Oasis Number Two?”

“Oasis Number Two is where we’ve started going since they had to give Oasis Number One a thorough cleaning. Long story, but trust me when I tell you the son of a bitch deserved it.”

I should probably be horrified at all there was to unpack in her statement, but I found myself nodding with a grin on my face. “I can wholeheartedly agree with that statement.”

Violet looped her arm through mine. “I’m going to give you some advice and I hope you’ll take it because this place will change your life, if you’re like I was.”

“I don’t understand.” I frowned at the other woman, but the warm, comforting smile on Violet’s face never faltered.

“You’ve been betrayed in the worst ways by people you trusted.” Violet didn’t phrase it as a question. She spoke like a person who’d been in the same boat I was.

“Can’t deny that,” I muttered. “Xavier is the only person in my life ever to have sacrificed for me. And what he did for me I can never repay.”

“Riot told me Xavier killed your abuser.” Violet didn’t look judgmental or like she was fishing for information. “Riot protected me and my son, Caleb. He would have gladly killed my husband if he could have.” She put her shoulders back and her chin up. “I beat him to it.”

I gasped, reaching out to take Violet’s hand. “Oh, no! I’m so sorry! That had to have been horrible.”

“Only thing I hated about it was that Caleb was there and that he’d nearly killed Doug himself. Doug Harrington was a bastard who needed to die.”

“I’m glad you found your escape, Violet.”

“I am too. That’s why I want to tell you to take this club at face value. Don’t judge them, though I seriously doubt you have that problem given how you met Xavier.”

Hannah handed me a bottle of water. “We’ve got food on the way up, but I’m sure you’re thirsty.”

“Thanks.” I unscrewed the bottle and took a pull.

“Anyway, Knuckles knows every single guy here,” Hanna continued.

“He said Xavier wanted you to be his, but you need to know you always have a choice. These guys are the super protective and possessive types, but they’re some of the best people I’ve ever met.

If they have one flaw, I’d have to say it’s the tolerance they show the club girls. ”

“Hannah!” Pippa put her hands on her cheeks like she couldn’t believe Hannah had said such a thing. “They’re not going to be mean to the women.”

“No. And I don’t want them to be.” Hannah huffed out a breath. “But the next girl who touches Knuckles is gonna leave missing a paw.”

I nearly snorted water out of my nose as I laughed. “I’m so sorry!” I was equal parts horrified and resigned. Because, really. There was no recovering from water out the nose.

“Don’t be.” Hannah handed me a napkin. “Just get used to it. You stay around here long enough and you’ll discover we’ve all got a really morbid sense of humor.”

“I guess sometimes it’s either laugh or cry.”

“Exactly.” Hannah gave me a crisp nod, her smile wide and mischievous before sobering again.

“The point is, these are good men. I know you probably feel like you’ve followed the White Rabbit down the hole, but these men are the real deal, Tillie.

They're socially awkward, and most of them are stone-cold killers, but they have a strong moral code and they are all protective of women and children in general.

"She glanced at Pippa. "Which is why they let the club girls get away with way more than they should."

Pippa shook her head but still grinned. "I can't deny they're becoming a problem. I had to cut one woman's hair the other day." Pippa's eyes were wide and solemn, like she felt sorry for the other woman. Then she shrugged. "It was only hair. Right?"

"Um, how short did you cut it?" I knew before I asked the question what her answer would be.

"I shaved it." She grinned. "Well, OK, so I partially shaved it. I caught the club girl in question asleep and shaved a strip of hair from the top of her forehead to the back of her head before she got away from me."

I couldn't help but laugh. These women were outrageous, and I could tell I was going to love them.

"Tillie!" Xavier's voice had me turning to find him several feet away, pushing through his brothers with warm smiles and claps on the back as he did. When he got to me, he held out his hand. "Let's go get you settled."

"I've got a couple choices for you." Hannah held up two sets of keys. "This one," she shook one set, "is a single bedroom across the hall from Xavier's room. You can be near him without him being underfoot. You'll have your own space, but privacy too."

"What's the other one?" Xavier snagged my hand in his warm hand, and I laced my fingers with his before I realized I had.

“The other set is to a two-bedroom apartment in the same building with the rest of us. It’s not one of the top-floor apartments, but if you decide you want to take one of those let me know. We’re still finishing up those rooms. No one wanted them so they weren’t a priority.”

“Why would I need a two-bedroom?” I looked from Hannah to Xavier and back.

Hannah shrugged. “In case you wanted Xavier to stay with you, you’ve still got your own bedroom.”

I sucked in a breath, because that sounded fucking perfect. But Xavier had his own room, and I was sure he wanted to get back to what he probably considered his home. He wouldn’t have any desire to sleep anywhere other than his own bed, and I wouldn’t blame him.

“We’ll take the two-bedroom,” Xavier said, reaching out to take the keys from Hannah.

“What?” My gaze shot to his, but he merely smiled down at me.

“I saw your reaction, pretty girl. You like the idea of us being close.”

“I can’t lie worth a damn, Xave, so I’m not going to try and pretend you’re wrong. But I’ll be fine on my own. You don’t have to sacrifice staying in your own place after being away so long. I’m sure you --”

Xavier rolled his eyes as he placed his fingers over my lips. “Woman. Staying with you is no fuckin’ sacrifice. I don’t want you across the hall. Separate bedrooms is far enough away from you.”

And just like that, I lost the last piece of my heart. I sobbed out a small laugh. “OK.

I'm not going to try to talk you out of staying with me when you're right. I want you close too."

"Awesome!" Hannah clapped her hands as she smiled. "Come on. I'll take you to your apartment. Then you guys can get some rest. I've got everything all set up for you." She talked as she led us outside to a side-by-side ATV. We waved to the other women.

Knuckles followed us outside and dropped a kiss on his wife's cheek. "I take it I owe you that ten bucks, baby?"

"I'll be taking Xavier and Tillie to the apartment next to Hawk and Carrie. And to answer your question, you do owe me ten bucks. I knew when I first saw them together Tillie would want Xavier to have her back until she got acquainted with her new surroundings."

"Good." Knuckles glanced from me to Xavier before sticking his hand out to Xavier who took it in a firm grip. "Let me or Gunnar know when she's ready to wear your property cut. We'll have the girls arrange everything."

I couldn't help myself. I turned into Xavier's embrace and buried my face in his chest, my emotions getting the better of me.

As I knew he would, Xavier wrapped his arms around me without hesitation.

He and Knuckles spoke for a couple minutes.

I soaked up Xavier's support while he let me compose myself and I loved him all the more for it.

"You ready to go see your new home, Tillie Girl?"

I looked up at Xavier, the man who had gone to prison for killing my abusive husband, the man who had come to my rescue when I'd been threatened and was terrified out of my mind, the man who brought me to the place he knew would be safest and circled the wagons with his brothers to protect me.

“I think I've been ready my entire life. ”

Xavier smiled down at me. “Ditto, baby. Ditto.”

Xavier

Much as I wanted to hunt down the Goddamned sons of bitches who'd attacked us, I couldn't bring myself to leave the apartment I now shared with Tillie. She had lain down on her bed without undressing and covered herself with the soft blanket and curled up into a ball.

"You OK, Miss Piggy?" The corner of her lip rose slightly but she didn't move or speak. "Overload?" She nodded. "Do you want me to leave you alone?" She shook her head and slid one hand out from under the blanket, reaching for me.

I sat on the edge of her bed and took her hand in mine. Tears slid from her eyes as she tightened her fingers around my hand. Fuck. She was breaking my fucking heart.

"Tell me what you need, Tillie. Tell me and it's yours."

That seemed to startle her. She blinked several times looking up at me. "You can't promise that. What If I wanted a million dollars?"

"Then I'll get you a million dollars."

"What about a small island where I can rule my subjects with an iron fist?"

I raised an eyebrow. "You want it in the South Pacific or Mediterranean? I can probably swing the Caribbean as long as we don't go near the Bermuda Triangle.

I'm superstitious." I was only half joking.

And only about the superstitious part. I happened to know a couple guys with the means who owed me more than one favor.

Might be a stretch, but I could make it work.

She didn't change expression but seemed to be searching my face for something. Maybe to see if I was lying?

After a while she opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Another tear slid from the corner of her eye. Tillie cleared her throat, but instead of trying to voice her request again, she simply scooted over slowly. So there was room for me to lie on the bed beside her?

"Baby, you're gonna have to say what you want. I can't read minds and if you're wanting me to lie down with you, you're gonna have to say so. That ain't somethin' I'm willin' to assume you mean. I gotta have something concrete."

She nodded her head, then croaked out. "Will you please hold me like you did in the truck?"

"Baby." Yep. I was done. This was it. The day I lost my man card.

The shit of it was, I wasn't broken up about it.

If it meant I was the one to hold this woman together?

Well. I was beginning to believe to the depths of my soul, holding this brave, sweet woman together might have been the fucking reason God put me on this earth.

Slowly, letting her have as much time as she needed to change her mind, I lay down next to her. It wasn't necessary, though. The second I lay back, Tillie moved close to

me, clinging to my shirt like it was her fucking lifeline.

I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her close. I felt her trembling against me, small tremors that rippled through her body. This woman had been through hell more than once and still found the strength to keep going. I admired her resilience more than she could ever know.

“I’m so tired,” she whispered against my chest. “Not just physically. I’m tired of being afraid, of running, of never feeling safe.”

That gave me pause. “Tillie, were you hurt while I was in prison? Is there something you’ve not told me?” If someone else had hurt this woman, I’d be killing again. Only this time, I wouldn’t be making any noble fucking sacrifices.

“No. I never expected everything in my life would be all peaches and cream, but I really didn’t expect my mom and dad to...” She stopped speaking, her fingers now against her trembling lips. I wanted to press her but wasn’t sure what the right move was.

“Did they hurt you?”

“No. Not physically. They just... took everything . They sold everything I got from Paul’s estate, even the house, because they said I could just live with them.

You know. Until they found another man with money who wanted me.

” She trembled in my arms, clinging harder, which I hadn’t thought possible.

Her knuckles were white where her fist still bunched in my shirt.

She sucked in a ragged breath and held it several seconds before letting the breath out

in a slow, deliberate release.

“It was never the money, you understand. Not for me. Mom and Dad, though. I think money motivated them to do everything they did with me. They were older when they had me because they were never supposed to need another child.”

Something about the way she phrased her statement had my hackles rising. “I don’t understand. What do you mean ‘need another child’?”

“My brother was supposed to be their ticket to the good life. He was the smart one. The one who touched something, and it turned to gold. Mom was in her late forties when she had me, and only because my brother went to prison for something to do with money laundering and doing something bad with the stock market. They never talked about it, and I only found out about it when they shoved me into Paul’s life.”

“OK.” I took a breath and stroked her arm while I thought over what she’d said. “There’s a lot there, honey. This isn’t something you’ve ever mentioned before.”

“No. My time with you on Saturdays was my escape. I took as much time as I could to forget everything when I was with you. You gave me so much and the last thing I wanted to do then -- or now -- is for you to think I’m looking for more.

The reason I only now bought a place and moved away from my parents was they kept putting me off with the estate sale and settlement.

I found out later it was because they’d taken it all.

I managed to keep my car and enough to buy” -- she shuddered -- “that little farm, and put back enough to keep me going for a few months if I couldn’t write or things got slow for the holidays or something.”

I had to concentrate on keeping my breathing slow and even. The last thing she needed was my anger on her behalf spilling over to her right now. “We’ll worry about all that later, OK? You’re safe now,” I promised, stroking her hair. “No one’s getting to you here.”

She nodded slightly, her breath warm against my neck. “I know. That’s what scares me.”

I frowned. “What do you mean, baby?”

“What if I get used to feeling safe with you, and then...” She trailed off, but I understood what she couldn’t say.

“And then I leave?” I finished for her. “Not happening, Tillie. Not by choice.”

She pulled back just enough to look up at me, her silvery-green eyes swimming with emotions I couldn’t fully decipher.

“But that’s just it. Sometimes we don’t get a choice.

Like with Paul. I didn’t choose for him to become a monster.

I didn’t choose for you to kill him and throw your life into chaos when you could have been happily on your way.

” The tears really started falling now. She wiped her nose with the back of her wrist, then swiped at her eyes with her fingers.

“My whole life has been one clusterfuck after another, Xave. Since I met you, you’ve been the only bright spot in my life.

I knew things wouldn't be easy just because Paul was gone and I didn't have to be afraid of him anymore.

I was fully prepared to work hard to make my own life.

It just seems like one thing after another kept dragging me backward, trying to suck me back down into a deep, dark hole I could never escape from! ”

I pulled her closer, tucking her head under my chin.

“Listen to me, Tillie. You're not going back into any fucking hole.

Not while I'm breathing. Metaphorically speaking or not.

” I stroked her hair, feeling her tears dampening my shirt.

“I've spent a year and a half thinking about you every Goddamn day.

Planning what I'd do when I got out. How I'd find you, make sure you were good. ”

“You planned to find me?” Her voice was small against my chest.

“Baby, you only think you know what I'd go through for you.” It was the Goddamned truth. “Yeah. I killed for you. But that was just my excuse to go to prison. True, I hadn't planned on killin' anyone, but then you turned up and some people just need killin'.”

When her gaze met mine, her eyes were wide with shock and not a small amount of confusion. “What? What are you saying, Xavier?”

“I needed to be in Terre Haute for about six months. That's how long I thought it

would take me to do my job. Knuckles made all the arrangements and six months was all I needed.”

“Oh no,” she gasped, distress on her lovely face.

“Hey. Stop. Let me finish.” I gave her a level look, firm but not harsh as I held her gaze.

When she settled and nodded her head, I dropped a kiss on top of her head and continued.

“We had it all planned out. Me and Knuckles. He was still in prison, but the man has connections I don’t want to know about.

I helped him prepare this, so I knew I’d be getting out as soon as I could finish the job.

” She shifted, but I held her where she was.

I wasn’t sure I could look at her just yet because the woman had rocked me to my core the night I killed her husband.

“I was gonna go in for some trumped-up drug charges or something. Didn’t really care as long as I could get out when I wanted.

I was supposed to get an eighteen-month sentence, but Knuckles said the Miles family lawyer would get me out in six months tops if I was ready.

I was going in to, uh, settle some disputes and stuff.

” I knew she was about to ask so I cut her off.

“It doesn’t really matter why right now, only that I had the choice to get out once I’d completed my tasks, which I got done in the six months I’d been allotted.

I chose to stay because you... kept coming.

” She sucked in a breath, her eyes going wide with shock and something I wasn’t quite sure of.

“Why would you do that?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

I shrugged and repeated, “You kept coming.”

“You said that. Why not ask to meet up when you got out? Or ask for my phone number?”

“Because I’m a big guy. You already know I can be violent when I need to be. I wanted you to be ready for me. I wanted you to have a chance to heal inside and out. But most of all, I wanted you to know me, so you’d know without a shadow of a doubt, I’d never hurt you. Ever, Tillie. Not ever.”

“I know you wouldn’t. You saved me.”

“I’m also the guy who murdered your husband.”

“Because he beat me up!” She pushed herself up and braced her forearms on my chest. “Xavier, I never thought you’d hurt me. Not even that night when you went in with the Judge you pulled out from under your seat.”

I winced. “Christ. I was hopin’ you hadn’t actually seen me get my gun.”

“It wasn’t like I didn’t know what you did.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t want any more violence to touch you. When I killed that bastard, the only thing I cared about was makin’ sure you never had violence touch you again.”

“I waited in the truck like you said, but I didn’t want to.

It was so hard watching the police take you away in handcuffs.

” She shuddered, laying her head back on my chest and snuggling closer.

She clutched my shirt tightly once again.

“You saved me. When everyone else in my life was blinded by the wealth and privilege Paul’s lifestyle afforded them, you were the one who came to my rescue.

You didn’t question if I was lying or if there had been a good reason for me being beat all to shit.

” She sat up then, crossing her legs, tailor fashion.

“I’ve replayed that night over and over in my mind, Xave.

You knew. From the second I became aware of you, when I first looked into your eyes, I didn’t have to tell you what had happened. You just assumed.”

“Honey, I knew. Anyone with half a brain could tell what happened to you wasn’t an accident. Especially with the way you shied away from me when I stopped.”

“God, the rain was coming down so hard.” She gazed away from me, looking off in the distance, staring into the past. “The storm was probably the only reason I got away from the bastard that night.”

“Prissy fucker didn’t like gettin’ wet?”

“He was a coward,” she snapped. “Fucking terrified of storms.” Then Tillie winced and sighed. “That’s not fair. Lots of people are afraid of rough weather. But it’s the only reason I got out of the driveway.”

“I killed that son of a bitch too fuckin’ quick.” I hadn’t meant to mutter that out loud, but when Tillie gave me a faint smile, I decided maybe I hadn’t said something to scare her.

“When you stopped that night, I think I’d resigned myself to whatever happened. I didn’t want to be raped or beaten or anything. I just wanted it all to be over.”

“Christ, baby.” I reached for her then, pulling her on top of me so she straddled my hips. Wrapping my arms around her, I held her so tight I was afraid she wouldn’t be able to breathe, but when I loosened my hold, she whimpered.

“More.”

“Don’t let me hurt you, honey. I don’t ever want to hurt you.”

She shifted and moved higher in my arms so we were face-to-face. “And you never will, Xave. It’s just the kind of man you are.”

Then, to my complete and utter surprise, Tillie met my lips with hers.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:15 am

Tillie

I don't know why I kissed Xavier. One second I was lost in the nightmare of my past, the next I knew I'd die if I didn't taste him.

His lips were warm and firm against mine, a stark contrast to my hesitant touch.

For a moment he froze, then his hand came up to cradle the back of my head, his fingers tangling in my hair as he returned the kiss with gentle restraint.

I could feel him holding back, careful not to frighten me, and that tenderness made something break loose inside me. I pressed closer, deepening the kiss, desperate to feel more of him. His other arm tightened around my waist, and he groaned softly against my mouth.

When we finally broke apart, it was Xavier who ended the kiss. We were both breathing heavily and I'm sure the desire in Xavier's eyes mirrored my own. Still, because he was the man he was, Xavier had to make sure this was what I really wanted.

"Tillie," he whispered, his voice rough. "You don't have to do this. Not for me. Not because you think you owe me something."

I shook my head, cupping his face between my palms. "I'm not. I want this. I want you."

His expression was a mixture of hope and disbelief. "You've been through hell today.

I don't want you to do something you'll regret when you're thinking clearer."

I couldn't help but be amused. "I can't tell you how many nights I lay in my bed by myself and dreamed you'd come to me.

I'd wake up just as you were sliding your cock inside me and want to cry in frustration.

" That made him suck in a breath, his eyes going wide.

"Yeah, Xave. Do you want to know why I'm absolutely sure this is what I want? "

He swallowed, nervous. "I want to point out that bikers and convicts have a certain... reputation." He looked and sounded like he was giving me a lecture, and I nearly smiled.

"While I most certainly have the necessary equipment at or above the average size, I haven't had sex since a month and three days before I went to prison.

" I knew better than to smile, but it was getting harder and harder.

"Do not take this first time to mean I'm gonna be a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am kind of fuck.

I might come before you the first time, but I swear by God Almighty you will come. Several times."

That was all I could take. I burst into giggles while leaning in to kiss him again. He sighed, then let out a disgruntled grumble against my lips. "Don't see anything so Goddamned funny." But there was no heat in his voice.

“This is one of many reasons I know I’m absolutely making the right decision.

There was never any doubt in my mind you’d make sex good for me.

But now I’m worried I might be rushing things.

” As soon as the words left my mouth, I wished them back.

So, I put a finger in his face and gave him what I hoped was a stern look.

“But you absolutely will not go find another woman to fuck. You want to fuck, I’m all over that shit.

But it will be me. Not someone else, so forget I said I was rushing things. Seems like I’ve not moved fast enough.”

Now it was his turn to laugh. “Little bloodthirsty, baby?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. I just want things clear from the start. You said you’d never reject me for sex, and I’m OK for it to be just sex.

” I winced, shaking my head. “OK, that’s not true.

I won’t be OK with it, but I’ll still accept it.

I want you that much, Xave. I’ll take what you’re willing to give. ”

“Good,” he grunted before snaking his arms back around me.

The feeling of security was immediate. Being held tightly in this man’s arms was like nothing I’d ever experienced.

I wanted to stay with him forever, but if this was all I ever got, I'd hold it in my heart forever and smile every time I thought about it.

"Because, baby, you ain't gettin' just sex from me.

" His voice was low and rough, his dark eyes intense as they searched mine.

"What you're gettin' is everything I got to give.

All of me, for as long as you'll have me. "

My breath caught in my throat. "Xavier..."

"Shh." He brushed his thumb across my bottom lip. "Let me show you what you mean to me, Tillie Girl."

This time when our lips met, there was no hesitation from either of us.

The kiss was deeper, hungrier, filled with all the longing that had built up between us over countless Saturday visits separated by bulletproof glass.

His hands roamed across my back, pulling me impossibly closer as I melted against him.

When he rolled us over so I was beneath him, he braced himself on his forearms, careful not to crush me with his weight. "You tell me if you need me to stop, yeah? Anytime, for any reason."

I nodded, running my hands up his muscled arms. "I will. But I won't need to."

He studied my face for a long moment, then slowly began kissing his way over my

chin and down my neck to the swell of my breast. His lips traced a path of fire across my skin, and I arched into his touch, desperate for more.

Every careful caress erased another memory of pain, replacing it with pleasure so intense I could barely breathe.

“Xavier,” I gasped as his hand slipped under my shirt, his calloused fingers skimming along my ribs with surprising gentleness.

“I got you, baby,” he murmured against my collarbone. “Let me take care of you.”

My breath hitched as his lips slid up and down my neck, his beard creating a delicious friction against my sensitive skin. Each touch was reverent, almost worshipful, so different from anything I’d experienced before.

“Can I take this off?” Xavier murmured against my collarbone, his fingers playing with the hem of my shirt.

“Yes,” I whispered, lifting my arms to help him. “Please.” The cool air hit my skin as he pulled the fabric over my head, but any chill was immediately replaced by the heat of his gaze.

“Beautiful,” he breathed, taking in the sight of me in my simple cotton bra. His calloused fingers traced the edge of the fabric, sending shivers down my spine. “So fucking beautiful.”

I reached for his shirt, suddenly desperate to feel his skin against mine. “Need you, Xave.”

With a crooked smile, Xavier sat back on his heels and pulled his shirt off in one fluid motion.

I couldn't help but stare at the expanse of tattooed muscle revealed to me.

My fingers itched to trace every line, every scar, every inch of him.

He was heavily muscled but not overly large. Just perfect for me.

"Like what you see?" There was a hint of vulnerability beneath his teasing grin.

"Pretty sure you know exactly how yummy you look."

"Make no mistake about it, sweetheart. I am yummy." His cocky, boyish grin made me laugh.

Especially when he flexed. Xavier always had the power to make me laugh, even when I'd been sad, afraid, or felt defeated.

Of course, he'd make me comfortable during intimacy.

Xavier would settle for nothing less than our first time together being absolutely perfect.

I should have felt self-conscious. I wasn't wearing anything fancy, and my body bore the faint marks of old scars Paul had left. The way Xavier looked at me, though, made me feel like the most desirable woman on earth.

When he unhooked my bra and slid it off, I didn't try to cover myself. Instead, I watched his face as he gazed at my breasts, the naked hunger in his expression giving me much needed courage.

Xavier lowered his head to press a reverent kiss to the slope of one breast. "Been dreaming about this for too fuckin' long."

His mouth closed over my nipple and I gasped, arching into the wet heat of his tongue.

I tangled my fingers in his hair, holding him to me as waves of pleasure radiated through my body.

Every gentle suck, every swirl of his tongue sent jolts of electricity straight to my core.

I couldn't hold in my moans and whimpers and didn't bother trying.

When he shifted his attention to my other breast, his hand slid down my stomach to the waistband of my jeans. He paused there, his eyes finding mine in silent question.

"Yes," I whispered, lifting my hips. "Please, Xavier."

He made quick work of the button and zipper, then eased my jeans down my legs with agonizing slowness, his fingertips trailing fire along my skin. When he tossed them aside and looked at me lying there in just my panties, the raw hunger in his expression made me tremble.

"God, Tillie," he breathed, running his palm up my thigh. "You have no idea how fuckin' perfect you are."

"I'm far from perfect," I whispered, suddenly aware of every flaw, every scar that marred my skin.

"No," Xavier said firmly, his hand stilling on my thigh as his eyes met mine.

"Don't you dare. Don't you fucking dare diminish yourself."

” His voice was fierce, protective. “Every mark on your body tells the story of how strong you are. How you survived. You’re perfect to me, Tillie Girl. Every Goddamn inch of you.”

Tears pricked my eyes at the raw honesty in his voice. No one had ever spoken to me like that before. Like I was precious. Like I mattered.

“Xavier,” I breathed, reaching for him. “What did I ever do to deserve your care and protection?”

He shook his head. “You ain’t the lucky one, honey. You’re the woman who has to put up with a caveman followin’ you around like a fuckin’ puppy dog.”

Holding back my smile was impossible. “I mean” -- I shrugged -- “puppies are cute. I’m not really seeing the issue.”

His chuckle filled me like warm honey, heating me from the inside out. He kissed me then, deep and claiming, pouring all his emotion into the press of our lips and slick glide of his tongue against mine.

When he pulled back, his breathing was ragged. “I need to touch you,” he said, his voice strained. “Need to make you feel good. Will you let me?”

Instead of answering with words, I hooked my thumbs in the waistband of my panties and pushed them down. Xavier’s eyes went dark as he helped me slide them off completely, leaving me bare beneath his heated gaze.

“Christ,” he whispered reverently, his hands skimming up my calves to my thighs. “You’re gonna be the death of me, woman.”

His touch was featherlight as he slid his hands over my hips and up to my breasts.

When his thumb brushed over my nipple, I gasped and arched into his hand.

The next thing I knew, Xavier had latched onto my other nipple and was sucking at the sensitive peak with steady pulls before licking the swollen nub with the flat of his tongue.

We both groaned. I threaded my fingers through his hair and held him to me, afraid he'd change his mind and leave me like this. But Xavier's big body trembled against mine, his skin growing slick with sweat.

"I've never tasted anything so fuckin' good in my fuckin' life." Xavier sounded almost in awe. Like he was in the middle of the most wonderful experience he'd ever imagined and was afraid to break the spell woven around him. "Need more."

"Yes!" I nodded my head furiously. "Definitely need more."

Xavier slid down my body, pressing open-mouthed kisses along my stomach, my hip bones, the tops of my thighs. Each touch left me trembling, anticipation building as he settled between my legs. His broad shoulders pushed my thighs wider, and I felt completely exposed before him.

"Xavier," I whispered, suddenly nervous.

He looked up at me from between my legs, his dark eyes intense. "I've got you, baby. Let me play for a bit." As he looked up my body at me, sweat dotted my own skin. I was sure there had never been a more erotic moment in my entire life than Xavier with his mouth hovering above my pussy.

Then his mouth was on me, and coherent thought fled. The first slow stroke of his tongue had me arching off the bed with a startled cry. He chuckled against my sensitive flesh, the vibration adding to the pleasure coursing through me.

“That’s it,” he murmured, his breath hot against me. “Let me hear how good it feels.”

I couldn’t have held back if I tried. Each swirl of his tongue, each gentle suck at my clit sent waves of pleasure rippling through my body.

I clutched the sheets, then his hair, then the sheets again as I writhed beneath his skilled mouth.

The sensations he created within me were so intense it bordered on pain and, silly as it sounds, I didn’t know what to do with my hands.

When he slipped one thick finger inside me, I cried out.

It felt like I was spiraling out of control, like my body wasn’t my own.

Only Xavier held the key to pleasure like this and I was greedy for more.

But only with Xavier. I knew in my heart and soul I’d never be able to give my body willingly to another man as long as I lived.

For good or ill, I was all in with this man.

“So fucking wet for me,” he murmured, his fingers exploring my folds with gentle expertise. “Tell me what you like, baby. Tell me how to make you feel good.”

I couldn’t form coherent words as his thumb found my clit, circling it with just the right pressure. “That,” I gasped, my hips rising to meet his touch. “Oh, God! Just like that!”

Xavier watched my face intently as he slipped one thick finger inside me, then another, stretching me gently as his thumb continued its maddening circles. The dual

sensation had me writhing beneath him, my hands clutching at his shoulders.

“Xavier,” I moaned, feeling the tension building inside me. “Please, I need --”

Before I could finish my plea, Xavier covered my pussy with his mouth...

And it. Was. On .

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:15 am

Xavier

I recognized I was in serious trouble when Tillie came the second I touched her pussy with my mouth.

Not only was I fighting out of my weight class with this woman, Tillie embraced my attention and welcomed my touch.

In fact, she reveled in the way I ate her pussy and held none of her cries and screams back as she came on a hard, wet rush.

Because, you know, no pressure or anything.

The taste of her flooded my mouth, sweet and musky, and I groaned against her sensitive flesh.

Her thighs trembled around my head as she rode out her orgasm, her hips undulating over my mouth, her fingers tangled in my hair, holding me right where she wanted me.

I kept my tongue moving, gentler now, easing her through the aftershocks.

I would give this woman anything she wanted.

Do anything she wanted. If it gave her this much pleasure, there was nothing I'd deny her.

I'd eat her pussy until she either passed out or made me fuck her.

Maybe if I gave her all the pleasure she could stand before I actually fucked her, she wouldn't be disappointed if I didn't last past the first couple strokes.

"Oh my God," she gasped, her chest heaving. "Oh, my God!" Tillie screamed and screamed, her cries growing more and more hoarse.

"That's it, baby," I growled next to her clit, before flicking it a couple times with my tongue. "You come nice and hard for me. I want to drink you up."

"Xavier!"

With a final scream, Tillie orgasmed again.

Her pussy clenched around my fingers, wetting my hand and chin.

Her sweet, slightly musky scent was like a homecoming.

My reward for the extra months I'd stayed in prison.

Knuckles was the only person who knew why I'd remained behind bars, and he'd thought I'd lost my Goddamned mind.

And maybe he was right. I could have gotten out of prison and approached Tillie on the outside, but that hadn't felt right at the time.

My only regret was that I hadn't gotten to her before she'd purchased the exact wrong piece of property.

Because I knew in my soul Tillie had needed the time and separation as she got to

know me.

She needed to feel safe and in control. I was right, too.

Tillie now knew there was nothing I wouldn't do for her.

I was hers. I just hoped like hell I could make her mine too.

I looked up at her from between her legs, unable to hold back my satisfied smile. Her face was flushed, her hair a wild tangle around her head, her eyes half-lidded with pleasure.

"Just when I thought you couldn't get more beautiful. Post-orgasm is a really good look for you." I kissed the inside of her thigh.

Tillie reached for me, tugging at my shoulders. "Come here. Need to feel you."

I crawled up her body, my jeans uncomfortably tight against my straining cock. When our mouths met, she moaned at the taste of herself on my lips, and the sound nearly undid me.

"You're still wearing too many clothes," she complained, her hands fumbling with my belt.

I chuckled against her neck. "Couldn't agree more, baby." I kissed her before finding her breast again, sucking the nipple and grazing the puckered flesh with my teeth. I was rewarded with her sharp cry.

I sat on my heels and worked at my belt with shaking hands.

Tillie watched me with heavy-lidded eyes, her gaze following my every movement as

I slid from the bed and stripped out of my jeans and boxers.

Before dropping everything on the floor, I fished out one of the two condoms in my back pocket.

When I was finally naked, her eyes widened slightly as she took in the sight of my hard cock.

She sat up slightly, resting on one arm as she reached out to me. With reverent fingers, she stroked my length before taking my cock in her hand and stroking a couple of times. Her eyes were glazed and dreamy, like she was mesmerized. Which wasn't a small boost to my ego.

"Fuck, baby. Been too Goddamned long since anyone but me touched my cock."

Her hand moved slowly, exploring, and I had to grit my teeth to maintain control. When she swiped her thumb over the head, collecting the bead of moisture there, I nearly lost my mind.

"Come back," she said, a wicked gleam in her eye as she pulled gently at my cock to bring me to the bed.

"I'm in so much fuckin' trouble," I muttered as I covered her body with mine.

Her skin was like silk. Once I took care of a couple things I was going to keep her naked and in bed until I'd tasted every single inch of her at least three times. And her smile... was simply to God breathtaking.

"Only the best kind, I hope."

"Oh yeah. The very best."

I ripped open the condom and rolled it over my cock, stopping to grip the base and regain some semblance of control.

“I should probably at least raise an eyebrow that you’re prepared for this, but the truth is I’m just grateful because, yet again, you’re looking out for me when I didn’t look out for myself.”

“I ain’t had sex since I went to prison and I didn’t do drugs on the inside. I was careful, but there were a lot of fights and blood. I’d rather get tested to be sure before I take you bare.”

“How the fuck are you even real, Xave?” She looked equal parts amused, annoyed, and so fucking happy. “I’d say you’re too good to be true, but I know that’s wrong. You’re exactly what you appear and I’m not sure I would have ever believed any of this if I hadn’t come to see you every Saturday.”

I rested my weight on top of her, my arms on either side of her head.

One curl lay over her forehead, threatening to fall into her eye so I reached up to gently brush it away.

“Understand me, Tillie. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.

To keep you safe, happy, and livin’ your fuckin’ best life. But that’s for you. I’m a killer.”

“Fully aware of that, Xave. I was there.”

“That bastard was a clean kill because I let my temper get the better of me. I’m fully willing and capable of carrying out the grisliest torture and death you can imagine, then coming home to you and sleeping like a baby. I’m a monster. But I’m your

monster.”

She reached up and stroked my beard, threading her fingers through the crisp strands. “It feels good to have the monster on my side for once.”

Yep. I was done. With a defeated groan, I kissed her again. I guided my cock to her entrance before covering her fully and sinking in one slow inch at a time.

Tillie gasped beneath me, her eyes fluttering closed and her nails digging into my shoulders as I filled her completely.

She was so tight, so perfect around me I had to pause, breathing hard against her neck to keep from losing control entirely.

I stilled, giving her time to adjust, my forehead pressed against hers as we both breathed heavily.

“You okay?” I managed to rasp out, though speaking was nearly impossible with how good she felt wrapped around my cock.

Her legs came up to my waist, pulling me deeper. “More than okay,” she whispered. “You feel... God, Xavier! You feel incredible.”

I started to move then, slow and careful at first, watching her face for any sign of discomfort.

But there was only pleasure there, her lips parted as soft moans escaped with each thrust. Her nails dug into my shoulders with sharp little stings, and I knew I was going to wear those marks like badges of honor.

“Faster,” she pleaded, her hips rising to meet mine. “Please, I need more.”

I obliged, picking up the pace, driving into her with steady strokes that had her crying out. The sound of my name on her lips was better than any drug, and I found myself chasing that high, wanting to hear it again and again.

“So Goddamned fuckin’ perfect.” I breathed my words against her neck before latching on and sucking gently, leaving my mark on her for all to see.

I growled low in my throat as she tightened around me, her inner walls gripping my cock like a silken vise. My rhythm faltered as I fought for control, determined to make this last.

“That’s it,” I encouraged as her body arched beneath mine. “Take what you need, baby. Do it now!”

She moved with me now, finding our rhythm, her hips rising to meet each thrust, clutching at my back and shoulders.

“Xavier,” she gasped, her voice breaking.

I slipped a hand between us, finding her clit with my thumb. The moment I touched her there, she cried out, her body going rigid beneath me.

“Look at me,” I commanded softly. “Want to see your eyes when you come.”

Her gaze locked with mine, vulnerable and trusting in a way that made my chest ache.

As I circled her clit, her eyes widened, and I watched as pleasure overtook her.

Her pupils dilated, her lips parted on a silent scream, and then she was convulsing around me, her pussy clenching around me and I knew that was it.

I came as Tillie's pussy squeezed and milked my cock, demanding I put my cum inside her despite the condom.

Tillie didn't look away from me. She kept her gaze focused on mine just like I'd told her.

The connection between us was electric, raw and primal, yet somehow more intimate than anything I'd ever experienced.

And it wasn't just this one time. In my heart, I'd known the night I killed her husband she was the woman for me.

Sex with her only reinforced the notion.

For several long moments, we lay tangled together, our breathing gradually slowing, our bodies still connected. I pressed soft kisses to her neck, her cheek, her forehead, unable to stop touching her now that I finally could.

"I can't believe you stayed in prison for me," Tillie whispered, her fingers tracing patterns on my chest.

I carefully rolled to my side, taking her with me so we remained face to face. "Best decision I ever made. Got to know you. The real you."

"But all those months..." Her voice trailed off, and I could see her struggling to comprehend the sacrifice.

"Worth every second," I said firmly. "I'd do it again if it meant it got me to where I'm at right now."

"When she opened her mouth, I leaned in to kiss her before continuing.

“I don’t mean sex either, baby. Though...” I grinned down at her as I brushed a strand of hair clinging to her cheek.

“I’m definitely glad I got there too. But I mean where we are in our relationship with each other.

I think, even without the sex, we built a good foundation, becoming friends first.”

Tillie’s eyes filled with tears, but they were different from before. These were the kind that came from something good, something overwhelming in the best possible way.

I couldn’t help kissing away the offending moisture before finding her mouth with mine for another lingering kiss.

There was nothing I wanted more than to lie here and hold her until she came down softly, but I had to get cleaned up.

“I should probably get rid of this,” I said, gesturing to the condom.

“Be right back.” I stood but stopped and turned back to her.

“Don’t go anywhere. Understand?” I tried to put a stern note in my voice, but Tillie grinned at me.

“Afraid I’ll leave without saying goodbye?”

“Yes.” I gave her a solemn look, then frowned. “I don’t like that thought.” Absently, I rubbed the center of my chest before turning back to the bathroom.

As I shut the door, I heard Tillie speak to me softly. “As long as you want me,

Xavier, I'll never leave you. Especially without saying goodbye."

I grinned at her, but I was disturbed at the instant relief. Yeah. This whole finding my woman thing had more twists and turns than I ever expected. Especially where my emotions were concerned. The need to keep her close, to protect her from everything, was overriding everything in my life.

Knuckles knew how much she meant to me. It was why he'd moved heaven and earth to give me what I wanted when I insisted on staying in prison, and when I needed to get the fuck out.

I had no idea how he did it, but I called him in a fucking panic and he made it happen.

I figured the Miles family had something to do with it.

Knuckles had allied us with that family for them to use us as paid muscle.

Normally, that kind of move would have been a hard pass for me, but I knew the kind of man Knuckles was.

I trusted him with my life. More importantly, I trusted him with Tillie's life.

If he took the job, then he was satisfied the Miles' weren't going to have them hurt innocents.

Now, if they needed me to bust a bunch of drug dealers' balls, I was down with that.

I cleaned up, then looked at myself in the mirror.

There was no denying Tillie was too good for me.

I accepted I was fighting out of my weight class with this woman.

She was definitely too good to be with an ex-con.

But, as I studied myself, I made a vow. Tillie was going to be happy.

She was going to be and feel safe. She was going to have the best life I could possibly give her.

Anyone who went against that plan was going to meet my wrath.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:15 am

Tillie

Two Weeks Later...

I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak.

Life was as idyllic as I'd always wanted.

Xavier spent almost every waking moment with me.

If he was busy with something club-related, he would turn up at random wherever I was and stand around like a schoolboy with a crush.

He never intruded and remained in the background unless I invited him over.

Like I'd ever leave him standing off to the side by himself.

I always welcomed him with open arms and a big, wet, sloppy kiss, which he got the biggest kick out of.

There were only two things making my life less than perfect inside the Kiss of Death MC compound, and I found the irony amusing as fuck.

First, I knew Xavier was meeting with Knuckles and several other members of the club to get the rundown on how they were dealing with what Xavier termed "the cartel problem." I had a suspicion their pest removal involved some permanent solutions, but Xavier didn't tell me and I didn't ask.

Fuckers deserved what they got. As for my house that I barely got to live in, apparently everyone in the area knew about the problems with drug runners.

It was why I not only got a bargain price when I purchased it, but why they settled for a lower amount when I said I was paying cash.

The guy was just happy to get rid of the place and recoup some of his losses.

Xavier told me to let him deal with it. He'd make sure I got my money back and then some.

I honestly didn't care as long as I never had to see that house again.

Secondly, my parents had started blowing up my phone.

I hadn't answered and let my voicemail catch it, but I hadn't listened to any of the messages yet.

I'd barely skimmed the first couple of transcripts of their voicemails, but honestly, they'd been the ones to turn their backs on me.

The gist of the whole thing was, one of my parents heard from a friend who heard from a friend and so on, that I was famous or something and wanted to know what their friend had meant.

No doubt they were seeing dollar signs. I hated jumping to negative conclusions about my parents, but I knew them too well to think anything else.

I hadn't told Xavier about them calling because I had learned my man well enough to know that he'd go scorched earth if he found out they'd upset me.

Which -- I couldn't lie -- I found sexy as fuck.

I'd kept to myself for the most part. A social butterfly I was not.

But Xavier had brought me a new laptop, saying Knight had an extra one he wasn't using.

I had my doubts, but the computer meant I could put my notes into some kind of loose outline for my next book.

It had been at the house, and I still hadn't been back.

There was really nothing I wanted there other than the laptop.

I was big on saving everything to one cloud service or another in case I needed to work from somewhere other than my own computer, so it was easy to get set up and running.

Once I'd gotten started, the words flowed better than they ever had.

Writing days like I'd had the last couple of weeks were the reason I'd wanted to write in the first place.

I loved telling stories, but more than anything, I liked having control over my world.

Sure, there were times the characters tried to bully me, but I'd simply put them aside and work with another set of characters.

I might be a pushover in real life, but I was in control...

Right. So, maybe control was an illusion. Or maybe I was just that fucking crazy.

As I looked with satisfaction at my work today, I realized how at ease I was while I was writing. Had I ever truly been comfortable in my own home? The short answer was, not like this.

From my first full day in the compound, I'd been treated like a little sister by the men.

The women all seemed really close. Well, the women who were old ladies.

The club girls, or club whores, were a different story altogether.

I could already tell they were going to test me, and I'd expected it.

Kind of like the biker version of Mean Girls .

During our Saturdays together, Xavier had told me all about club life, including the territorial nature of club whores.

He'd also assured me the men in Kiss of Death pampered their women, whether they were old ladies or not.

He'd said they'd created monsters. Now the club girls were pushing back against the old ladies, demanding attention.

He said the guys never let it go too far, and they always took the side of their old ladies, but they all kind of enjoyed the cat fights as long as no one got hurt. Pudding or Jell-O never hurt either.

But just as Xavier had promised, as long as I stayed in our apartment, the club girls left me alone.

The only time anyone disturbed me was at lunch and when Xavier came home from whatever club business he was tasked with.

At lunch, Hannah, Pippa, Violet, and Carrie brought me food.

Sometimes a simple sandwich and chips, other times they'd bring burgers or hot dogs.

Or pizza. They made me eat and talk with them for an hour, then let me get back to work.

Violet said I needed the break and good, friendly human interaction.

Always, the women were unfailingly kind.

All of them read my books and eagerly talked about what they'd read during our lunches. I loved every single one of them.

I'd just finished a chapter when the door opened and Xavier stepped inside.

"Honey, I'm home!" It was his favorite thing to say when he stepped through the door.

Without fail, he had a huge smile on his face.

If I wasn't at my desk working or in the kitchen baking something, Xavier searched me out until he found me.

If I'd pulled an all nighter and he found me in bed? Well. Those times had been great fun.

I stood and ran to Xavier. As always, he opened his arms and I jumped into them, wrapping my legs around his waist while I giggled and kissed him.

“Damn, baby.” Xavier chuckled against my lips, his eyes alight with humor and more than a little desire. “Gonna have to insist you welcome me home like this every day.”

“Maybe I should stop greeting you like this,” I teased, nipping at his bottom lip. “You’re getting spoiled.”

“Don’t you dare.” He carried me to the couch and sat down with me still in his lap before leaning in and blowing a raspberry against my neck, making me squeal. Then he gave me a lingering kiss before sighing and sitting back against the couch. “How’s the writing going?”

I beamed at him. “Really good. I finished another chapter today.”

“That’s my girl.” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch gentle despite his rough hands. “Knuckles wants to see us tonight.”

I tensed slightly. “Both of us? Why?”

“Nothing bad,” he assured me quickly. “He’s got some news about your house situation, and he wants to talk about making you official.”

“Official?”

Xavier’s eyes grew serious. “My old lady. Wearing my patch. If you want that.”

My heart skipped. “You mean like getting a property patch?”

“Yeah.” His thumb traced my cheekbone. “But only if you’re ready for that. No

pressure.”

Was I? I thought I might be. Xavier had proven to be telling the truth about club life and everything he’d told me about Kiss of Death. He also continued to show me care and positive attention. And the man was a sex god.

A slow smile spread across my lips as I considered his offer.

“Yeah. I’m ready. You are the same man out of prison I got to know in prison.

And I’ve been in love with you for quite some time, Xavier.

I’m not even going to try to deny it.” Xavier sucked in a sharp breath, but I continued before he could say anything.

“You’ve shown me what it feels like to be loved.

You may not be ready to admit it yet, but I know you love me.

In whatever way. Platonically. Romantically. You love me. And I love you.”

Xavier’s eyes went dark and intense, his hands tightening on my waist. “Tillie,” he said, his voice rough with emotion.

“Baby, there ain’t nothing platonic about what I feel for you.

” He cupped my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing across my cheeks.

“I’ve been in love with you since that first Saturday you walked into that visiting room,” he continued, his forehead resting against mine.

“Scared the shit out of me because I knew I was gonna have to let you go at the end of every visit. But I couldn’t tell you to stay away. ”

Tears pricked my eyes as his words washed over me. “Xavier...”

“I love you, Tillie Girl. More than I ever thought I could love anything. You’re everything good in this world and somehow you chose me.” His voice cracked slightly. “I don’t deserve you, but I’ll spend every day trying to be worthy of you.”

I kissed him then, pouring all my love into it, trying to show him what he meant to me. When we broke apart, we were both breathing hard.

“So that’s a yes to the property patch?” he asked with a crooked grin.

“It’s a yes to everything with you,” I whispered against his lips. “Property patch, your old lady, whatever label you want to give me. I’m yours.”

Xavier growled low in his throat. His hands slid down to grip my thighs where they straddled him. In one fluid motion, he stood, lifting me with him. I squealed and wrapped my arms tighter around his neck as he carried me toward the bedroom.

“Need you,” he murmured, his beard tickling my neck as he pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses along my throat. “Right fucking now.”

“Yes,” I breathed, already tugging at his shirt, desperate to feel his skin against mine. “Please.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:15 am

He kicked the bedroom door shut behind us and laid me down on the mattress with surprising gentleness for a man so clearly consumed with desire. His eyes burned into mine as he pulled his shirt over his head, revealing the tattooed expanse of his chest and abs that I still couldn't get enough of.

I reached for him, but he caught my wrists, pinning them gently above my head with one large hand. "My turn to play," he said, his voice a rough caress.

With my wrists pinned above my head, I felt a delicious vulnerability wash over me. Xavier's weight pressed me into the mattress, his hard body a stark contrast to mine. The hunger in his eyes made my breath catch.

"Xavier," I whispered, arching up against him.

"Need to fuck you hard, baby," he growled, his free hand shoving my shirt over my breasts. I hadn't expected anyone after lunch, so I was in a simple T-shirt and panties with no bra. "Need to mark you, claim you. Need everyone in the Goddamned compound to know you belong to me."

Maybe it made me a freak or something, but I loved this caveman side of Xavier. Probably because I knew Xavier was solidly the caveman who would protect me with his life.

With increasingly quick and jerky movements, Xavier rid me of my panties and shirt before shoving his own jeans down his hips. "Tell me if it's too much," he commanded against my skin, his lips grazing the skin from my inner thigh up to my pussy.

“Oh, God! Do it, Xavier!” My plea was a breathy moan. “Eat my pussy!”

With a husky growl, Xavier shoved away from me, straightening as he finished removing his clothes. Then he gripped my hips and flipped me onto my belly with surprising strength, pulling my hips so I was on my knees before him.

“Gonna fuck you hard, Tillie. You promise me you’ll stop me if I get too rough.”

“I promise,” I wailed. “I promise if you don’t fuck me right now, I may castrate you in your fucking sleep!”

Xavier’s dark chuckle sent shivers down my spine. “Such a dirty mouth on my sweet girl,” he murmured, his hands skimming down my back. “Gonna have to do something about that.”

He positioned himself behind me, and I felt the blunt head of his cock pressing against my entrance. “Pain said my test came back clean, so I’m takin’ you bare. You don’t want that, say so now because I ain’t pullin’ out.”

That was all I could take. Instead of answering, I lowered my chest to the bed and reached back to grip Xavier’s buttocks and pulled me to him as I shoved myself backward onto his cock.

“Mother fuck!” Xavier bellowed as he tightened his grip on my hips until I was sure I’d have bruises. I loved every fucking second of it.

He held still for several seconds before he started to ride me hard, setting a punishing rhythm. “So tight, so perfect. So... mine.”

“Yes!” I gasped, pushing back against him, meeting each thrust. “Yours, Xavier. Only yours. Always!”

The sound of skin slapping against skin filled the room, punctuated by our moans and cries and screams. Xavier's pace was relentless, and I reveled in the raw possession of it all.

"That's it, baby," he panted, one hand sliding up my spine to tangle in my hair. "Take everything I give you."

I could feel myself spiraling toward the edge, every nerve ending on fire.

When his hand snaked around to find my clit, I screamed his name, my body convulsing around him as I came harder than I ever had before.

Xavier followed me over the edge with a roar of his own.

His cum was hot inside me. Some of the warm, sticky fluid trickled down my inner thigh as I overflowed.

Still, Xavier held himself as deep inside me as he could before falling forward on top of me, pinning me to the bed beneath him.

I welcomed his heavy weight. His cock still throbbed inside me, not showing signs of going to sleep any time soon. Sweat coated us both.

With a groan, Xavier shifted so his body was no longer on top of mine. Instead, he wrapped his arms around me and held me close to him, my back to his chest. The occasional jump of his dick made little zings of pleasure flutter through me.

"Holy shit," he breathed out. "Holy. Shit." He was as winded as I was. I had to smile.

I couldn't help the giggle that escaped me as I felt Xavier's warm breath against my neck.

“What’s so funny?” he murmured, nuzzling against my hair. He didn’t sound put out, merely curious. If I knew Xave, he wanted to share in the merriment. He played as hard as he worked. And I loved playing with my gruff biker.

“Nothing. Just happy.” I sighed contentedly, pressing back against him. “I never thought I’d have this.”

His arms tightened around me. “This?”

“Safety. Happiness.” I twisted in his arms to face him. “Love.”

Xavier’s eyes softened as he traced my cheek with his thumb. “You’ve got all of that and more, baby. Forever.”

We lay there in comfortable silence, our breathing synchronizing as we basked in the afterglow. Eventually, Xavier pressed a kiss to my forehead.

“We should probably get cleaned up. Meeting with Knuckles is in an hour.”

I groaned, reluctant to leave our cocoon. “Do we have to?”

“Afraid so. Man doesn’t like to be kept waiting.” He grinned, dropping a quick kiss on my lips before sliding out of bed. “Come on. We can shower together.”

I grinned. “Sounds perfect.”

Knuckles would just have to get over it, because I had the feeling we were going to be late to that meeting.

Xavier

“Good thing I’m a patient man.” Knuckles lounged behind his desk, one booted foot propped on the edge. “I told you an hour and a half ago the meeting was in an hour. There a good Goddamned reason you kept me here half an hour before you decided to show up?”

I grinned. “Yep.”

Knuckles grunted, nodding at Tillie, who held firmly to my hand as we walked into the other man’s office.

“Probably has something to do with that sweet girl you corrupted after you went to prison, so I guess I can’t really fault you.

” Knuckles pointed at Tillie. “Family first, honey. He tries to put the club first, you come talk to me. I’ll kick his ass. ”

Tillie sniffed before clearing her throat. “I swear to God, Knuckles, if you make me cry I will put hair remover in your beard oil.”

My president sat up straight, a look of horror on his face. “Now, look here, little miss. No messin’ with the beard. That’s a step too far.”

Tillie laughed so hard she was crying, and Knuckles gave me a wary look. “Don’t you let her mess with my beard oil, Xavier. I didn’t make her cry. That’s all on her.”

I chuckled, pulling Tillie closer to my side. “Can’t make any promises, boss. Woman’s got a mind of her own.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Knuckles muttered, but his eyes were warm with affection when he winked at Tillie and grinned. “All right, let’s get down to business. First things first. Your property situation.”

He pulled out a thick manila folder and dropped it on his desk. “Got some good news and some better news. Which you want first?”

Tillie squeezed my hand. “Good news?”

“Menendez cartel won’t be bothering you anymore. Ever.” Knuckles’ expression turned cold and deadly. “Let’s just say they got the message loud and clear that you’re under our protection. And they know we are the muscle for the Miles family.”

I felt Tillie tense beside me, but she didn’t ask for details. Smart woman. Knuckles seemed to be studying her reaction but said nothing.

“And the better news?” I prompted.

Knuckles didn’t take his gaze from Tillie’s. Instead, he started a line of questioning I wasn’t really comfortable with.

“Tillie, do you know the Miles family?”

“Not personally.” Tillie looked extremely uncomfortable, but not like she was going to balk.

“Wouldn’t expect you to know them personally, honey. You know who the Miles family is, though. Right?”

She took a deep breath, then met Knuckles' gaze with a direct one of her own. "I know they have mafia ties. Other than that, not much. They've been in the news some."

"Yeah. They try to keep a low profile, but it's hard not to get noticed." He took a breath and let it out slowly, waiting patiently. I knew he wanted Tillie to ask questions, but she looked like she was at a loss.

"Knuckles. Just say what you need to." I wasn't going to let my president make Tillie uncomfortable when there wasn't a reason. "She's not gonna faint if you tell her the truth."

Tillie surprised me by addressing Knuckles.

"Look. I don't have a problem with what you do.

If all of you are like Xavier, I know you're not shaking down mom-and-pop shops for protection money or some shit.

That's not who Xavier is. He wouldn't stand for anyone else doing it.

"Knuckles' lips twitched but he held his expression blank.

"Having said that, I know you're not always on the right side of the law. And I know you kill when you have to."

Knuckles shrugged. "Or when someone needs it."

"Exactly!" Tillie's smile was genuine as she continued. "I'm sure every single one of you has a mean streak in you, but you're not the kind of men who'd beat up on people weaker than you are."

“I like this girl, Xavier. Wasn’t sure about her at first. Seemed a little too gentle for this place, but she’s got fire.” The big oaf grinned. At my woman.

“You got your own old lady, asshole. Don’t grin at mine.”

“Wouldn’t think of it. And you’re a jealous prick for thinkin’ I would.”

“Damn straight I’m a jealous prick!” I draped an arm around Tillie and pulled her closer. “Mine.”

“Why not just pee on her and be done with it?” The voice wasn’t one I recognized. Instinctively I turned, sweeping Tillie behind me to keep myself between her and danger. “Knuckles.” He addressed our president instead of me, which was just as good.

“Antonio.” Knuckles stood and took the hand Antonio offered. “Thank you for coming on short notice.”

“Kiss of Death has made my life easier since our collaboration began. And, to be honest, if we work something out here it’s going to benefit me much more than her.”

“What does that mean?” I could feel my hackles rising. “Who are you talking about?”

Antonio turned his attention to me. “Antonio Miles.” He held out his hand. I didn’t immediately take it, but Antonio didn’t drop his hand yet. “Xavier, I presume?”

“That’s my name.”

“I’m here to help Ms. St. Martin with a piece of property, which includes a house she might wish to liquidate.” Antonio didn’t seem impatient and still stood there with his hand out, like he knew he had to let me have time to make up my mind.

I thought about telling the bastard to fuck himself, but that was the green-eyed monster inside me I hadn't realized existed. I took his hand in a firm grip. "Sorry. I'm a bit rough around the edges."

"No apology necessary. Might I speak to your woman?" The bastard had to be all polite and shit. Didn't change my answer.

"Not alone. You want to talk to her, you do it here." My tolerance only went so far.

Antonio grinned. "Of course. Ms. Matilda St. Martin?"

"Tillie," she said.

"Tillie, then. Please call me Tonio."

"Why would you want to speak to me?" I felt Tillie curl her fingers into the waist of my pants.

"Because you have a house I'm fairly certain you'd like to never see again. I'm willing to pay you a fair price for that little farm."

"You realize that place isn't safe. Right?"

Antonio smiled at her. "Of course, you'd warn me. But yes. I'm fully aware of everything going on there. So, my question to you is, would you be willing to sell the property to me?"

"Not that I'm not grateful or anything, but why would you want that place? I don't know you, but you seem nice. I don't want anyone getting hurt."

I had to bite back a growl when Antonio Miles grinned at my woman. "Sweetheart,

the very last person you need to worry about is me. I promise you I am fully aware of everything and will take all necessary precautions.”

Tillie seemed to consider Antonio for a long moment.

I expected she'd ask why he wanted her land but when she spoke, that's not what she said.

“I paid cash for the place, so the guy who sold it to me came down on the price so I could afford it. I don't think it's right for me to ask for the market value when I didn't pay that for it.

I mean, you're doing me a favor. Not the other way around. ”

“There's where you're wrong.” Antonio sat in a chair on the other side of Knuckles' desk and spoke to Tillie.

He wasn't mean. In fact, he seemed amused.

Not in an obnoxious way or anything, but like he found it cute Tillie was concerned she was ripping him off.

“I can't get into specifics, but by purchasing your farm from you without an agent, and since I'd have control over your end of the paperwork as well as my own, I have a unique opportunity to obtain a property with the most prolific narcotic highway in the country.

The one maintained road that's not on a map.

I can control the paper trail and everything official in the sale, then I'll be in a better position to control the flow of narcotics from Mexico all the way to the Great Lakes.

”

Tillie groaned. “Why did you tell me that? Now I know!”

“You do?” Antonio’s amusement was really grating on my nerves.

I hated the guy on principle because he was rich, good-looking, and could give Tillie everything I couldn’t.

I never thought I was insecure, but it seemed like I was finding out more about myself than I ever cared to know. “What exactly do you know?”

“I don’t know! Just...” Tillie took a deep breath and closed her eyes before exhaling and flashing Antonio a bright smile. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Relax, Tillie. I’m a hardass and I’m not a good person, but I don’t threaten or intimidate women for any reason.

You’re here with Xavier and Knuckles.” He indicated our joined hands and the property cut Knuckles had tossed to me while Antonio spoke to Tillie.

“You’re Xavier’s woman, so you know no one here is completely legit and they do things sometimes not accepted in polite society. ”

“Don’t we all.” God, Tillie’s musical laughter warmed my soul in ways I never thought possible. “Honestly, I don’t care. But I don’t want you mad at me if something goes wrong.”

“Absolutely not!”

“No fuckin’ way.”

“Ms. St. Martin, I can assure you something like that will never happen.” Antonio looked genuinely incensed. “I never do anything without all the information available and, honestly, I’d suspect just about anyone here before I’d suspect you.”

“What? You don’t know me. How can you say that?”

“Honey, I’m the one who got Xavier out of prison on a moment’s notice. Knuckles and his club work for me. I take care of my own. So when I got the call, I looked into you. You wouldn’t betray me. It’s just not who you are.”

“You got Xavier out of prison?”

“Yes. He went in because of me in the first place. I don’t send my people in someplace without making sure I can get them out quickly. Sure, it still took a few hours, but I put the extraction plan in motion the second I got off the phone with Knuckles.”

“Then, acceptable risk and a backup?”

“See? You understand. I’m a predator, Tillie. Make no mistake. But I don’t hurt my family for my own gain. I expect their loyalty, but I give them mine in return.”

“You know what? Who am I to judge? My life looked ideal, but it was a nightmare. Every single person in my life failed me in more ways than I thought possible. Xavier was the only person to help me. Whatever you guys do, I don’t care. I’m pretty sure you’re better people than anyone else I know.”

“Thank you, Tillie.” Antonio sat back in his chair.

“In my research, I also found the amount you paid for your property. I’m telling you that so you’ll know I am fully aware of what you have in the place.

I'll have my lawyer draw up the necessary paperwork for you to sign in a few days, along with a check.

I'm giving you double the amount you paid for it, plus a little extra. ”

“What? No! You shouldn't to do that.”

“I never do anything I don't want to do, honey.

Trust me. I could pay you three times that amount and still have the better deal.

” He shrugged. “Might do that anyway.” He winked at Tillie.

“Just ‘cause you're too cute.” He chuckled.

“Worried I didn't know the place was dangerous. That was adorable.”

Tillie leaned into me, clutching my arm. “Something's wrong with him. I don't think he's all right,” she whispered. “You know. Upstairs.”

“He's fine.” I tried hard to scowl at Antonio, the bastard, but it was hard because honestly, it was kind of cute. My little Tillie was worried about the man who was probably the biggest crime lord in the region not understanding the place was dangerous. It really was a funny notion.

“Are you sure you want to buy that place?”

“Yes, Tillie. I promise.”

“I can't say I'm not relieved. I didn't really care about the money, but I'm glad I'm not going to lose it.”

“I’ll be in touch with Knuckles. We’ll set up a time for you to sign the paperwork.”

Antonio stood, and everyone but Knuckles followed suit. Antonio held out his hand to Tillie, who took it without hesitation. “Thank you, Tillie.” As he walked to the door, Antonio turned back. “Oh. You might want to expect a call from your parents.”

“Crap. That was your fault?” Tillie put her hands on her hips and glared at Antonio.

“Wait, what?” I looked from Tillie to Antonio. “What do you mean his fault?”

“They’ve been blowing up my phone, Xavier. I haven’t talked to them. I’m not really sure I want to.” She wrinkled her nose delicately. “What did you tell them anyway? They’ve been going on about me being famous or something. I’m not famous.”

“Apparently one of your mother’s friends is a fan. I only know because I hacked into your mom’s phone’s cloud service and found all sorts of things she probably didn’t want me to know. Your dad too.”

“See? I told you he wasn’t all right, Xavier. I think he’s crazy.”

“Like a fox.” Antonio grinned before walking out the door.

“Why didn’t you tell me your parents had been harassing you?”

“Out of everything he just said, that’s your takeaway?”

“Tillie.”

“I can deal with my parents. I let them push me around for a long time, but now that I know what a real family is supposed to be like, they don’t intimidate me anymore. I also find it difficult to believe they ever loved me. Or my brother.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Knuckles said, sticking his chin out stubbornly. “You’ve got all of us now. We’ll look out for you.”

“I really am grateful to you guys. For everything.”

“That’s what family does.” Knuckles’ expression grew serious then. “When Antonio mentioned your parents, you looked like you swallowed a lemon. They gonna be a problem for you?”

“No. They just want to see if they can get more money out of me.”

“Right,” I muttered. “Ain’t happenin’.”

“I don’t want to talk about them right now.” Where before Tillie had been almost carefree, this meeting had seriously dampened her mood. I could see it in the set of her mouth. She was stressing, and I didn’t like it.

“Come on.” I took her hand and headed out of Knuckles’ office. “We’ll catch up with you later, Prez.” I threw my hand up at Knuckles as I led Tillie out of the room.

“Where we going?”

I didn’t look at her as I guided her through the building to the outside. “To put a smile back on your face.”

A couple hours and several orgasms later, I’d definitely put the smile back on my precious Tillie’s face.

Tillie

“Not again.”

My phone rang practically nonstop for the next several days. I’d debated blocking their number, but couldn’t quite make myself do it.

“If this doesn’t stop, I’m going to deal with it.” Xavier was as easygoing as they came. Until someone fucked with me. While I had no desire for my parents to be hurt or anything, it was sexy as fuck to know this man had my back in everything.

“Honestly, it’s as much my fault as it is theirs. If I’d talk to them, they’d stop calling.”

“Want me to talk to them? Because I’d love to.”

If we both lived to be a hundred, I’d never tire of this man’s unwavering loyalty. “I appreciate the offer more than you could ever know, but I’ll handle them.” My phone started ringing again. “Just not right now.”

I powered down my phone with a grimace and tossed it onto the couch. “Maybe tomorrow.”

Xavier’s expression darkened as he watched me. “You don’t owe them a damn thing, Tillie. Not your time, not an explanation. Nothing.”

“I know.” I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “But they’re still my parents. As

awful as they are, there's this stupid part of me that keeps hoping they'll change. Or that they'd at least accept me for who I am. Not what I can do for them."

Xavier crossed the room and pulled me against his chest, his arms a fortress around me. "That ain't stupid, baby. That's just you being who you are. You're someone who's been through hell and back and still made a new life for herself."

"I never could have done it without you, you know," I confessed softly, smiling up at him. "Best therapy ever." I melted into his embrace, drawing strength from his solid presence. "When did you get so wise?"

"Prison gives a man time to think." His chuckle rumbled through his chest against my cheek. "That, and watching you every Saturday, learning who you are."

I smiled against his chest, breathing in his familiar scent of leather, soap, and something uniquely Xavier. "I'm not sure I'll ever get used to that."

"To what?" His fingers traced lazy patterns along my spine.

"That you chose to stay in prison longer just to get to know me better." I pulled back to look at his face. "It's the most romantic, terrifying thing anyone's ever done for me."

"Romantic, huh?" His eyes crinkled at the corners. "That's what the kids are calling it these days?"

I swatted his arm playfully. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah." I love the rasp of his words in that lazy drawl he had going on sometimes. "I know. Just don't use the R word in front of my brothers, OK? They'll get all pissy if I outdo them."

I let it go another week before I decided on a course of action. There was no way around talking to them, so I was going to have to bite the bullet and get it over with. But, dammit, it was so fucking hard!

“Honey, I’m home!” Christ, that man! Xavier could put a smile on my face under the worst of circumstances.

Like I knew he loved, I ran to him and jumped into his arms. “I missed you!”

“Missed you too, honey. You busy this afternoon?”

“Not really. I think I’m actually done for the day.”

“Good. I’ve got to go talk to someone and thought you might like to come with me.” He winked at me. “We’ll take the bike. Chicks dig the bike.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, I can’t argue with that. You know I always jump at the chance to go riding with you.”

“Good. Grab your helmet and come on.”

Ten minutes later we were rolling down the interstate.

Two of the guys from the club rode in front of us, two in back, putting us safely in the middle.

I had no idea where we were going and didn’t particularly care.

The only things that mattered were the bike, the guys surrounding us in a bubble of protection, and the man I had my arms wrapped around.

I wasn't sure how far we went. Not far enough as far as I was concerned.

I was too busy looking at the scenery to worry about our destination.

We pulled off the interstate and into an older section of Nashville to a strip mall with a nightclub and a couple of restaurants in a huge parking lot.

The place looked like it had been abandoned for several years.

The windows in every building other than the nightclub were dusty and grungy.

A couple had the windows broken. The nightclub looked as seedy as they came.

There seemed to be only one other car in the lot, and we were driving toward it. The closer we got, the more sickeningly familiar the vehicle became.

We rolled to a stop in front of the Cadillac SUV. Dad always had to have a new vehicle every year, so he leased. The guys revved the engines a couple times before everyone shut down.

Xavier helped me off his bike and turned me to face him. Putting his hands on my shoulders he gave me an encouraging look. "I'm sorry, but I didn't want you stressing over this. I'm here to support you while you do this. So are the rest of the guys."

"I should be mad at you, but I can't be." I smiled up at him and Xavier leaned in to kiss me.

"You got this, baby. I'll be with you the whole time."

"I'm not afraid of them, Xavier. They're not going to hurt me."

“Lots of ways of hurtin’ someone. Words are sometimes as bad as blows.”

“Matilda!” I winced as my mother called out to me from their vehicle. “Matilda, come here, please.”

I took a breath, popping my neck before putting my shoulders back. “I got this.” My muttered pep talk wasn’t much, but I wasn’t as nervous as I thought I would be. Like, maybe I’d built this up to be worse than it had to be.

As I walked between Oktober and Chains to my waiting parents, Xavier took my hand and squeezed. When I looked up at him, he winked at me and I smiled. I was so in love with this man it wasn’t even funny.

Mom’s face was a carefully composed mask of polite concern, but I could see the flicker of disgust in her eyes as she took in my companions. Dad stood ramrod straight beside the Cadillac, his fingers drumming impatiently against the door.

“What on earth are you wearing?” Mom hissed as I approached, eyeing my leather vest.

“Oh, you haven’t gotten to the good part of my outfit yet.” I smiled and turned around where Xavier’s property patch was prominently displayed. When I faced her again, I kept my smile firmly in place as I made introductions. “This is Xavier. These are my parents, Richard and Eleanor Dyson.”

Xavier nodded once, his hand still firmly clasped in mine. “Ma’am. Sir.”

Dad’s gaze swept over Xavier, taking in his tattooed neck, his cut, his entire presence, before dismissing him entirely. “We’ve been trying to reach you for weeks, Matilda. You shouldn’t worry your mother.”

“Wait a minute.” My mother’s eyes had grown wide, and her mouth was now open in a silent “O” of shock.

“Oh. My. God! That’s the man who killed poor Paul!

Richard! Push the OnStar button! Call 911!

” My mother was actually fanning herself.

I’d have felt sorry for her except I knew she wasn’t outraged on my behalf.

She was angry at Xavier for taking away her ticket to a life of luxury.

That’s all my parents ever cared about in life. Money.

“We weren’t notified you were out of prison.

” My father was still behind the driver’s-side door.

I had no doubt he’d already called the police, and I had the urge to leave.

No one had done anything, but a group of ex-cons intimidating an older rich couple wouldn’t work out well for anyone in my party.

“Why would you be?” I asked, trying to get control of the situation before it spiraled.

“You weren’t related to him or Paul.”

“Paul was like a son to us.” My mother dabbed at her eyes. “And this... this... animal took him away from us!”

“This animal picked me up on the side of the road in the middle of the worst storm

I'd ever seen.

I was covered from head to toe in bruises, my clothes ripped and bloodstained.

He didn't ask questions, he simply offered me a ride.

When he finally coaxed me into confiding in him, he made it so Paul would never hurt me again.

"Memories swamped me. Reliving my nightmare was almost more painful than going through it the first time.

I had a visceral reaction to the trauma, breaking out in a sweat.

I had to fight to keep my knees from buckling, but I stayed on my feet.

"You scoffed at me. Told me to quit being a drama queen."

"Matilda, really," Mom huffed, crossing her arms. "Paul was under a lot of stress with his company merger. You were always so sensitive, needing all his attention."

Xavier's hand tightened around mine, but he remained silent, letting me fight my own battle. I appreciated that more than he could know.

"I called you from the emergency room with three broken ribs and a fractured cheekbone," I said, my voice flat. "You hung up on me and told Dad I was causing trouble and that if I didn't stop, Paul was sure to divorce me and that would mean you'd be cut off from the monthly allowance he gave you."

My father cleared his throat, glancing around the parking lot as if searching for witnesses. "We should discuss this in private, Matilda. Not in front of... these

people.”

“These people,” I said, gesturing to the bikers surrounding us, “are my family. The only real family I’ve ever had.”

“This is outrageous,” my father muttered. “Get in the car, Matilda. We’ll talk about everything when we get home.”

I decided to change tactics because I was so done with this. “So, you’ve been trying to get hold of me for weeks.” I held my arms out to the side. “Well? Here I am. What’s going on?”

“When we get home, Matilda.” My mother’s face was a mask of disapproval I’d grown very familiar with over my lifetime.

I shrugged. “Suit yourself.” I turned to go, knowing Xavier would follow me.

“Wait!” Mother called out to me, actually grabbing my arm to prevent me from leaving. “Come home with us.”

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“Sorry. Not where I want to be. Either talk or I’m leaving. It’s that simple.”

“Fine,” my mother bit out between clenched teeth, her anger showing when I’d bet everything I owned she didn’t intend to wear her emotions so close to the surface. “I heard you’re a famous writer. I wanted to congratulate you.”

“I’m not famous.” Much as I wanted my parents to acknowledge my abilities and talents, I also didn’t want to hear the next phase of the conversation. Because this was the part where they asked me for money.

“That’s not what Beulah told me. She said you won an award or something.”

“No awards.”

“She said you wrote a bestseller.” My mother actually smiled at me and made a little effort to look impressed -- when I knew how she felt about my chosen genre!

“I’ve had some luck.”

“You must do well for yourself. I heard you bought a place, though I thought it was in Indiana.”

“It is.” This was painful in more ways than one. I wasn’t leading them into what they were truly getting at, and my mother was trying every way in the world to force me into asking her what she wanted. Nope. I might not have been in control of my life all the time, but I was in control now.

When the silence stretched on, my father was the one to finally break character. “Oh, for heaven’s sake,” he snapped. “We need the rest of the money you got from Paul’s estate. Since you’re a huge success, you don’t need that money.”

“I’m sorry, but you guys got everything. All I had was some cash I’d managed to get out of my bank accounts before you had them all frozen. Including my personal account.” I wanted to be mad, but really what was the point? They weren’t going to change. I couldn’t live with them any longer.

“That was payment for you living with us after Paul was murdered. That way you didn’t have to work while you were dealing with the murder and then the trial.” She glanced at Xavier and shuddered in disgust. “I’ll never understand why you took this beast’s side over a good man like Paul St. Martin.”

I hit my limit. “Mother. Father. I’m really sorry you made this trip for nothing, but I can’t help you. Please be careful on your way home. Do not call me again.”

Maybe I should feel ashamed to have been mean to my parents.

I wasn’t a fan of speaking to my elders like I had, but I’d toned it down considerably from what I wanted to say.

Instead, I snagged my helmet where I’d set it down and shoved it on my head.

I didn’t wait for Xavier, simply climbed on the bike and waited for him to follow.

My parents called out to me several times, but I ignored them. When our little convoy started back down the interstate, I felt like I was leaving a huge albatross behind me in our wake.

I knew life wouldn’t automatically be perfect, though I thought it was pretty damned perfect at the moment, but I now had people who cared about me.

Their love was genuine and not dependent on something I could do for them.

And the most amazing love of the bunch was the love I got from Xavier.

Time would tell how strong our connection was, but I knew what we had was real.

Because I'd experienced fake. What we had together was the real thing. And it shone brightly.

When we got home, Xavier snagged my hand and hurried with me to our apartment. The second the door was shut he was kissing me. I sighed and surrendered to him.

His hands moved urgently across my body as he stripped away my clothes with practiced ease. My fingers fumbled with his belt, desperate to feel his skin against mine. We stumbled toward the bedroom, leaving a trail of discarded clothing in our wake.

"You were amazing today," Xavier murmured against my neck, his beard creating delicious friction against my sensitive skin. "So fucking proud of you."

I gasped as he lifted me, my legs automatically wrapping around his waist. "I couldn't have done it without you there."

"Yes, you could've," he growled, pressing me against the wall.

"You might not have been able to when I first met you. That Tillie was beaten down, but she was still in the fight. Then you healed. Inside and out." He kissed me hard then, swept his tongue inside my mouth in a show of dominance.

"You're strong and resilient, but none of that matters now because I'm with you now. I'll always protect you."

His mouth captured mine again in a hungry kiss that left me breathless.

His cock was hard against my belly, ready and wanting.

When he tucked his cock against my entrance, I tensed, the anticipation sweet even though I was impatient.

He entered me with one powerful thrust and I cried out, my head falling back against the wall.

“Fuck, Tillie,” he groaned, his hands gripping my thighs as he held me in place. “Need you so much. Never fuckin’ get enough.”

Every thrust drove me higher, the intensity of his possession matching the emotional high of finally standing up to my parents. I clutched at his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin as pleasure built inside me in a delicious rush.

“Xave!” His name escaped my lips as a desperate cry, my body trembling on the edge of release. Every thrust pushed me higher, the pressure building until I could barely breathe.

“That’s it, baby,” he growled, his rhythm never faltering. “Come for me. Let me feel you squeezin’ my cock.”

My clit found the friction I needed against his abdomen, the perfect amount of pressure, and I shattered. My orgasm crashed through me in waves of pleasure so intense I saw stars. I clung to him, my pussy convulsing around his cock as I screamed his name.

Xavier’s thrusts became more urgent, his breathing ragged against my neck. “Fuck, Tillie... fuck... mine,” he panted, his hands gripping my ass hard enough to bruise as he drove into me.

With a final, powerful thrust, he buried himself deep and came with a guttural roar that reverberated through his chest. I felt the hot pulse of him inside me, claiming me in the most primal way.

For several long moments, we stayed locked together against the wall, our breathing slowly returning to normal. Xavier's forehead rested against mine, his eyes closed as we savored the moment together.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered, gently carrying me to our bed. He laid me down with surprising tenderness for a man who had just taken me so thoroughly against the wall.

As we curled together, my head on his chest, I felt a peace I'd only ever found in this man's arms. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my ear was the most comforting sound in the world.

"I love you, Xavier," I murmured, tracing one of his tattoos with my fingertip.

"Love you more, Tillie Girl." His hand stroked my hair, his touch gentle and possessive at the same time. "Always love you."

We lay in comfortable silence for several minutes, our bodies cooling as the afternoon breeze wafted through the open windows. Outside, I could hear the distant rumble of motorcycles, the occasional burst of laughter from the compound. Sounds that had become home to me.

"You know what's funny?" I said, propping myself up on one elbow to look at him.

"What's that?" His eyes were soft as they met mine, his expression unguarded in a way I only ever saw when we were alone.

"A year ago, if someone had told me I'd be here in this place with you, and that it

would be the happiest I'd ever been in my life, I'd have called them a Goddamned liar."

Xavier's laugh rumbled through his chest. "And I'd have agreed with you. But sometimes the best stories have the most unexpected endings."

I traced the tattoo over his heart -- the one he'd gotten last week with my name intertwined with his in an intricate design. "Not an ending," I corrected him. "A beginning."

A beginning. I had a feeling this time I'd get the life I'd always wanted. Hell, I had it already.