

A man with a full beard and long hair, wearing a black leather vest over a dark shirt. He has extensive tattoos on his arms and chest, including a large skull on his chest. He is resting his chin on his fist, looking intensely at the camera. The background is dark with some light speckles.

Convict

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
A. ZAVARELLI

Convict

SIN CITY SALVATION #2

A. ZAVARELLI

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In loving memory of Kristina Lindsey.
Every strong female I write will be for you.
Rest in peace, my beautiful friend.

;

Playlist

The Wicked—Blues Saraceno
Wonderwall—Ex Makina
Nightmare—Halsey
Everything I Need—Skylar Grey
Somebody's Watching Me—Hidden Citizens
Crazy in Love—Sofia Karlberg
Gasoline—Halsey
Put Your Lights On—Santana, Everlast
Blown Away—Carrie Underwood
Devil in Me—Halsey
Sweet but Psycho—Ava Max
House on a Hill—The Pretty Reckless
Tomorrow Never Came—Lana Del Ray
David—Noah Gunderson
The Devil's Gonna Keep Me—Oyinda
Butterflies—Kacey Musgraves
Hostage—Billie Eilish
Written in the Stars—The Girl and the Dreamcatcher
Dogs of War—Blues Saraceno
Kill for You—Skylar Grey, Eminem
Bumper Cars—Alex & Sierra
Liar's Blues—Daniel Spaleniak
Renegade Runaway—Carrie Underwood
Addicted to Love—Skylar Grey
Young and Beautiful—Lana Del Ray
I Don't Mind if You Don't Mind—Ron Pope
Stand by Me—Skylar Grey
Human—Rag 'n' Bone Man
The River—Blues Saraceno

Clear Blue Sky—Skylar Grey
Sledgehammer—Fifth Harmony

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Prologue

Birdie

AS THE SUN SANK OVER the Las Vegas strip, hues of orange and gold danced across every shiny, reflective surface that protruded into the sky. It was a balmy Nevada summer, and the desert heat electrified the blood in my veins as my tires screeched over the asphalt at breakneck speed.

Lana Del Ray blasted from the speakers in my flaming red Audi TTS while the breeze stirred blond strands of hair around my shoulders. Lights flashed in my vision. Horns blared. I sang along to the vocals, my fingers tapping the steering wheel in time to the music.

I loved this city. The constant on switch. The obnoxious noise. It was sensory overload twenty-four seven, and you could never feel alone in a place like this. Las Vegas was a melting pot of lost souls. A giant dust bowl overflowing with outcasts and outliers. I'd never felt like I belonged anywhere more than I belonged here, yet it was slipping from my grasp with the turbulent uncertainties of every passing day. Bittersweet memories evaporated into the atmosphere as I accepted that familiarity was no longer my safe place.

Regardless of the dismal forecast of my future, there wasn't time to consider all the ways my life could implode. Skidding to a halt in front of the valet stand at the Venetian, I checked my lipstick in the mirror and snatched my spiked Valentino clutch from the passenger seat. The valet rushed to open my door; his boyish face weighted with desperation to please me. I thanked him as he handed me a claim ticket. That should have been the end of our interaction, but it never was. Instead of jumping into the car and zooming off to a designated parking space, he lingered as his eyes

wandered over me. A volcano of acid erupted in my gut, the typical response I had when men eye-fucked me. But I held myself together with a plastic smile and a robot heart.

It really wasn't his fault. I'd intentionally chosen the mini wrap dress with the design of bringing men to their knees. The black spandex fabric painted every curve it touched, leaving a small gap at the thigh where the asymmetrical hem naturally drew the eye. Blessed with good genes, my long legs were one of my best features, and I displayed them often when I was prowling casinos. But the baby-faced valet was not my intended target audience.

I offered him a crisp twenty for his trouble and left him standing there slack-jawed as I walked away. My black Louis Vuitton pumps clapped over the cobblestone as another patron rushed to open the door for me, despite the fact there was a dedicated employee to do just that. He winked at me, and I dipped my head in appreciation as I ducked inside.

As I sucked in a lungful of recycled casino air, my pulse thrummed with nervous energy. My body always came alive before a con. Though it had been born out of necessity, the adrenaline rush that followed every job was a stark reminder I still lived and breathed. I wasn't just an empty bag of bones, tainted by the tragedy rotting me from the inside out.

"B!" A wispy frame darted out in front of me, the familiar face greeting me with a mischievous smile.

I halted and inventoried Trouble's raggedy appearance. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm bored." She shrugged. "I used that tracking thing on my phone to see where you were. I had a feeling it would be the Venetian today."

Despite the constant pressure churning in my mind, a smile tugged at my lips. Trouble often cited the dangers of my cons as justification for her clingy behavior. I acted like it was an annoyance, but secretly, it was a relief someone else was looking out for me.

Many months ago, on a particularly slow night, I found the homeless girl wandering aimlessly through the casino. She was a hot mess. Too thin. Hair in desperate need of a brush. Her clothes were at least two sizes too big, and her face was smudged with dirt. She'd stopped me in my tracks. I thought she looked familiar, but in retrospect, I knew it was simply that she felt familiar. In another time and place, that lost girl was me—when life was harder, and I didn't have a closet full of pretty things. I didn't know her, but

I felt protective of her. She ate like a Viking at a medieval banquet when I treated her to a meal, and my conscience couldn't let it rest. I secured her a hotel room for the night, and the next day, I brought her clothes from the closet I shared with my sister. Pretty soon, I had her set up in a studio apartment with a cell phone and a refrigerator full of food. Now she followed me around like a puppy every chance she got, but I didn't mind. She was the only real friend I'd ever had.

"Where are the clothes I gave you?" My eye twitched at the potato sack she called a T-shirt and the paint-splattered jeans hanging from her hips. It was a fight with this girl every day to wear something decent.

Her eyes rolled toward the ceiling as she patted the nylon eyesore hanging from her shoulder. "I have some in my backpack."

I ushered her along toward the bathroom. "Then you should put them on. This is a nice hotel."

"Fine," she huffed. "What's on the agenda for tonight, anyway?"

"I can't stay long," I told her. "I'm meeting Gypsy for dinner."

She nodded in understanding. If there was one person I dropped everything for, it was my sister. Through thick and thin, we were always there for each other. She'd practically raised me. I looked up at her. I admired her. And the only reason I knew I was capable of loving anyone in this world was because I loved her fiercely.

"I'll be out in just a minute." Trouble glanced over her shoulder before she disappeared into the restroom.

I stood by the entryway and scanned the casino floor. To my disappointment, it was a dead afternoon, and there weren't a lot of patrons to choose from. A few businessmen caught my eye, but I wasn't feeling it. Then I thought of Gypsy and the past she didn't know had come crawling out of the messy grave we left behind.

For years, she'd sacrificed herself to protect me. Now it was my turn. Come hell or high water, I had to have a wire transfer on its way to California by the end of the day. Not feeling it wasn't an option. There couldn't be an off day or even a bad day. I needed to score a lot of cash, and I needed to do it fast.

I scanned over the options again. *Too old. Too drunk. Too scary looking.* The choices were few and far between. Twisting the band on my right hand, I examined the huge blue sapphire ring I'd scored last week. It was flashy and extravagant, and I hoped it wouldn't be an issue to offload it. But I

doubted the man I took it from had even reported it stolen. That was the name of the game. What happened in Vegas usually stayed in Vegas.

Trouble reappeared in one of my old blouses and a pair of white shorts, making a production of her transformation by jutting her hip out like a model. “Better?”

“Much,” I agreed. “Are you hungry? You want to grab a bite while I go do my business?”

She bit her cherry red lip and pouted. At twenty-two, Trouble was a few years older than me, but she didn’t act like it. The youthful innocence surrounding her felt foreign to me because it had been ripped away from me before I even sprouted breasts.

“Can’t I come with you?” she begged.

My temples throbbed as I prepared to have this argument for the ten millionth time. Trouble didn’t know all the particulars of my cons or my reasons for pulling them in the first place. I didn’t want her involved, and the last thing I needed was to worry about her safety too.

“I’m not going to change my mind. I don’t want you doing this shit.”

“Yet it’s good enough for you,” she shot back.

“I have experience. And it doesn’t matter what I do. You should want better for yourself.” *God, I sounded like my sister.*

“Fine.” She crossed her arms. “Whatever. Are you taking the Palazzo side?”

I nodded, checking to make sure my phone was turned on before I forked over some cash. “Go get some gelato and play a few machines. Text me if anything comes up.”

“I will.” She muttered her assurance while making a beeline straight for one of the table games.

I turned on my heel and began plotting. I only had an hour before I was supposed to meet Gypsy at Sinatra. That wasn’t a lot of time, but I’d make it work. I had no choice. Following the signs for the Palazzo side of the building, I scoped out any potential targets along the way. A few contenders were noticed within minutes, but again, I wasn’t feeling it.

I didn’t know what was wrong with me, but something just felt off. This game had depleted me, and I needed to find a way off this treadmill. Every time I raised the cash, my extortionist stretched the mythical finish line. I couldn’t win. Not really. I had to tamp down the crushing feeling that everything was about to implode if I didn’t get a handle on it soon.

Just when I was starting to sink into another tar pit of despair, a gentleman caught my attention. Or rather, I caught his. He was sitting at an empty table, mindlessly thumbing through his phone before his gaze locked onto mine. After a quick perusal, I had a feeling I'd seen him somewhere before. But the lack of recognition reflected at me determined he was just another body in a suit. It wasn't even a particularly nice one. Definitely not tailored. This was an off the rack kind of guy all the way. There wasn't a remarkable thing about him from what I could tell, and he probably didn't have millions sitting in an offshore bank account. But I was short on time, so for tonight, he would do.

"Waiting for a game to start?" I nodded to the table as I approached.

He leaned back to examine me, a pleasant satisfaction in his features. "Not that I'm aware of."

"Just keeping the chair warm then?" I offered him my best smile. The smile that led men to believe they were the best thing to ever cross my path.

"More like waiting for you," he said smoothly.

My smile faltered for a second as his eyes flashed with hunger. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something about this guy felt vaguely familiar. It wasn't just the suit. It was his energy, his voice. They pulled me back to another time and place, past the locked gates of my memory where everything was blurry and distorted. It wasn't the first time this had happened, and I doubted it would be the last. Bits and pieces of all the men I'd known before would often appear as traits in perfect strangers. I had to remind myself I was in the present. I didn't know this man, and he didn't know me. And right now, a clock counted down the seconds on the due date of my monthly installment.

Acrid bitterness coated my tongue as I forced my next words out. "Perhaps you'd like to wait for me somewhere else?"

Without missing a beat, he removed a key card from his pocket and considered me. "How much to do anything I want for the night, nothing off limits?"

His blunt words didn't surprise me, but they did make my fingers inch toward my purse. I had to repress the urge to use my Taser on him right here and now. Under the guise of pliability, my smile remained. He didn't know the only pleasure he would have tonight was an ice pack on his balls when I finished with him.

“Why don’t you tell me how much you think I’m worth,” I answered coyly.

He slid the key card across the table. It was still in the paper slip, the room number printed in black ink. “Give me ten minutes. I need to stop at the ATM.”

And just like that, the deal was done, and we went our separate ways. I debated the validity of this awful feeling brewing in my gut and forged on. My heels tapped over the polished floor as I rounded a giant art installation parked at the midpoint for both sides of the hotel. It was a colossal glaring red sign that simply read “LOVE.” My lip turned up as I passed the love-sick couples taking selfies in front of the sign. Didn’t they know love was a joke?

I stayed the course, trying to bring myself to focus. One more job, and I could send off my monthly deposit and breathe again for five minutes. But I was distracted, and when my phone chirped with a new message, my uncertainty amplified.

Trouble: Something came up, and I had to run. Message you later!

I frowned at the screen. That had to be record time because I’d barely been gone for ten minutes. My fingers whipped over the keyboard, tapping out a hasty message in reply. A message that was cut short when my body smacked into a hard surface, plunging me back into my surroundings. When I looked up, I found that the wall blocking my path was actually a man. Except man wasn’t the appropriate term. He was a tank. At least six and a half feet of unwavering steel. A curious amalgamation of hard lines and rough curves. The expansive chest resting at my eye level gave way to powerful, broad shoulders and below that, arms ravaged by ink hung like weapons at his sides. The inhumanly-sized barbarian wore faded blue jeans and a black motorcycle vest. He was out of place, and I was out of patience when I finally tilted my head up to examine his face.

For a split second, I couldn’t breathe. When his whiskey-colored eyes latched onto mine, everything else disappeared. If I didn’t believe in kismet before, it was undeniable now. Those golden eyes had haunted my dreams for years. A mythical figure I was certain my imagination had invented. Someone I didn’t even know, but whose presence I’d felt in the depths of

my unconsciousness. And now here he was in the flesh. It was too surreal to accept, and I didn't want to.

Whoever this man was, he definitely didn't fall into my target market. He was bearded. Rugged. His toffee brown hair was windswept and wild, and judging by the coppery tint of his skin, he spent a lot of time under the Nevada sun. The motorcycle boots and chain jangling from the side of his jeans alluded to one certainty. He was a biker. And in my gut, this meeting felt fated, though I couldn't figure out why.

My stomach flipped when his eyes carved a path over my body, and my reaction surprised me. It wasn't the habitual disgust I felt, and his face was absent of the lust I typically saw. This was an entirely different animal. He looked at me as if I were a nuisance. But worse yet, his unusual eyes were full of judgment as he cataloged my appearance.

"Excuse you," I snapped, attempting to sidestep him. Regardless of whether our collision was my fault, I had no intention of apologizing to him now. His arm shot out to catch me, and I glared up at him.

"You should pay attention to where you're going," he grunted.

My skin prickled under the grip of his calloused fingers. His voice was rough. Gravelly. And he stared at me as if he had a direct line into the hardwiring of my brain.

"Thanks for the tip, asshole," I muttered. "Now get your paws off me."

I tried to shrug him off, but he didn't budge. He was completely grounded, and I was rootless. Beneath the intensity of his shadowy gaze, I felt the armor I'd forged so carefully disintegrating.

"You're coming with me." The emotionless words rumbled from his chest.

Clinging to the image of fearlessness I wore like a badge, I laughed. "Is that what you think?"

His head dipped forward, the response low and gruff. "That's what I know."

I humored him with a smile, but inside, my heart rattled against its cage. He wasn't joking.

"Sorry." I tried unsuccessfully to yank away again. "But you aren't my type."

His eyes flickered with dark amusement. "Who said you were mine?"

Flames licked over my skin, singeing my delicate ego. Of course, this caveman wouldn't know designer from department store. His opinion

shouldn't matter, but for reasons I couldn't fathom, it did. It was an anomaly. Everything about this interaction was out of my wheelhouse. Men were toys. Suits with wallets. They didn't make me feel. They didn't produce physical responses in me. *But this one did.*

"What do you want?" I whisper hissed as a few heads turned our way. All those couples pouring out of the art installation probably assumed we were having a lover's spat.

His attention never wavered, and neither did his grip. "I already told you. You're coming with me."

"Like hell, I am." My nails dug into the skin of his forearm in warning. We were in a public place, and I could easily make a scene, but he seemed aware that I wouldn't. Because like it or not, the last thing I needed was to draw more attention.

He studied me, the black of his pupils melting into the amber of his irises. I released a shaky breath. We weren't getting anywhere. Clearly, this man was insane. I was preparing for further negotiations when my arm suddenly dropped back to my side, free from his grip. For a second, I stood there, stunned. And then the stranger fished a phone out of his pocket and stirred the screen to life with his thumb, flashing it at me.

My eyes moved from his face to the screen, and my heart leaped into my throat. Time seemed to slow as comprehension took root. The ammunition he'd produced so casually was an image of Gypsy in front of our apartment in Summerlin North. Her fingers were wrapped around the handle of a suitcase, and she was wearing the same yellow romper she'd had on when I picked her up at the airport this afternoon.

"What the hell is this?" Acid corroded my voice as I fought for breath. "How did you get that?"

His response was to flick his thumb across the screen, producing a cascade of images that didn't seem to end. Photos of my sister. Photos of me. At casinos. Lunch. Shopping. From the looks of it, there was months' worth of surveillance neither of us had ever noticed. A crater opened up inside my chest, threatening to swallow me whole. This was bad. It was really fucking bad.

"What do you want?" I croaked.

"Come with me," he answered without emotion.

On instinct, my eyes shot toward the exit, but it was a silly notion. There was no escape. Not if he had Gypsy. I turned my phone over in the

palm of my hand, fumbling to dial her number, but his fingers closed over mine, and he shook his head as he snatched the phone from me.

“I need to know she’s okay. I’m not going anywhere—”

“Don’t be a pain in my ass, and your sister will be just fine.”

I tried to suck in air, but it felt like I was drowning. I’d been so busy putting out the fires of our past in California that I never saw this one coming. I was exhausted and terrified, and I’d never felt so helpless. *Gypsy*. Her name was the mantra playing on repeat in my head. I couldn’t let anything happen to her.

“Where are you taking me?” I swallowed.

“Back to your apartment.”

My jaw hinged open, but I couldn’t force any words over my dry tongue.

He gestured for me to move, and I fell into line, heels jarring into the pristine floor while his hand branded my lower back. My entire body was trembling by the time we reached the exit, and for a split second, I felt his eyes on my face. I couldn’t return his gaze, but I wondered if he was sorry for whatever he was about to do.

Without hesitation, he hooked a finger under the strap of my clutch and removed it from me. Fishing around for the claim ticket, he handed it to the valet once we were on the curb and then tucked the bag inside his leather vest. Further proof this was not a random incident. He knew I was here. He knew that I’d turned over my car to the valet on arrival, and the ticket was in my bag.

My brain tried to formulate a question, but before I could, the driver returned with my car, opening the passenger door for me first. I looked at the baby-faced employee, silently pleading for help, but his eyes didn’t move from my boobs. And that was how I ended up strapped in beside my abductor without a word or a fight. He looked even larger cramped into the driver’s seat of my tiny sports car, but he handled it with ease.

I didn’t give him directions. He knew exactly where to go. All I could do was stare out the window, my legs a jittery mess against the leather seat. Just three possible scenarios had caused this chain of events to unfold, and none of them were good.

“Do you have a name?” My hands twisted together in my lap as I asked.

The bearded stranger glanced at me across the small space of my front seat, pinching his eyebrows together slightly. That small action told me he

had to think about it, and that was a good indication he was working for someone else. I knew I hadn't ever conned him, and while there was a possibility Gypsy had, he wasn't the type she usually went for either.

"You can call me Ace," he grunted.

The gulf between us fell silent and remained that way until he pulled into my designated parking space at the apartment. I glanced at the spot where Gypsy's car should be, but it was gone. It triggered a response in me that I hadn't felt since I was a girl. My sister was the only thing I had in this world. *I couldn't lose her.*

Ace got out of the car and left me to trail him up the stairs. I contemplated the possibility that he didn't even know where Gypsy was. Maybe this had all been a lie designed to lure me back to the apartment alone.

The muscles in his shoulders flexed with every step he took, thick and menacing. I considered darting in the opposite direction. There was no way I could fight him off, so once we crossed that threshold, I was at his mercy. He had my Taser and the pepper spray I carried in my purse. I had nothing. But the thought of Gypsy propelled me forward, as he knew it would.

Ace used a key on his own ring to unlock our front door, and I stared at him in disbelief as he gestured me inside.

"Who the hell are you?" I demanded.

"I'll tell you when you get your ass inside and sit down."

My eyes narrowed, and I felt the first spark of rage simmering in my gut. That wasn't a good sign of things to come. I needed to stay calm, and I needed to focus on Gypsy. If I lost control, there was no telling what would happen.

I tottered forward on unsteady heels, my legs suddenly boneless and weak. Somehow, I made it to the couch, and Ace shut the door behind him. He sat down beside me, leaving enough distance to give me hope that he wasn't a physical threat. At least not yet.

My clutch clattered onto the side table as he dragged an envelope from the pocket of his vest, forking it over to me.

"What is this?" I squeezed the paper between my fingers, noting the thickness.

He leaned back and kicked his boot up onto the opposite thigh with a quietude that cemented my suspicions that this was just a job to him. One way or the other, he didn't care. He wasn't invested in my feelings or my

humanity. He was here to perform a service for someone, and I needed to know exactly who that was.

Peeling back the metal prongs that held the seal in place, I dumped the contents of the envelope onto the coffee table. A choice I regretted once my hand moved over the photographs, spreading them apart. They were pictures of me. At clubs, casinos, hotels... pretty much anywhere I'd been over the course of the last few months. And some of them weren't pretty. There was evidence of me stealing. Still shots of me cleaning out wallets, safes, and the like. I didn't know how he'd even snapped them, but I could only conclude I must have been set up somehow. It was exactly what I'd feared, but that wasn't even the worst of it.

The worst part was the raw vulnerability I felt when I saw the naked photos of me. It was a shame deeply embedded into the very fiber of my being, and something I promised myself I would never do. My body was mine now. It belonged to me and only me. But here was the proof I couldn't deny that, in the pursuit of freedom, I had allowed my seductions to drag me into a depth of darkness I never wanted to revisit. I'd harnessed the power of a man's universal weakness and used my sexuality as a weapon. A machine of war. And even if I'd never slept with any of those men, it didn't matter. It didn't change the filth crawling over my skin when I examined the evidence of my sins.

Agony split me in half, and when I raised a trembling hand to wipe away a stray tear, Ace had the decency to look away. He wasn't taking an active role in my humiliation, but I wondered exactly how much of these he'd seen. If he'd studied them. If he thought I deserved whatever was coming to me.

"You've made your point." I shoved the contents back into the envelope, crumpling the photos at the bottom. "Now tell me where my sister is. What's it going to take to keep her safe?"

He shifted, but his eyes didn't connect with mine. It was the first sign of human emotion he'd displayed. I could feel in my gut that he didn't like this. But that didn't change whatever was about to happen.

"You've stolen a lot of money and humiliated a lot of powerful men. Your sister too—"

"I get it." My jaw clamped down so hard it felt as though my teeth might break. "Just get to the point. What's happening here?"

A sigh heaved from his chest, and Ace leaned forward, propping his elbows on his thighs as he turned to study me. “Here’s how this goes down. Give up any fight you have now because it won’t change the circumstances. You want to protect your sister, and she wants to protect you. Tonight, my friend will offer her a deal that can save you both, and she will take it.”

“What friend?” My eyes darted around the apartment, checking for other signs of life I may have missed. “And what sort of deal?”

“It’s not important.” He shook his head. “The only thing you need to know is that you’re out of options, Birdie. Your sister will take the deal, and if you want things to go smoothly, you’ll accept it too.”

He didn’t have to tell me I was out of options. For my whole fucking life, I’d been out of options. Trading one exploitation for another was all I’d ever known. Jumping from one frying pan to a different fire.

“Tell me about the deal,” I pressed, unwilling to accept that our house of cards was crumbling around us.

The vein in his neck throbbed as dark hot eyes pierced right through me. “The terms of that arrangement are between Gypsy and my friend, and all you need to know is she’ll be staying with him now. Your part of the deal is much easier. So easy, it only requires one thing from you. Leave town, and don’t come back.”

“No,” I croaked. “That will never happen. You’ll have to kill me first.”

“You’ve made your bed.” Ace spoke through gritted teeth. “Now you have to lie in it.”

Chapter 1

Ace

BIRDIE GODDAMNED BLUE. FLASHES OF her wove through my mind like spidery webs, obliterating my focus and ratcheting my frustration. I'd punched a one-way ticket for this merry-go-round since the day I'd carted her ass out of the Venetian a little over a year ago.

One simple request. That was all I'd asked of her. Leave town, and don't come back. But could she do that?

No. She never fucking did what she was told. And here we were, caught up in this game of cat and mouse all over again. Only, who was the cat and who was the mouse was still to be determined as she prowled the floor, undoubtedly seeking her next victim. She'd moved on from casinos after she'd come to understand I had eyes everywhere. Whenever I learned she was back in town, a simple text was usually enough to bring her to heel. She'd make herself scarce, and I'd watch her from a distance until she popped back up again. The girl was a fucking boomerang.

Rinse and repeat.

She only saw me when I wanted her to, but my job with her was never done. It was becoming a fucking problem. Lucian asked me to keep an eye on her, so I did. His interests rested squarely on her sister, and Birdie was not part of that equation. Once she'd learned that Gypsy had signed the deal Lucian offered, she no longer had a dog in that fight. But Birdie was still running wild, and I found myself chasing every lead I got on her like I was a goddamned fiend. She thought she'd outsmart me by changing up her scene. Casinos, clubs, they were all the same to me. Either way, she didn't belong here.

Lights strobed over the bare flesh of her shoulders, highlighting her silhouette in shades of purple and blue. Music pulsed, vibrating up through the floor and into my pounding head like an unrelenting migraine. Something about this girl managed to provoke every last nerve I had.

Tonight, she was wearing a gold slip of a dress that was far too short for my liking. It dipped low in the front, exposing the rounded curves of her braless tits. It wouldn't take much to drag that fabric aside to uncover all that soft, round flesh. Every fucker in the place was thinking about it, myself included.

With so many eyes on her, she hadn't even noticed me in the dark corner. She rarely did when I watched her this way. But I thought she could sense me. I'd catch her looking over her shoulder, her fingers brushing over her neck as though she could feel the physical caress of my eyes on her skin. Sometimes, her armor would crack, and a glimpse of her vulnerability would shine through. She was on edge. Alert, but persistent. Then a moment later, she'd snap out of it and return to the game, more intent than ever.

I didn't understand the motivation behind her desperation to repeat this cycle. At first, I'd assumed it was an addiction. What else could compel her to live in a hell where every day was the same and nothing ever changed?

On the surface, she was an enchantress, glowing with pleasure and sin. But I'd had plenty of time to pick her apart. She was exhausted. Anxious. Flighty. There had to be a reason she subjected herself to this, but it was a piece of the puzzle I had yet to figure out.

"Can I get you another drink?" The waitress intercepted my vision, and I shook my head, eager for her to move along. But she didn't. When I glanced up at her, a pair of curious eyes roamed over my face. Some chicks liked the ex-convict look I'd never bothered to rebrand. The beard prompted assumptions that I'd be more than happy to take them out back and give them a rough going-over. Or so I'd been told.

"How about something to eat?" she offered, her tongue darting out to wet her lips.

Again, I shook my head. "I'm good."

She hesitated, conjuring up another offer to throw my way, and my eyes narrowed. I'd heard more than a few times that I was a scary looking son of a bitch, and it didn't take much to destroy whatever fantasy her imagination

weaved. The waitress scurried off without another word, but by the time she disappeared, it looked like Birdie had too.

Fuck.

I scanned the sea of pulsing bodies, my head pounding as the noise drilled into my temples like a fucking jackhammer. I hated these places. I hated every loud, throbbing beat of the music. Every drunken, glazed stare tossed my way as I pushed through the crowd. The gold dress wasn't anywhere in sight, and that left only one conclusion. I'd find her in the alley.

Warm air hit my face as I stepped outside and turned the corner. It didn't take long to find the little criminal. Her honeyed voice drifted through the shadows as she demanded the poor fool's wallet.

The guy was obviously from out of town. Rich trust fund kid with his pants down around his ankles and a dick that sagged under the realization he'd been played. But it still burned me. Had she kissed him? Touched him?

History told me otherwise. She'd never let them touch her before. She'd never let it get that far. But maybe that was only in my head.

"The watch too." Birdie nodded to his wrist as she emptied the wallet and stuffed the cash into her bag.

The kid hesitated. "But it was my father's."

She paused, and it was moments like these that I knew she wasn't truly lost. "Fine, keep the watch. What else do you have?"

"My cuff links," he offered, eyeing the Taser in her hand. "They're gold."

She extracted them and waved her weapon of choice. "Don't follow me."

He nodded, and she turned on her heel at the same time I ducked around the corner. As much as I'd like to stick around and smack the shit out of her ass for being so reckless, she didn't need to know I was ever there.

Back at the compound, I smoked a blunt and downed a shot of whiskey before bed. I still felt restless. It had been a long fucking day, and I had a lot of pent-up tension.

Stripping off my clothes, I stood in the middle of my bathroom, the cool familiarity of a pocketknife against my palm. Old urges resurfaced as I twisted the handle between my fingers, recalling the day's events. I closed my eyes, and the ghosts of my past weren't far behind.

It's your fault she's dead, boy. You good for nothin' piece of shit. You killed her. Satan birthed you from the fiery pits of hell before he delivered you from that womb. We have to pay for our sins in this life, and the only way to save your soul is to bleed the devil out of your veins.

The tip of my blade pressed against the raised flesh on my chest, but I hesitated. A year ago, it would have twisted and snarled through the scar tissue until a river of red leaked down my torso and dripped onto the bathroom tile. I tossed the knife aside and glanced at my reflection in the mirror. Every letter carved into my chest had been retraced since Ed branded me. But there was no satisfaction in that pain anymore.

Something had shifted in me when I first saw Birdie. Somehow, over time, she'd become my new addiction. Stalking her, picking her apart... these were the only things that ever felt better than my own destructive urges. She made my head a war zone of emotions. I didn't like to feel, but she made me feel. Obsession, resentment, frustration. I just wanted to stay numb. Empty. Balanced.

I debated on a shower, but instead, I found myself opening up the bathroom drawer to retrieve my favorite pair of Birdie's panties. I wrapped the black lace around my dick and leaned against the counter. Sucking in a breath, I closed my eyes and tried not to think of anyone or anything. I needed to clear the scattered thoughts in my mind and find a release. But all I saw was her.

Threads of a different fabrication spun through my mind. Her warm body arched against the cool brick in the alleyway, the hem of her dress wrapped around her hips. The honeyed skin of her thighs parted, luring me to the heaven between them. I wedged my hips into that space, drugging myself on her hypnotic sweetness. My thumb slipped beneath the silky fabric that curved against her breasts, drawing each piece aside until she was exposed to me. I wanted to drag her soft, full tits over my face and into my mouth. I wanted to feel them bouncing beneath her as I thrust into her like a savage. I pinched her nipple, and she yelped. She never fucking listened. I told her as much when my palm echoed off the arc of her ass. But even in my dreams, Birdie fucked my mind. Her lips curled into one of her sex-kitten smiles as she tilted her head, exposing the eyes that would inevitably bring me to my knees. She was proud of herself for getting to me this way. My palm slipped between her thighs, desperate for confirmation

that I wasn't the only one infected with this insanity. Sticky warmth coated my fingers. Everything I wanted and nothing I needed.

Fuck.

Pressure expanded inside my fist, the muscles along my spine rigid with tension. It was wrong, but I gripped harder, faster, fisting my cock as I imagined her pussy wrapped around me, milking the poison from my body and greedily accepting it in hers.

The release was explosive, spurting all over her panties and my knuckles as I collapsed against the counter. Exhaustion and disgust settled into my bones as I came back down to reality. How many times had I told myself I wasn't going to do that again? I wasn't going to think of her. She was too pure for a devil like me. I would corrupt her. Taint her. Ruin her. Depravity was the only way to describe this fixation.

She could never be mine.

⋮

Chapter 2

Ace

“HEY, STRANGER.” A FEMININE VOICE filtered across the shop floor.

I poked my head out from the engine I’d been working on for the past week, my lips pinching together when I found Kylie standing there. “What are you doing here?”

For a split second, she looked wounded by my words, but she recovered quickly. Kylie knew I had an unspoken rule about my shop. Everyone in my life understood that. I had a system, and everything had its place. Even the guys who worked for me knew better than to touch my shit or step foot on my side of the shop. When I came here, it was to work, not socialize, and I’d never brought a woman here just to hang out on the sidelines. But I wasn’t about to remind Kylie of that because I already felt like an asshole every time I’d seen her lately. This time was no exception. What I couldn’t figure out was why she continued to hang around.

Our agreement was as simple as it could get, and Kylie knew the score. I wasn’t capable of emotional shit, and she knew from the beginning exactly what I needed from her. We’d stayed in that lane for a couple of years now, and I’d paid her well for her time. But things had been stagnant for a while now, and I assumed that was the reason for her visit today.

“I haven’t seen you in weeks.” She nudged the tire of the truck with her sneaker. “I just wanted to make sure everything was okay with you.”

I yanked the grease rag from my back pocket and wiped off my hands. “I’m good.”

Kylie didn’t buy the bullshit I was selling, and I couldn’t blame her. I didn’t know what the fuck was wrong with me lately, but I’d been a cranky

son of a bitch. I hadn't called her recently because the last few times we'd met, I'd recognized the war in her eyes. She wanted to fix me, and she'd held out hope that if she just kept doing what I asked, I'd eventually have some sort of mythical breakthrough. It would disappoint her to know that day would never come.

She glanced around the shop, noting it was empty, and then her voice lowered. "Have you been doling it out yourself, Ace?"

When I didn't answer, she stepped closer. Her entire face had shifted into one that I recognized. She was a different person now than when she first walked through the door.

"Do you want some pain?" Her voice dipped an octave.

On autopilot, I nodded, even if it wasn't what I needed. The pain hadn't been providing the relief it used to. I had a different fix in mind now, and it involved blue eyes and long tan legs. Regardless, I was too numb to turn it down. I couldn't watch Birdie every second of every day, and for now, maybe this would temper some of my frustration.

Without making a production of it, Kylie drew back her palm and slapped me across the face as hard as she could. Once, twice, three times... but I felt nothing.

"Take off your shirt," she instructed. "And give me your belt."

Robotically, I removed my shirt and belt, and handed them to her before I turned around, bracing myself against one of the shop trucks. Over the past two years, she'd never refused my escalating levels of depravity. I'd been burned, cut, whipped, and throttled in every way a man could request. My only limit was that I would never kneel. Not for her. Not for anyone.

The belt snapped across my back, searing the skin and bringing memories back to life. I closed my eyes and accepted the pain unflinchingly.

Get down on your knees and beg for forgiveness, demon. Kneel into the fiery coals of hell while you accept the lashes of righteousness against your flesh. Feed the soil the poison in your blood and let it soak into the earth. Prove you have a soul to save.

Kylie counted out the lashes, just as I'd instructed her to do in the beginning. I wanted blood. Proof of life. And she gave it to me in rivers down my back. But when she finished, I could see the shame in her eyes.

She was tired of this, and I didn't blame her. It was sadistic. Something most people could never understand. Lucian tried to explain that to me

when I left prison a free man, but it didn't change the fact that pain was all I'd ever known.

Kylie cleaned up my wounds with a first-aid kit and handed back my shirt. Her mood was somber in contrast to the disposition she'd arrived in. Time was up, and she knew it.

"Will you be at the clubhouse this weekend?" she asked.

I considered the question before my phone buzzed, distracting me. A glance at the screen confirmed it was Gypsy. Over the past year, Birdie's sister had become a fixture in Lucian's life and mine by default. I opened the message, my jaw working as I read her text.

Gypsy: I need to talk to you about Birdie.

"Ace?"

I blinked and looked up, irritated with myself. I'd completely forgotten Kylie was still here. I was officially an asshole.

"Sorry," I muttered, shoving the phone back into my pocket.

"I asked if you were going to be around the clubhouse this weekend," she reminded me.

"Right." I shifted. "Yeah, I'll be there."

She hesitated, waiting for me to say something else. When I didn't, she took it upon herself. "I could drop by to check your wounds. I'm off this weekend."

I was on the verge of asking her if that was such a good idea, but instead, I just shrugged. "If you want to."

She smiled and shook her head at my boorish attitude. "Don't sound so excited, Ace. You're liable to give a girl a complex."

My lips tightened, and I nodded. "You know you don't have to keep coming around and checking up on me—"

"I know what this is," she interjected. "And I know what it isn't. I'm happy with the status quo, Ace. As long as you are too."

I nodded, but honestly, I wasn't sure anymore. Kylie was a beautiful woman who had her shit together—a good job, a house, and a well-adjusted mental state. She never asked me for anything, but lately, I'd been wondering if she wanted more. She always showed up to this one-sided clusterfuck, never complaining that I couldn't give her anything in return. I didn't have the emotional capacity for a relationship, and this was as close

as it could ever get for me. She knew it, but I didn't know if she'd accepted it. Kylie deserved to spend her time with someone who could give her everything she wanted. Someone who would go meet her folks and watch movies with her and go out to dinner or whatever the fuck it was normal people did together.

"All right." She shrugged. "Well, I guess I should probably go and let you get back to work."

"Okay."

She hesitated, and I didn't know why, but she smiled. "See you this weekend, Ace."



Gypsy sank onto the couch in the house she shared with Lucian, her face heavy with exhaustion. It didn't seem like that long had passed since she'd accepted the terms of Lucian's deal, but a year had already come and gone. She'd fallen into compliance, and then she'd fallen for Lucian. I'd watched them together, mystified by the transformation that had taken place between them. It wasn't something I could relate to or understand, but it was proof that through all the shit life could throw at a person, good things did happen sometimes.

Now Gypsy was heavily pregnant, struggling to fight off tears as she looked up at me through bleary eyes. When she requested to speak with me about her sister, I had a notion this was coming. Birdie would never admit or accept that she wasn't safe here. And while Lucian was busy holding on to everything by a thread, Gypsy was preparing to be a mother. That only left one solution, and it was the one I'd been trying my best to avoid.

"I don't know you all that well," Gypsy began. "But I feel like, after everything, I can trust you, and I really hope that's true."

"As long as you're Lucian's wife, you have my loyalty."

Those words weren't uttered lightly. I was nothing more than a voiceless man when he found me rotting away in a prison cell. I'd resigned myself to the fact that I would spend my life behind bars, caged like a beast. It was the only way I knew before he came along, talking about truth and

justice. He'd read about my case and claimed he wanted to help me. I didn't trust him at first. I didn't want to believe there was any other life for me. But that crazy attorney saw something in me nobody else could. And he kept coming back, talking to me, treating me like a human, until he cracked me wide open and rattled my secrets free. He paved the way to freedom and showed me what life could be. I owed him everything, and when it came down to it, there wasn't anything I wouldn't do for him.

Gypsy looked up at me, and her entire body trembled under the burden of her emotions. Whatever she was about to say, she hated herself for it. But it was unjustified. During the time I'd known her, I'd come to understand that Gypsy was fiercely protective of the people she loved. And more than anything, that included her younger sister, Birdie. She'd go to war for her. And in fact, she had signed away her life for her. But she was fucking tired, and it had never been more obvious than at this moment. She'd had the weight of the world on her shoulders for far too long. Trying to raise a rebellious wild child like Birdie when Gypsy wasn't even grown herself. They'd been treading water together for a long time, but Gypsy was drowning.

"I've tried to think of other options." She wiped at the corner of her eyes. "I tried to talk to her myself. She doesn't listen. She's reckless, and she puts herself at risk. She still refuses to leave even though it's the best thing for her."

"Leaving won't solve her problems. Birdie still has a lot of growing up to do."

"I know." She dipped her head forward in defeat.

I walked over to the window, my head throbbing with the reality of what needed to happen. Gypsy couldn't come right out and say it, and I wouldn't make her. I knew what I was doing when I came here. I knew exactly how this situation would unfold, and like a fool, I came anyway.

"I can take care of her," I said. "Keep her safe. She probably won't like it."

Gypsy's voice wavered when she answered. "Can you give me your word that you'll never hurt her?"

Every muscle fiber in my body pinched tighter. She couldn't have known how those words would affect me. My whole life, people had made assumptions about me, and I learned a long time ago to disregard their opinions. But the thought of anyone hurting Birdie was different. It

darkened my vision and turned me into a savage. For months, I'd been watching her. Compulsively examining every aspect of her life, I'd searched for threats around every corner. But every time I fed this sickness inside me, I wondered if it was really me she needed protection from.

"I'm not a good man, Gypsy." I sighed. "I have a low tolerance for spoiled brats—"

"She isn't—"

My eyes narrowed. "She is. And I get it. She had a rough fucking go of it, but you've been trying to overcompensate for everything that ever happened to her, and that isn't working anymore, is it?"

Gypsy leaned forward like a mama bear ready to protect her cub. "It's easy for you to say, but we did the best we could."

"And if that hasn't worked out by now, maybe it's time for a new approach."

We stared at each other in a silent war of wills. I was tempted to walk out and wash my hands of the whole situation, but I couldn't. From the moment I first saw Birdie, she was a tragedy I couldn't avoid. She needed guidance. Direction. A firm hand. And I wasn't up to the job, but I wasn't ready to relinquish it to anyone else either.

"She can live at the compound with me," I grunted. "But if you want me to do this, that means you have to let me take the wheel here. I can't have you trying to interfere every time she calls crying about a rule she doesn't like."

"I get that," Gypsy conceded. "I wouldn't do that. Birdie needs structure. She needs rules."

"She needs a hell of a lot more than that," I murmured.

"You can't let any of the men at the compound touch her," she blurted. "I mean it."

"That's not going to fucking happen," I snarled and then shook my head. The viciousness of my assurance surprised me, but Gypsy seemed pleased with my response.

"Can you have your guys keep an eye on her for a few more days?" she requested. "Just until the baby is born. And then..." Her head dipped, and her eyes began to water. "Then you can take her."

Chapter 3

Birdie

“THIS IS IT, JOE.” I threw the paper bag full of cash onto the motel table. “I’m out.”

He draped his scrawny frame back against the chair, narrowing his dark eyes as he looked over me. I’d witnessed that same lusty gaze many times before, but it was all for show. I knew from firsthand experience he preferred girls in a much younger demographic.

Not only had this sick bastard participated in destroying my childhood, but he’d also come back to haunt me after a chance encounter in a casino. Over the past year, he’d bled me out of well over a hundred thousand, and if I didn’t put a stop to it now, it was never going to end.

“You’re out when I say you’re out.” He sniffed the way coke addicts often did. “You’ve got a lot of balls coming in here and trying to tell me—”

“There’s a detective in Vegas.” I met his eyes dead on as I played the only card I had. “He’s been asking a lot of questions about me. About Ricky. I’m out of fucking time, and I can’t keep doing this unless you want me to lead him straight back to you.”

Joe scratched at his nose as he seemed to consider my words. His pupils were nearly black, and his leg bounced up and down so fast it was giving me heart palpitations. I didn’t know what to expect. This threat could work in my favor if he was smart, but it wasn’t likely.

Without warning, he shot up and wrapped his fingers around my throat. “Are you fucking with me, bitch?”

“I’m not.” I clawed at his hand, digging my nails into the dirty flesh. “Get off me.”

His grip was unyielding, and he didn't relent even after I drew blood. "Maybe I should go ask your sister, huh?"

"You could try." My voice filled with venom. "But her husband would shoot you dead before you ever opened your mouth."

He shoved me away, and I stumbled backward, clutching at my tender throat. Joe paced the floor, dragging a hand through his greasy hair. He didn't like what I'd come to tell him, and I already knew if I wasn't scoring him cash, I was no longer of use. But I didn't come here to beg. I'd already made contingency plans. The private investigator I hired in California had provided some rather telling evidence of Joe's current business dealings. Enough for a couple of felonies, at least. I just hoped it would be enough to motivate him.

"I need the video and the pictures," I said. "I've given you the money. I've done what you asked."

"And you'll keep doing what I fucking ask," he turned and spat. "You get the tape when I say you've paid your dues and not a second sooner. In the meantime, I have plenty of other ways to put you to work. With a body like that, I could charge a nice premium."

"It's not going to happen," I snarled. "You think what happened to Ricky was bad? I'll do you worse than I ever did him."

He came at me again, slamming me into the wall and cutting off my air supply with his forearm. I dug my nails into his skin, but his grip was undoubtedly homicidal this time.

"How about I just fucking kill you right here and be done with it?"

I didn't doubt he was capable of it. I'd planned for it, but I wasn't prepared for his superhuman strength. The darkness in his eyes proved there was no reasoning with the devil. He was my worst nightmare, reincarnated.

"Get off me, motherfucker," I rasped as I fought him, kicking and clawing with every ounce of strength I could muster. He wasn't relenting, and I'd run out of options. My fingers clamored around in my jacket pocket, frantically trying to get a grip on the pepper spray I carried. The Taser was in my purse, but there was no way I'd get to it in time. Already, blackness threatened the edges of my vision.

With what felt like my last breath, I secured the canister in my hand and yanked it up toward his face, pulling the trigger.

"Fuckkkkk!" Joe released his grip on my throat as the torrent of liquid annihilated his eyes.

White-hot pain pierced my lungs as I dragged in my first free breath and shoved him away, bolting for the door. But just as I turned the knob, fingers twisted in my hair and wrenched my head back. My heeled shoe flew back into his shin, and he collapsed to his knees.

“Fucking bitch!”

“That’s right.” I jerked the door open and turned to face him one last time. My hands trembled as I fished the damning photos of him from my purse, tossing them onto the floor. “I’m not a little girl anymore. So fuck you, Joe. Come near me again, and I will ruin you.”



I folded the last of the baby blankets, tucking them into the diaper bag before glancing around the hospital room to make sure I didn’t miss anything. Gypsy was already in the wheelchair, my nephew securely tucked into her arms as Lucian stood behind them. His face was a mixture of awe and disbelief, and admittedly, I found it difficult to look away from them.

When he stormed into our lives a little over a year ago and strong-armed my sister into a deal through means of blackmail, I hated him. I swore I would hate him until the day he died. But looking at them now, everything had changed. Gypsy was softer. She’d become a mother and a wife. Two things I never thought I’d see. Her days of conning were far behind her, and I didn’t know exactly where that left me.

As part of the negotiations, Gypsy begged me to leave Las Vegas. She wanted me to move somewhere safe and go to school and make a better life for myself. But she had no idea Joe had crash-landed back into our lives. I ensured she remained blissfully unaware of the evidence that could unravel us because I didn’t want her to worry. But the worry never left her eyes when I was around.

All day, she’d watched me as I fussed over her. She smiled, but it was sad. Her concern for me was well founded, even if I didn’t want to admit it. Our past wasn’t pretty, and it had finally caught up with us. But mostly, it had caught up with me. I didn’t want to drag her back into the nightmare

she'd fought so hard to protect me from. She deserved to be happy. She'd taken care of me, and now it was my turn to take care of her.

I kneeled to stroke my nephew's cheek and then took Gypsy's hand in mine. "I'm proud of you, Gyps. You know that? You're going to be an amazing mother, just like you always were to me."

Tears sprang to her eyes, and she looked so wracked with guilt, I couldn't wrap my head around it. "Don't say that, B. I should have done a lot of things differently."

"No, there weren't," I argued. "You did the best you could. You did more than anyone else would have. And you don't need to worry about me anymore, all right? Everything's going to be okay."

She pulled me in for an emotional hug I chalked up to hormones. She'd just given birth, and the last year hadn't been easy. It had been more than any one person should bear. But she managed it with dignity and grace, just as she always had.

"Ace is going to give you a ride back," she choked out the words. "Okay?"

I nodded, tossing a glance at the brooding biker lurking near the doorframe. The man who took me hostage at the Venetian hadn't changed much. He was still decked out in his jeans, boots, and a flannel cut off beneath his leather vest. His beard was a little longer, maybe, but everything else was the same. Including the fact that whenever I looked at him, a million tiny fireflies lit up my belly.

I didn't know why, because he was never happy to see me. Ace looked at me like I was a math problem he couldn't quite figure out. I was lucky to get a grunted response, if he responded to me at all. He was aloof at the best of times and surly at the worst. I didn't think he'd had a day of fun in his whole life, and I wondered why. There were so many questions I had about him, but I never voiced them. It was better that way. The smartest thing I could do was squash my curiosity deep down inside and ignore it. The last thing I needed was to get tangled up with emotions I didn't understand.

The nurse that had been on shift today walked in, Gypsy's discharge paperwork in her hands. She was pretty. I'd thought so the first time I saw her. Long chestnut hair, bright green eyes, and perfect, glowy skin that looked completely natural. I couldn't find a single thing I didn't like about her. But that changed the moment she looked at the man beside the door and recognition sparked in her eyes.

“Ace?” Her lips tilted at the corners, face brightening as he nodded in her direction.

The way she said his name with such familiarity bothered me. Who was this woman, and how did she know him? My eyes turned green with envy as claws I didn’t know I had sprouted from my fingertips. How ridiculous. I was not a jealous woman. Never in the history of ever had I cared one iota about what a man did or with whom. I’d never even had so much as a boyfriend. And Ace definitely wasn’t my boyfriend. So why the hell did I feel this way?

I studied him for a reaction, noting the way his eyes grazed over her with a recognition that made my stomach squeeze. Ace had mentioned to Gypsy once he had a girlfriend, but I was certain he was either lying or delusional. I’d seen him many times at Lucian’s house and on the random occasion he decided to pop up in my life on a whim, but I’d never once seen him with a woman. I didn’t even think he had the time for a relationship, given how involved he’d been with helping Lucian recently. Now, I couldn’t be sure. This woman looked like she knew him on a personal level, and I didn’t like it.

Heat soaked into my skin as I tried to find a steady piece of ground. Why did I feel so shaky? It was like a train wreck I couldn’t look away from. She leaned up on her toes and whispered something in his ear, and he nodded. His eyes moved to me, and I licked my lips. My mouth was drier than the scorched earth of the Nevada desert.

Kylie, the nurse, walked over to Gypsy and started prattling on about her discharge, but my eyes were locked onto Ace. I couldn’t pry them away if I tried. The familiar sting of betrayal pricked at my nerve endings. It made no sense, though, because Ace wasn’t mine. In the grand scheme of things, I barely knew him. He had been nothing but a roadblock to my freedom. A grunting beast of a man hell-bent on ensuring I had zero fun in my life. So why did it feel like I’d been stung by this development?

I didn’t know if he could sense the roiling storm of emotion brewing inside me, but those feelings only amplified when he studied me. Eyes that were normally as smooth as cognac bled into a shade of hot dark whiskey. They were animalistic, predatory. A threat and a promise. But when Kylie spun on her heel and headed for the door, her step faltered as her gaze moved back and forth between us. My eyes collided with hers, and the slightest flicker of surprise flashed over her face as she took me in. A

torrent of emotions sped through her pale eyes so quickly, I couldn't keep up.

Did she see me as a threat?

Before I could find the answer to that question, she regained her composure and disappeared down the hall.

"We ready?" Ace grunted.

Lucian nodded, disengaging the brake on Gypsy's chair before he wheeled her toward the door. I followed in a daze, not quite certain of anything. My eyes were glued to the expansive back of the man leading the charge, his stride steady and certain. Ace walked with the confidence of a man who could handle anything the world threw his way. There was a noticeable swagger in his step, but it wasn't fueled by arrogance. He was intense by nature, a consistent one hundred and ninety proof. But I doubted he was even aware of what he must look like to everyone else. I doubted he even cared. He was in his own world, completely untouchable by everything else around him, and for that I envied him.

At the end of the hall, we piled into the elevator and descended in silence. The space smelled like disinfectant with a hint of leather and diesel. I knew the latter notes were all Ace, but as my eyes drifted to the bronzed skin of his throat, I wondered what he smelled like there. And worse yet, what he tasted like.

I forced my gaze away as the elevator signaled our arrival to the ground floor. Gypsy's eyes teared up again as we said our goodbyes, and she demanded a hug from me even though I'd see her in a matter of minutes.

"It's all right," I assured her.

She nodded, her attention diverting to Ace. "Drive safely."

He jerked his chin before his eyes landed on me. "Ready?"

"Yep." I turned and gave Gypsy a little wave. "See you soon."

Chapter 4

Ace

“WHERE’S THE HARLEY?” BIRDIE ASKED.

My eyes moved to her ass as she hoisted herself into the seat of my Ford Raptor, and I stayed to make sure she buckled in. She sounded disappointed, and I wasn’t surprised. Women liked the bike. And Birdie might not know it, but she was the only woman who had ever been on the back of my FXD Dyna Super Glide. I didn’t make a habit of taking anyone for a ride. But when the situation warranted it and I had no choice, I’d taken her.

“It’s at home.” I shut the door and walked around to the driver’s side. She was quiet for all of two seconds as I fired up the engine and pulled out of the lot.

“What’s with the nurse?”

My fingers constricted around the steering wheel. I didn’t like that she’d met Kylie, but I couldn’t really figure out why. And despite my resolve not to give a shit, I was curious what was going through her mind.

Birdie was a beautiful woman. So beautiful it hurt to look at her sometimes. With electric blue eyes and long blond hair, she could turn heads on her worst day. It was difficult not to notice the curves of her body. She was sleek, powerful, and built for speed. The kind of feminine that lured you in and held you captive. She didn’t seem like a woman who would need to harbor jealousy, but as my eyes moved over the fingers twisted in her lap, I wondered if that was what this was.

My cock bulged uncomfortably against the seam of my jeans, a response I had difficulty controlling around Birdie. Why she provoked that

reaction in me, I couldn't say. She was a brat. A misguided, spoiled, entitled brat. But beneath her high-maintenance exterior was a tragedy. There were legitimate reasons for her behavior, and what she showed the world was only the tip of the iceberg. The truth was, she reminded me of my past. A past I'd tried hard to forget over the years.

"Is she your girlfriend?" Birdie pressed.

"Why do you care?" I eased the truck onto the interstate, heading for the compound out in Moapa Valley.

"I don't." Birdie blew a bubble with the gum in her mouth, her Adidas shoe bobbing up and down in irritation. "I just think it's weird you've never brought her over to Lucian's."

I didn't respond. Trying to explain the agreement I had with Kylie would give me a headache, and it was none of her business anyway. I had to remember that. If this situation was going to work, there needed to be clear boundaries.

"Where are we going?" Birdie studied me, her eyes burning into the side of my face. I had hoped she wouldn't notice for a while longer, but now that she had, I could tell she was on edge.

"Out to the compound."

"What compound?" Her voice dipped. "We're supposed to meet Lucian and Gypsy back at the apartment."

I reached for the volume button on the radio and cranked it up in an effort to drown her out. I hadn't given a whole lot of thought to exactly how this would go down. There was only one certainty. Birdie was coming with me, and that was it. She'd probably try to fight. She'd pout and throw a fit and become even more of a pain in the ass than she already was. But at the end of the day, I hoped she'd save the efforts because it wouldn't change anything.

She reached for the radio with a pink-tipped fingernail, cranking it all the way back down to a deafening silence. Then she turned in her seat, eyes boring into me. "What the hell is going on, Ace? Are you kidnapping me again?"

My knuckles went white, and it must have given me away.

"Oh my God, you are." Her voice rose. I didn't know what she was going to do. I hoped she'd at least wait until we were at the compound to have her toddler-sized meltdown, but logic wasn't one of Birdie's qualities. Her heart and soul were ruled by fire.

“Goddammit.” She unlocked the door and tried to yank it open. “Let me out. Let me out right now!”

I swerved onto the side of the freeway, horns blaring behind me as the truck came to a screeching halt. Birdie was already unbuckling, door flung wide open as she tried to make her getaway. Having zero desire to chase her down the road on foot, I had to act fast. I unbuckled myself and caught her around the waist, dragging her backward with one arm. She wiggled and fought in my grasp, kicking and slapping every which way she could come at me. When she got me in the throat, it hurt like a motherfucker, and on impulse, my grip around her faltered enough for her to squeeze out of my grasp. She was crawling across the seat again, desperate to make her grand escape. This time, I grabbed her by the arm and held her firmly in place while I jerked a zip tie from my pocket. Her eyes widened when I slapped it around her wrist, and she tried to yank back, but she might as well have been trying to fight a Clydesdale.

“Hold the fuck still,” I commanded, securing her wrist to the gear shift. It was a temporary fix for an increasingly frustrating situation.

A sigh heaved from my chest as I jumped out of the cab and walked around to the other side. She was still frantically trying to escape, fighting the containment of the zip tie and kicking at me. A few solid blows pummeled my chest before one hit me in the face.

“For fuck’s sake,” I growled, grabbing the backs of her thighs and pinning her body with mine. She wiggled again, but this time, she felt the hard flesh of my cock poking against her ass when she bounced it off me. Immediately, she stopped moving, panting as she turned over her shoulder to stare at me in disbelief. Heat rose to the surface of my cheeks, and I barked out the only thing I could think to say.

“Turn the fuck around.”

Birdie didn’t listen, but then again, she never did, and it irritated me to no end. I grabbed a mass of blond curls and dragged them over her face so she couldn’t look back at me, but she still had one arm free, and she used it to quickly untangle the hair in her vision.

I didn’t even know why we were fighting over this. She’d felt my dick against her, and I couldn’t deny it. It was the most ridiculous situation I’d ever been in, her ass hanging over the side of my truck while I held her down with my body. She smelled so fucking good. Sweet like the summer wind in my face when I was flying down the road at eighty miles per hour.

That was how she made me feel too, and right now, I hated her for it. The flawless, honey-kissed skin of her thighs peeked up at me from beneath her shorts, tempting me in a way nothing had ever tempted me before.

I was uptight, and I was irritated as fuck. And frankly, I didn't know what to do with her now. Reaching into my pocket, I dragged out a few more zip ties.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" she snarled. "Who carries those around in their pocket? Hello, serial killer."

I ignored her and focused on securing her ankles together, but she fought me every step of the way. Just when I thought I was close, she'd yank her leg away and make me start from scratch again.

"Goddammit." I squeezed the back of her thighs with my palms. "Quit fucking moving."

"Or what?" she taunted. "What are you going to do about it, you big dumb biker?"

That was it. I'd fucking had it. I knew I was losing my cool, but I couldn't help it. My palm thundered down against the jeans-covered cheek of her ass, hoping to bring her to her senses. But instead, she just looked at me in disbelief, and then she started laughing.

"Oh, that hurts so much." She mocked me with her eyes. "Are you showing me who's boss now?"

A growl erupted from my throat, and without a second thought, I yanked her shorts down and bared her soft ass cheeks. She sucked in a breath, and this time, there was no laughter when my palm collided directly with the round globe.

"Ouch," she hissed.

I didn't stop there. I should have, but I liked something about that giant red paw print I'd left. I fucking liked it, and I wanted to leave more of them.

"Are you going to behave now?" I peppered each cheek with another slap between the words until her ass was so red it would hurt to sit down.

"All right!" she belted out. "Fine, you fucking savage. You can stop now."

For a minute, I just stood there, chest heaving as my eyes moved over the round curves of her ass covered with my marks. If I thought my dick was hard before, it was barely tolerable now. Because as much as Birdie wanted to prove how little this affected her, I could see the glistening

crevice of her pink pussy peeking out from between her thighs. She was wet for me. So fucking wet I could smell the sweet honey of her arousal.

I had an urge to pry her thighs apart and bury my face so deep in that pussy I couldn't see the light of day. An image of her riding my beard and grinding her hips on my tongue made my mouth water. I hadn't felt a need like this before. It was primal. Animalistic. And it was going to be a goddamned problem.

"Fuck you," I murmured as I pulled up her shorts and finished securing the tie around her ankles.

"Fuck you too," she shot back.

She wasn't looking at me anymore, but her face was mottled with red, and I didn't know if it was anger or embarrassment. Regardless, it didn't matter. She'd learned her lesson. The first of many. And I hoped she'd think twice about pulling shit like that again.

Using my pocketknife, I cut the tie that held her wrist against the gear shift and then secured a new one with both wrists in front of her. When I finished, I propped her back up in the seat and buckled her in. That should have been the end of it, but instead, my fingers drifted up to her face, pinching her chin between them.

"It would be in your best interest not to fight me anymore, or you're going to carve a long, hard road for yourself."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Despite her bravado, her eyes betrayed her nerves. Birdie could never admit she was capable of being vulnerable, but right now she was. It was the most beautiful thing about her.

"You're coming to stay with me at the compound. It's the only way to keep you out of trouble."

"No way." She shook her head. "Gypsy just had the baby. She needs me —"

"Gypsy asked me to bring you here."

My words hit her like a bucket of ice water, dousing the fire that always burned so brightly in her eyes. I hadn't told her to hurt her. I'd told her so she'd accept her situation for what it was, but it had hurt her all the same. Betrayal sliced across her features, darkening her eyes and pinching her lips together.

"She sent me away?" The words left her lips in a whisper, and I had the urge to touch her again, but in an entirely different way. I wanted to comfort her, though I knew it was a dangerous want to have. This wasn't me. I

didn't let myself form emotional attachments. I couldn't be anything for Birdie. Nothing more than a warden and a firm hand. Retracting my palm, I shoved it into my pocket and took a step back.

"It's in your best interest," I answered. "She just wants you to be safe."

⋮

Chapter 5

Birdie

ACE THUNDERED DOWN THE HIGHWAY, his posture as rigid as his personality. Every so often, I snuck a glance at him, shooting beams of hate straight for his head. He just up and decided that I was coming to live with him, and that was it. There was no discussion, no debate. It was his way, and there was no other highway.

As miles of desert tundra flew by outside the window, I still didn't want to believe that Gypsy had done this. My sister hadn't just told this man to take me off her hands and lock me away like a prisoner. But when I swallowed past the lump in my throat, I knew it must be true. She couldn't accept that I was capable of looking out for myself. It hadn't been that long ago that she'd learned Detective Taylor was looking for me. Everything shifted after that. I saw the terror in her eyes, and now I understood this was her misguided attempt to protect me. It didn't matter that I was legitimately trying to clean up my act because she couldn't trust me to stay out of trouble. But then again, why would she?

I'd done a lot of screwing up in the past. Choices that inevitably ended in her bartering with Lucian for our freedom. By some miracle, that situation turned out for the best, but it didn't mean I wasn't still sorry about it. When I considered the things Gypsy had given up for me over the years, it filled me with shame. For as long as I could remember, she'd tried to protect me. I loved my sister fiercely, but right now, I couldn't accept what she had done. It hurt too much.

Ace flipped on his blinker and turned onto a dusty dirt road leading farther into the desert. It occurred to me then that maybe what he said

wasn't true at all. Maybe he was just bringing me out here to kill me. The thought amused me more than anything because it was wildly imaginative. Ace was a lot of things, but a killer wasn't one of them. He was annoying and rude and condescending, and together we were about as volatile as fire and gasoline. It left me to wonder what he could possibly get out of this deal, considering he'd probably say the same about me.

I studied his profile in the fading afternoon sun, noting the creases around his eyes from years on the road. At thirty-two, he was a lot older than me. Twelve years, to be exact. I only knew because I asked him once, and he must have been in a giving mood because he actually answered.

He wasn't the type of guy you'd normally fuck with, but for some reason, it was all I ever wanted to do. I liked to provoke him. And after today, I'd be feeling the consequences of that on my bare ass for quite some time. I shifted in my seat, squeezing my thighs together as I remembered the feeling of his weight pressed against my body and specifically, his hard cock. He seemed almost embarrassed by the whole situation, but then he had no qualms yanking down my shorts and exposing me to him.

I couldn't help but wonder what went through his thoughts when he saw me like that. There was an annoying little voice inside me that wanted to understand the inner workings of his mind. I wanted his secrets. His vulnerabilities. And for the first time in my life, it wasn't even because I wanted to exploit them. I just wanted to collect them and keep them for myself. A silly notion made sillier by the fact that he had just taken me and hauled me off into the middle of the desert. Who knew how long he'd make me stay here.

"What is this place?" I asked as the giant adobe walls came into view. He'd called it a compound, but this was a fortress.

"It's my club. This is where I live." His reply was terse as he focused his attention on the keypad, punching in a code that opened the gate.

Inside, it looked like something out of an old western film. Houses dotted the landscape far and wide, and I didn't know how big the property was, but it stretched farther than I could see. In the center was a giant structure that I assumed from the bikes parked out front must have been the clubhouse. Ace drove right by the building, veering off onto another road that took us farther into the mysterious community. I was taking it all in when his gravelly voice intercepted my thoughts.

“You should probably know it’s pointless to tell anyone your sob story about being here against your will. If you try to run, they’ll turn you right back around and send you home to me.”

Home to me.

For some reason, those were the words that echoed louder than the others. *I was going to live with Ace.* I’d be sleeping and eating and breathing in the same space as him. A ball of nerves formed in my stomach as a million new questions sprang to mind. Where would he keep me? What would I do all day out here in the middle of fucking nowhere?

Another wave of nausea hit me as I processed what was happening for a second time. It was real now. He’d stripped me of my freedom. He’d hauled me off to a prison in the desert where I had no say in anything.

“I’m not staying here,” I told him as he pulled into the drive of a stucco house. It was of medium size, a neutral, unassuming color, and I knew it must be his.

Ace didn’t say a word in response to my protest. He simply got out of the truck and walked around, hoisting me out and propping me upright on the pavement.

“Are you going to behave?” He arched a brow at me in question. “Or do I need to haul you into the house myself?”

In my head, I was already scheming up an escape plan, and it must have shown. Instead of waiting for an answer, he wrapped a lodgepole of an arm around my waist and heaved me over his shoulder.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” The words bobbed from my lips as my head dipped up and down in time to his steps.

“The first thing you should know about me is that I don’t have a lot of patience for the games you like to play. If I have any doubts about your intentions, I will take away your freedoms so fast your head will spin. Don’t test me, Birdie.”

He uttered the words all growly like, and instead of listening to the threat like I should have been, I was squeezing my thighs together. There was something about that gravelly voice that was like crack to me. I could only imagine what it would be like to hear him whispering his threats and demands in my ear while he was splitting me wide open with his thick cock.

The thought sent a chill through me. I hadn’t thought about a man that way in... well *ever*. It had never happened before. I’d been with men, but not of my choosing or my own free will. And since then, I’d been content in

my belief that I didn't need that type of relationship with anyone. But now a firestorm of thoughts and feelings were crashing through my mind like I was a hormonal tween at a boy band concert.

Ace swung open the front door and carried me inside the space where his boots echoed off the stone floor. The place was surprisingly clean and well furnished. He actually lived here. I could tell by the mixture of lemon-scented cleaner mingling with traces of leather and a scent distinctly Ace.

"You can put me down now." I wiggled in his grasp, but he kept moving, hauling me over to the sofa and plunking me down onto a cushion with all the delicacy of a bull in a china shop.

I glared up at him and held out my wrists, waiting for him to free me from my plastic prison. But he shook his head. "I gotta go grab your shit."

My shit?

The knife in my back wedged a little deeper as his broad shoulders disappeared out of the doorframe and returned with luggage I recognized right away. Those shiny pink suitcases belonged to me. They had been in my closet at the apartment I used to share with Gypsy. And now they were here. She really did send me away.

Tears blurred my vision, but I didn't let them fall. I'd never let anyone see me cry, but certainly not this oaf who was currently eyeballing me like I was a stray pet he wasn't quite sure what to do with. He disappeared down the hall, dispersing of the luggage before he returned for more outside. And so the process went on. Meanwhile, I attempted to escape my binds, only to dig them deeper into my skin.

"You might not want to do that." Ace gave me the side-eye as he finally shut the front door. "They aren't the most forgiving."

"Then let me out of them," I demanded.

He crossed his arms and stared at me. "Say please, and I'll think about it."

My eyes narrowed, but it did nothing to sway him. He was actually serious.

"You want me to ask you politely?" I smiled. "Fine, please quit being a fucking asshole and—"

Calmly, he strode toward me. There wasn't anything particularly scary about his eyes or his mood. It was just the devil in all his details that got to me. He was a beast of a man. Giant paws for hands. Forearms sculpted from hard labor. Boots that echoed off the floor like shotgun blasts. I liked to

push him. When he got angry with me earlier, it made me feel vindicated that I could get to him. But now he was as Zen as he ever was, and this part of him... the quiet, brooding hulk of a man hovering over me... this part frightened me.

When he bent toward me, I squeezed my eyes shut, but as it turned out, it wasn't necessary. He didn't touch me. Instead, I heard him snatch something off the couch beside me, and I realized it was my purse. My eyes flew open again, this time to find him rummaging through my private things until he pulled out my iPhone and looked straight at me.

"What are you—"

My heart skittered into a frantic rhythm as he walked into the open kitchen and retrieved a glass from the cupboard. Without emotion, he filled the glass from the tap, and then unceremoniously dumped my phone into a watery grave.

"What the hell are you doing?" My arms protested against the plastic binds as I forced myself up from the couch. "I need that phone."

The restraints around my ankles thwarted my efforts to hop into the kitchen, and instead, I flopped forward without grace, my knees bouncing off the tile floor before I toppled over into a heap.

"Son of a bitch!" I hissed.

Before I could process what was happening, Ace was kneeling beside me, shaking his head. "You are too impulsive. Do you ever just think things through?"

His scolding had little effect on me, not when my knees felt like they'd been hit with a jackhammer. Once again, he heaved me up onto the sofa, instructing me to stay put while he disappeared down the hall. As if I was going to try to go anywhere now.

A visual inspection confirmed that my knees were already starting to bruise. There was a small scrape on the right leg, and my ankles stung from the force of the plastic that had jarred against my skin during the impact.

When Ace returned, he had a handful of first-aid supplies with him, and despite his cool demeanor, he looked concerned as he set them on the coffee table. He glanced at my knees and walked back into the kitchen, retrieving a bag of frozen peas.

"It's just a scratch," I murmured resentfully as he sat beside me. His brow marred with concern as he gently dabbed at the scrape on my knee with a peroxide-soaked cotton ball. Nobody had ever taken care of me this

way since Gypsy had tried to teach me how to ride a bike. But this was different. Ace was surprisingly gentle even as his calloused fingers scraped over my skin, examining the swelling. I shivered, and the pain became a distant memory as endorphins flooded my system. I felt him everywhere. His touch produced a physical reaction in me that defied logic. It was pure chemistry, and it stirred the very marrow of my bones.

I wondered if he felt it too when he looked up at me and our eyes locked. For a split second, his hand stilled on my thigh, and his thumb skated across the flesh there, producing another shockwave in my body. Goose bumps broke out along my skin, and my fingernails dug into my palms as his eyes darkened with a primal satisfaction he couldn't hide. But just as quickly as I'd witnessed it, he tore his gaze away and obliterated the moment with a wall of silence.

Once he seemed satisfied with his own examination, he applied a bandage to the raw skin and carefully propped my legs up onto the coffee table.

"Keep this on here for a few minutes." He draped the bag of frozen vegetables over my knees. "It will help with the swelling."

I nodded, and he retrieved the pocketknife from his jeans, moving to cut the plastic ties from my ankles. But after he separated them, he frowned, observing the bloody marks left behind from the fall. The muscles in his forearm flexed as his fingers traced over the sensitive skin of my ankle, and when he spoke, his voice was rougher than I'd ever heard it. "I'm sorry."

I didn't know what to say. I could hardly even breathe. So I just watched him apply the same care he'd shown before as he tended to my ankles, coating the cuts with antibacterial ointment and bandaging them up. He seemed like he was in another world, lost inside his own head, and I wondered what he was thinking about when he paused to stare at the faint smudge of blood against my skin.

At that moment, I could relate to him. I didn't know a thing about his past, but I recognized that look. He was recalling something from his darkest memories. Something awful. And more than anything, I wanted to know what that was.

When Ace snapped out of it and stood, his expression darkened as his eyes moved over me again. I didn't know what to expect when he bent toward me, but instinct had my adrenal system in overdrive, preparing for a fight. Only nothing could have prepared me for what happened next.

“What happened here?” he growled as his fingers grazed the side of my neck. It was bruised from Joe, and although I’d done a fair job hiding it with makeup, it was obvious it had either melted or come off during our scuffle.

“Nothing,” I forced out. There was no way in hell I was going to tell Ace about any of that. The thought burned me with shame.

His fingers twitched as they curled into a fist at his side. I had a feeling he was envisioning himself pummeling whoever did this to me right about now, and stupidly, I liked that idea far too much. If only life were that easy. Joe was my problem, and I only hoped my parting threat would make him think twice about seeking Gypsy or me out again.

“You’re fucking done with that shit,” Ace announced. “No more cons. No more bullshit. Do you understand?”

A humorless laugh forced itself from my lips. Of course, he would think that I’d brought this on myself. He probably even thought I deserved it for stealing from idiots who just wanted to use me and throw me away.

“It’s cute how you think you can control my life.” I smiled up at him. “Let’s see how long that lasts.”

The tension never left his face as he walked into the kitchen and threw my ruined phone into the garbage as if to drive his point home. I expected more of a fight from him, and I was a little disappointed when he didn’t give me one.

“You hungry?” he bit out.

“No.” I leaned back into the cushion and studied him. “Why did you do that to my phone?”

“You were being a brat.”

I wanted to protest. I needed that phone to stay in contact with Gypsy. Except Gypsy had abandoned me to the wolf. She was the reason I was here in the first place. So what would I even say to her? No, I didn’t think I had anything to say to her right now. But Trouble was a different story. She would get worried if she didn’t hear from me. If she couldn’t track my location or check in, she’d probably start to freak. And what about her rent and food? What would happen to her if I was gone?

Worry gnawed at me, and Ace seemed to sense it, but he didn’t ask me about it. Instead, he cut the ties from my wrist and handed me the remote.

“Watch some television and don’t try anything stupid. I’m making dinner.”

Chapter 6

Ace

BIRDIE WAS SUBDUED AS SHE picked through her salad, eating only the croutons. I wasn't sure what to expect from her next, and that set me on edge. I liked my routine, and so far, she'd managed to disrupt every part of my day.

"Do you have any wine?" she asked, eyeballing the glass of water beside her.

"Eat your salad." I pointed at her plate with my fork. "Or have some more chicken if you want."

Instead, she shoved her plate away and leaned back, staring off into nothing. I didn't like the idea of her going hungry, and I made it clear when I shoved her plate back in front of her.

"Just take a few more bites." I'd meant for it to sound authoritative, but my voice cracked, and Birdie didn't miss it. "There are people in this world who don't have the luxury of eating. Be happy that you do."

Guilt settled into her face, and she took a couple more bites to appease me before she stopped again. I'd let her have that one for now. She didn't need to know I was keeping score. Besides, she'd already punished herself enough for the both of us. Her body looked like she'd been to hell and back, and it triggered urges I hadn't felt in years. Her wounds weighed heavy on my mind, but I didn't let on how much it bothered me to see her this way.

This was why I didn't allow myself to get wrapped up in other people. With the exception of Lucian, everyone else in my life was expendable. It usually wasn't difficult for me to maintain the status quo, but Birdie was

testing my limits. I needed to distance myself from her, but I couldn't leave her here alone. Not yet.

"So what happens now?" she asked, her voice tinged with frustration. "You just keep me locked up here all day and tell me what to do? Is that the plan?"

"Pretty much." I shrugged.

Razor blue eyes cut right through me, and she looked even prettier when she was on fire like that. My dick throbbed, adding to the discomfort I'd felt all day. Our confrontation in the truck left her scent all over me. It was difficult to refuse the drug that was right in front of me. My palms remembered the feeling of her flawless, satiny skin and the way I'd marked her with my handprints. I wanted to bury my fingers into those honeyed locks of hair and tilt her head back, demanding that she open her lips and her legs for me. That poison spread through my veins every time I saw her in a new light. There was no such thing as modesty when it came to Birdie. Every square inch of her felt obscene.

"You can't just keep me here," she barked after me as I stood and began to clear the table.

"What other choice do you have?" I asked. "You can't be trusted to look after yourself and stay out of trouble. Not when Detective Taylor is looking for you."

Her face blanched, and all the bravado she'd shown only moments before evaporated. "You know about that?"

"He's asked me about you twice," I informed her.

She fell uncharacteristically quiet as I loaded the dishwasher and wiped off the counter. The wheels were turning in her mind, and if I had to venture a guess, she was probably wondering what I knew about her past. Part of me hoped she would verbalize the question. I wanted to challenge her, but mostly, I wanted to hear confirmation of what I already knew in her own words. But she never said anything else about it, and neither did I. Instead, she hobbled back over to the sofa and reached for the remote, only to find that it no longer worked.

"What's wrong with this thing?"

"Nothing." I nodded to the bookcase in the living room. "Television is off-limits before bed. There are plenty of books you can read."

"It's eight o'clock," she huffed. "I'm not tired, and I don't want to read."

“We have an early day tomorrow.” I grabbed the earmarked copy of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau from the coffee table. In prison, I’d read to occupy my time, and I still maintained the habit as part of my nightly routine. Birdie wasn’t going to disrupt it.

She didn’t cave. Instead, she opted to sit on the couch, glaring at me while I read. What she couldn’t realize was that it didn’t faze me one way or the other. I’d seen worse things from men far more vicious than she could ever dream of being.

Twenty whole minutes of blissful silence passed before she jumped from the couch and started pacing the floor. “This is bullshit. You can’t keep me here.”

“I can, and I will,” I said without glancing up from my book.

“What would you do if I just walked out the door right now?” she challenged. “Are you going to chase me down the road too?”

“You wouldn’t get very far.” I turned the page. “But you can try if you want to.”

I felt her eyes on me, but I didn’t look up until she started for the door. Amused, I slid my hand between the pages and watched as she tried to turn the knob. It took about three seconds for her to realize there was a pin code on the lock panel. Her shoulders stiffened, and she turned around. Birdie was in for a lot of surprises as far as I was concerned. We took our security on the compound seriously, considering we had a lot of valuable merchandise on the property.

“All the locks in the house are electronic,” I informed her. “The dead bolt too.”

“You’re insane.” The vein in her throat pulsed as her hands clenched into fists at her side. “You know that, right?”

“I live on a compound. What did you expect?”

Her eyes darted around, and I assumed she was looking for other ways she could wreak havoc tonight, but I was tired, and it was time for bed.

“All your toiletries are in the bathroom attached to your room. Go brush your teeth and get ready for bed.”

I kicked off my boots, but she didn’t move, and I sensed this was going to be another battle. She confirmed my suspicions when I stood, and she still refused to budge. With a sigh, I stalked toward her, and she attempted to sidestep me. My arm hooked around her waist and hauled her back

against me before I forced her body into motion. I didn't want to hurt her, so when she started to fight, I hoisted her up into my arms and carried her.

"Would you stop doing that?" she screeched.

Her bedroom door was open, and I made it inside without incident. All the fighting from earlier today must have drained her because she wasn't nearly as combative as I anticipated. Plunking her down onto the bed, I nodded to the adjoining bathroom.

"You've got five minutes to brush your teeth and do your business."

When she looked up at me, her eyes had morphed from sky blue to gray. "Ace," she choked out. "Please don't do this."

The hair on my arms prickled as I considered her tone. *DidshethinkI was going to hurt her?*

Irritated, I headed for the door. She called out to me again, and the fear in her voice choked the air from my lungs. I couldn't figure her out. No matter how much information I'd gathered on her over the past year, it was never enough. Birdie was a fucking mystery to me. And right now, I needed to get as far away as I could before I fell into this trap.

Ignoring her, I shut the door behind me and locked it with the pin code before I wandered down the hall to my own room. I'd give her a few minutes, and then I'd turn out the lights. In the interim, I used that time to roll a joint. Nightly smoking was the only way I could get to sleep, and if I didn't get my sleep, I was a cranky motherfucker. Before I lit up, I checked the time on my phone and confirmed it had been long enough for Birdie to do her business. I opened the app on my phone again and turned off the lights in her room as I settled back onto my bed and reached for my lighter. That was when I heard the ear-piercing scream.

Chapter 7

Birdie

I CLAWED AT THE SHEETS, desperate to ground myself in reality as I attempted to drag a breath of air into my lungs. Heat singed me from the inside out. Shapes danced in the corners of my vision, moving and distorting around me, ripping me back into the past. Notes of black licorice flooded my senses, and I could practically feel his hands on me again. The hands of the person I thought was my savior, but in the end, he'd turned out to be a monster just like the rest of them.

"I brought you another doll," he whispered into the darkness.

"I don't want any more dolls. When are you going to take me away from here like you promised?"

"Soon, princess. Someday soon."

His hand began to creep up my thigh, and betrayal sliced through me as I curled into myself and pleaded with him not to do this. He promised to save me. He promised to take me away. Gypsy had been right all along. We couldn't trust anybody...

I squeezed my eyes shut and whispered over and over that it wasn't real. I wasn't there anymore. But the voice from my past pierced right through my protective veil, whispering how much he liked it. *How much he liked me.*

"Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you." I curled into a ball and rocked violently while I tried to drag myself out of the memory. I wasn't a little girl anymore. I was twenty years old, and I was perfectly fine.

Only I wasn't. Garbled words flew from my lips and moisture clung to my skin as my breath came hard and fast. Vertigo stole my balance, and my

body swayed to the left, nearly toppling over. The space in my throat felt like a pinhole, growing narrower by the second.

I needed air.

Window. There had to be a window. I launched off the bed, scrambling for the wall so I could feel around for the cool air. But in my frantic pursuit, I stumbled into something else—one of my suitcases—and flipped right over it. The resulting crash sent me plummeting onto the tile floor for a second time that day. Tears coated my cheeks, and then light blinded my eyes as the door swung open.

“What the fuck?” The voice penetrated my tomb of silence.

A hand took hold of my arm, and on instinct, I swung at him, lashing out at the demons who continued to haunt me. My fist collided with a solid part of his body, and I swung again. This time, there was no connection. He wrenched my arm back, and I tried to scramble away, but I couldn’t. He was so fucking heavy. So much stronger than I was.

“Birdie, open your eyes.”

“No!” I screamed. “Get off me!”

“Birdie.” His fingers grazed over my face. My stomach churned, and I tried to kick him, but my legs had turned to jelly.

“Please.” I shook my head. “Don’t do this.”

“Goddammit.” The voice was full of agony. Helpless. And it didn’t fit the voices from my nightmares. It was the reality check I needed to snap me out of it.

“It’s me,” he said. “Ace. Remember?”

Ace. My mind painted details of his features long before I opened my eyes. The behemoth of a man with the beard and tattoos. The one that should probably terrify me. But instead, my heart started to slow, and I found myself drawing in a steady breath, followed by another. He wasn’t Ricky or any of the others, and I wasn’t in that house.

“I’m in Las Vegas.” The voice that slipped from my lips sounded distant and childlike.

“You’re just outside of it.” Ace used his thumb to wipe away my tears in a way that seemed awkward for him. “But you’re safe here, Birdie. I need you to understand that.”

My eyes clashed with the whiskey gold in his. They were transcendent, unrivaled by any other color I’d ever seen in this world, and right then, I could have stared into them for eternity. Outwardly, he was jagged and

guarded, but his eyes were the passage to a fragile soul. A secret kingdom hidden away in his mind and heart.

“Come here.” He tugged me up into a sitting position and then propped me beside him against the wall. It took me a second to realize what he’d pulled from his pocket. I wanted to ask him about it, but verbalizing the question required too much energy. The crash was real, and I doubted I’d even be able to move from the floor.

Ace held his lighter to the rolled paper, and I watched in fascination as he took a couple of tokes and blew the smoke from his lips in a long sigh. When he held it to my lips, I didn’t fight him.

“This will help you,” he murmured. “Just take a little puff into your mouth.”

While he instructed me, his fingers settled at the base of my neck, rubbing away the tension that had gathered there. “Now take a deep breath. Good girl. Let it go.”

My head lolled against his sturdy shoulder as wisps of smoke slipped from my lips in intoxicating patterns. I had never smoked before. Never even considered it. But as the minutes passed with the reverberation of his voice guiding me, a divine quietude bled into my bones. I’d never felt so relaxed. My mind had never felt such peace. Everything was slower, sharper, intensified. The waning joint passed from his lips to mine, an intimacy that lit a fire in my imagination. A lucid dream in which his calloused fingers twisted in my hair while I drank the smoke from his lips and tasted the fire in his lungs.

Warmth expanded from my belly down into the space between my thighs. A paradise created for pleasure—a pleasure I’d never given freely—yet at that moment, I wanted to give it to him. But my bones were heavy, and exhaustion seeped into every cell. Logic felt distant, but I could still hear the whispers of truth. He wasn’t mine. *He would never be mine.*

Eventually, the joint vanished, and only silence remained. I couldn’t move. I didn’t want to. My body slumped against Ace, absorbing his warmth and the drumbeat of his heart.

“This will help you sleep.”

They were the last words I heard him rumble.



When I opened my eyes, the sight of an unfamiliar ceiling greeted me. Somehow, I'd been relocated to the bed Ace had prepared for me, my body cloaked in a tangled mess of covers. I didn't know how I'd gotten there. My memory was fuzzy, and I didn't like that feeling. I usually crashed hard after a panic attack, but this was something else. The weed I smoked had lulled me into a sleep unlike any other I'd ever experienced. It was a difficult concept to grasp when insomnia had always been my constant companion.

I sat up and scrubbed the sleep from my eyes. Today was Friday. The second day of my imprisonment. The second of an unknown number. Ace hadn't mentioned how long he intended to keep me here. There was no set time I was dictated to serve, and I think that scared me the most. But beneath the fear, the current circumstances also had another surprising effect. For months, I'd been juggling one mess after another. Every day was the same. Wake up, panic, stress, con, repeat. It was a vicious ride I couldn't get off. But today, there would be no cons. There would be no dealings with Joe. And for the first time in as long as I could remember, it felt like I could actually breathe again.

Logically, I knew that feeling couldn't last. Joe still needed to be dealt with, regardless of whether I was here or not. I could only hope that when that time came, he'd be willing to hand over the evidence that could condemn me in exchange for his dirty little secrets.

I dragged myself into the bathroom and gulped down a few handfuls of water before brushing my teeth. It felt like the afternoon already, but I couldn't be sure. Regardless, Ace hadn't come to wake me up, so I took my time showering and getting dressed.

I had no intentions of unpacking my suitcases or making myself comfortable here, so I left everything as it was. The first outfit I could piece together was an ivory crochet tank with a plunging neckline and a burnt orange maxi skirt. I found my favorite gold gladiator sandals and paired them with matching bangles.

Gypsy women took pride in their appearance, and it was a value my mother instilled in me. She took extra care to make herself look beautiful every day, though it really wasn't necessary. She was the most beautiful woman I ever knew, even if it was only for a little while. I couldn't remember how old I was when she disappeared from our lives, but the memories I had lived on. This ritual was my way of feeling close to her. The hag stone she wrapped was the only possession of hers I had left, and I carried it with me always.

When I walked down the hall into the living area, I expected to find Ace. The house was quiet, but I assumed he was still lurking somewhere inside. Only, it wasn't him I found sitting on the couch. My feet hit the brakes before my mind could process what I was seeing. The familiar face of a friend peered back up at me, and my initial reaction was panic. Had Ace taken her too?

"What are you doing here?" I blurted.

Trouble smiled back at me, but it wasn't a smile I'd ever seen before. It was laced with guilt. "Ace asked me to come keep an eye on you. He was needed at the shop."

She said the words so casually as if she didn't just hit me with a fucking wrecking ball.

"You know him?" My entire body trembled as I forced the words from my lips.

She nodded. That was it. No other explanation. But did I really need one? The girl sitting on the sofa wasn't who I thought I knew at all. The typical baggy jeans and ugly T-shirts she often wore were absent, and in their place was a pair of black shorts and a tank top. Even her hair was almost unrecognizable, pulled back into a smooth high ponytail to highlight the deception on her face.

"How do you know him?" I demanded, seeking out some other possible explanation.

"You're looking for answers that will make this sting less." Trouble adjusted the bracelet on her wrist. A bracelet I'd given her. "But if you really want me to say it—"

"I do." My head throbbed with the agony of her duplicity, but I needed to hear the words from her mouth.

"Okay fine." She blew out a breath and flopped back onto the couch cushion. "I've known Ace for a long time. Basically, since he joined the

Beards of War. He hooked me up with a job as a barmaid at the clubhouse, and sometimes I do odd jobs for him.”

“But you’ve been in Vegas this whole time,” I argued.

“Yeah.” She snapped the gum in her mouth. “Because he asked me to keep an eye on you and report back to him. So that’s what I’ve been doing.”

I shook my head, unable to accept her explanation. “I saw you first. I was the one who found you. What you’re saying—”

“It was a trick,” Trouble answered, a sliver of regret coloring her voice. “I just did what I was told.”

I didn’t want to believe I’d been played so easily, but I could no longer deny it. Somehow, Ace knew I would want to help this broken mess of a girl. It was the sort of knowledge buried deep down in my soul, and it terrified me that he understood me this way. How could he possibly know that?

“You told him everything?” I choked out. “The casinos, the cons, and... oh, God.” My head dipped as it occurred to me. “You took those photos of me, didn’t you?”

She didn’t answer, and that was answer enough. I turned on my heel, desperate for space, when she called after me.

“Birdie, wait.”

I didn’t want to look at her. I wanted nothing else to do with her. But I couldn’t help it. For an entire year, I had invested myself into this girl I considered a friend. I worried about her constantly, showering her with gifts and checking in on her as often as I could. She’d found the sliver of vulnerability in my armor and tore at the seams until she’d ripped it wide open, spilling out secrets I shared with nobody. And now the stupid part of me that hurt inside wanted to hear what she had to say for herself.

“For what it’s worth, I appreciate everything you tried to do for me,” she said. “I never wanted to hurt you. I understand you’ll probably hate me now, and I am sorry for that. Maybe one day, you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

In the end, I decided not to turn around. Regret made me bitter, and she was right. I did hate her.

Chapter 8

Ace

MY PHONE RANG FOR THE second time in a row, piercing my concentration as I fiddled around beneath the hood of a big rig that was already overdue for service. Normally, I wouldn't give two fucks who was calling me when I was in the middle of a shift unless it was Lucian or something going down at the compound. But this time, Trouble's name flashed across the caller ID, and the hair on the back of my neck prickled.

When I left her there, I knew the situation wasn't going to go over all that well, but I figured it was best to get it over with. Trouble could usually handle just about anything I threw her way, including Birdie. The two of them had formed a friendship of sorts over the last year, and I hoped that wouldn't change just because of a little road bump. But when I picked up the phone, my gut told me I might have been wrong about that.

"What is it?" I grunted.

"She escaped." Trouble sounded breathless, and the line crackled like the wind was blowing into the speaker.

"Impossible." I shook my head, even as I was reaching for my keys. "The house is locked down."

"Well, it looks like she found a way out anyway," Trouble explained. "She shattered the bathroom window and climbed out. I'm not even sure how long she's been gone because she had music blasting."

"Her bathroom window?" I squinted as I slung a leg over the hog. "There's no way she could fit through that. Are you sure she didn't just trick you?"

“What do you mean?” The breath whooshed from Trouble’s voice as she spoke as if she’d stopped abruptly.

“She probably broke the fucking window and then hid, waiting for you to leave the house so she could walk right out after you.”

The silence on the other end of the line confirmed that Trouble hadn’t checked the house before she left.

“Shit,” she murmured. “I’ll go back there now.”

“How long have you been gone?”

“Twenty minutes or so,” she huffed.

“Go back to the house and make sure she isn’t there. Keep an eye out for her along the way and call Kodiak to let him know.”

“I already did,” she assured me. “Every eye in the compound is on the lookout.”

“All right, I’m on my way.”

I hung up the phone with an impatience I didn’t recognize and gunned it out of the parking lot. This girl was out running around in the fucking desert, thinking she was going to find a way out of the compound when most likely she was going to find a whole lot of trouble instead.

The dark thoughts I often struggled to keep at bay wandered back to the forefront of my mind as I considered all the possibilities. There were snakes and scorpions and spiders in the desert. What if she was allergic? What if she’d been bitten and couldn’t move? Or what if she fell trying to navigate the difficult terrain on the northern side of the compound?

The possibilities piled up as I drove, boiling my blood and whitening my knuckles. Goddamn Birdie fucking Blue. It had been years since I felt so helpless. Everything was fine until she came into the picture and rattled a fault line into the infrastructure of my life. Again, I questioned why I ever agreed to it. But then I knew why. Lucian and Gypsy asked me. It was just that simple.

I didn’t have it in me to tell them no. Not when it came to her. For over a year, I’d dissected Birdie’s every move in an effort to understand her, and in the process, she burrowed her way inside my head, contaminating all my thoughts. Now she was in my space. My lungs. On my flesh. I breathed her in, I felt her everywhere. Her scent, her silky skin, her butterscotch hair. She was driving me goddamned crazy, and it had only been a day. One motherfucking day.

As I pulled into the compound, I knew what I had to do. I had to cart her ass back to Lucian and tell him it couldn't be done. I couldn't have her around me. It was the only way.

Kodiak greeted me at the entrance, his lips tilted up in a smirk he tried to hide when he saw the expression on my face. "Some of the guys have eyes on her. She's over by the warehouse, up on the north ridge. She stopped moving about ten minutes ago, so we're not really sure what the hell she's doing up there."

"Thanks, brother." I nodded.

He gestured me through the gates, and I leaned forward, accelerating in the direction that Kodiak had pointed me. He couldn't know it, but his words only confirmed my worst fears. She must have been injured. It was the only logical conclusion.

The warehouse sat at the back of the compound, nestled into a slab of concrete protected by thick adobe walls and the rocky terrain behind it. The landscape was dotted with cactuses and red rock formations, and we'd chosen it specifically for that reason. Anyone who wanted to come at our supply would have to do it through the front gates. Most people with a lick of common sense wouldn't attempt to scale those ridges, but most people weren't Birdie. She was reckless and impulsive, and this incident only served as proof of that.

When I pulled to a stop, I saw her plain as day, squatting on a rock in an orange skirt and a scrap of fabric she'd call a tank top. It wasn't immediately obvious from where I sat if she was injured, but she stayed put as I climbed toward her. The late afternoon sun bathed her silhouette in an earthy glow, highlighting the long tan legs stretched out in front of her. Against the terra cotta landscape of the desert, she was a mirage. A goddess on fire. For a split second, I paused just to take it all in. Birdie wasn't of this world, and I didn't need any other evidence of that than this moment. Her beauty was hypnotic in a way that could only be compared to myths and legends.

She squinted into the bright light of day and met my gaze. Her escape hadn't taken her very far, and it was evident she hadn't planned it out. The gold sandals wrapped around her feet weren't built for climbing, and the proof was in the torn leather strap on her left foot.

"Are you injured?" I asked.

Her lip quivered, and she turned away, refusing to acknowledge me. Internally, my concerns amplified as I fought to maintain control. Birdie didn't show her emotions easily. Something had happened, and her silence was the trigger to the loaded cocktail of fears only she could manage to induce.

"Get your ass up, or I'm going to carry you down myself," I demanded.

She climbed to her feet; electric blue eyes boring into me as she crossed her arms. My gaze swept over her, seeking out signs that confirmed or allayed my suspicions. From what I could tell, she was in one piece, and I should have been happy with that, but my mood didn't improve.

I gestured for her to move, and she did. Beside her, I remained tense, ready to catch her if she fell. The journey down the ridge was uneventful, and Birdie still hadn't said a word when I tucked her onto the back of my bike and instructed her to hold on. I stewed the whole fucking five-minute ride home. Her silence was more abrasive than her defiance, and I couldn't figure out why. The only reaction I managed to squeeze from her was when I escorted her inside the house and slammed the door behind us. She flinched as she finally turned to look at me, but my eyes were on Trouble.

"Out."

Trouble knew better than to say a word as she made a beeline out of the house. The moment she was gone, Birdie tried to walk away too, but this wasn't even close to being over. Caving into my urges, I reached out and fisted a handful of her hair, forcing her to stop abruptly. When she turned and saw the inferno in my eyes, hers widened. Her breasts swelled as she drew in a deep breath, and the bulk of my blood traveled south, engorging my cock so severely I couldn't think straight. I wanted to bend her over and fuck her until she wouldn't think twice about running off on me again, but that wasn't on the table. It couldn't ever be on the fucking table.

Still, I couldn't stop myself from wrapping my fingers around her jaw as I stepped into her space and leaned down to growl into her ear. "Surrender, Birdie. I fucking own you now."

The statement came out of nowhere, and I didn't recognize the ferocity in my tone. When Birdie looked up at me, her breath blew across my throat as she exhaled, and my eyes drifted to her lips. So soft and full and venomous. I imagined for a second what it would be like to taste them. I'd never had a need to kiss a woman before. Kissing was for lovers, and I was

a taker. But right now, I wanted to know her taste. I wanted to breathe her in as our lips burned with the fire of this undeniable heat between us.

Twenty minutes ago, I was dead set on taking her back to Lucian and Gypsy. But now, in my presence, there was no way I could let her go.

“You’ve been following me,” she accused as she attempted to pull away. “Inserting people into my life. Do you even realize how fucked up that is?”

Her voice betrayed a pain that ran deeper than I ever could have known. I’d never seen Birdie display such fragility, and it wrecked me. I wasn’t prepared to deal with her emotions, so I didn’t even know where to begin. Physically, I could take care of her. The basic needs she required as a human were easy to meet. But everything else was a purgatory I didn’t know how to navigate.

“Are you hurt?” I asked her again as I examined her. It was all I could offer as solace.

Tiny red welts had started to form on her ankles where the sand had pelted her skin as she walked. And along her calves, several new cuts had appeared. She’d been with me for twenty-four hours, and already, she looked like she’d been to the depths of hell.

“I fell into a cactus.” Her voice wavered as she turned away. “There are needles stuck in my back.”

I released my hold on her and turned her in my arms. Sure enough, red, inflamed welts dotted her lower back, prickled with spines from the cactus.

“Son of a bitch.” I scrubbed a hand over my face. It wasn’t the first time I’d seen it. Some of the guys from the club had met the same fate over the course of my years on the property. But they weren’t as delicate as Birdie. I closed my eyes, and a vision of the cold, lifeless face from my past resurfaced. I couldn’t save that girl. She was long past dead, and it was all my fault. But Birdie was a different story. I would do whatever it took to keep her safe, even if it meant she would hate me for it. Before I could even think about it, I was punching numbers into my phone as she turned to meet my gaze.

“What are you doing?” Her brows pinched together.

I turned away, already regretting what I was about to do. “Getting you some help.”

Chapter 9

Birdie

ACE DISAPPEARED DOWN THE HALL, mumbling into the phone before he returned a few seconds later, his face unreadable.

“Who was that?” I asked.

“Sit down.” He pointed at the sofa. “I’ll grab some shit to clean up your legs.”

“They’re fine.” I stared at him as if he were from another planet. “It’s just a few scrapes.”

“They need to be cleaned,” he grunted. “Don’t argue.”

He left me to follow his orders while he disappeared to rummage through the medicine cabinet. I didn’t get what the big deal was. He acted like it was a medical emergency every time something remotely small happened. Though there had to be a reason for his odd behavior, I just couldn’t figure out what it was.

When he returned, I was sitting upright on the sofa, which was about all I could manage in my current state. I’d neglected to tell him that I also had needles embedded into the skin beneath my waistband. I couldn’t lift my legs onto the coffee table or lean back without driving them deeper, so I wasn’t quite sure how this would work. But he seemed to consider my position, hesitating for only a second before he wordlessly knelt at my feet and began his work with unwavering focus.

He cleaned each wound with exhaustive care, inspecting them several times over to make sure he hadn’t missed anything. Maybe it was the way his mechanical mind worked, but no man had ever knelt before me to tend to my wounds. Men had only ever seen me as something to take and

use, but Ace treated me as if I were still salvageable. His large calloused fingers glided over my skin with the same reverence he held for his bike. I wanted to unravel the meaning behind that, but before I could, he'd finished.

Apparently satisfied with his work, he removed a joint from his pocket and parked beside me on the sofa. His large frame indented the cushion and dipped me closer to the heat of his body. My eyes strayed to his lips as he took a few puffs and then offered the joint to me. When I hesitated, his eyebrow arched.

"It helps the pain," he said.

"Will it put me to sleep?"

He shook his head, a wisp of smoke leaving his mouth. "Different blend."

Trust was a refuge I'd never known, but at that moment, I realized I trusted him. In the time that I'd known him, he'd kidnapped me, annoyed me, and foiled my plans on more than one occasion, but he'd never lied to me.

I took the joint from his fingers and rested it against my lips, taking small drags just as he'd taught me. Our eyes locked as the smoke curled between us, and I studied the golden amber of his irises as a dreamlike calm washed over me. It often felt like he could hypnotize me with those eyes, and in a moment of paranoia, I wondered if that was what he was doing. Part of me wanted to resist and look away, but I couldn't. Some other ethereal power possessed me to lean in and hold the joint up to his lips, proffering more of the medicine he needed. The question on my mind was why did he need it?

He took a drag, his eyes never leaving mine. This must have been what intimacy felt like. Sharing the balm that could heal both of our hurts. I should have been the first to break away, but Ace beat me to it. He plucked the burning paper from my fingers and snuffed it out, just like the memory of this moment between us. The gatekeepers of my heart battened down for a war on the horizon as he stood and diverted his attention away from me.

"Come on." He fished the keys from his pocket. "We need to get to the clubhouse and get those spines out of your skin."

What awaited me at the clubhouse was uncertain, but right then, I didn't care. The weed had soaked into my veins and warmed my blood, so pain didn't exist anymore. The needles were a part of me, just like all the broken

pieces I'd glued back together over the years. My body was boneless as I stood and joined him at the door, the dilemma of right and wrong forgotten as his gaze slipped briefly to the valley between my breasts. My tongue darted out to wet my lips as my eyes drifted over his powerful frame. Forget the Beards of War. He was a god of war. And I was a mere mortal unequipped with the powers to resist such human temptations.

Between his legs, another muscle bulged against the seam of his faded blue jeans. The girth outlined by the denim was bigger than any other I'd ever seen, and my imagination ran wild with it. He was uncomfortably hard, and it showed. This was the undeniable evidence that proved he wasn't immune to me. Our eyes collided again as I swallowed, and for three long seconds, the earth stood still. I didn't know exactly what it was I wanted from him, but I wanted it with the fire of a thousand suns. Nothing about these foreign feelings made sense to me, but I was grateful when Ace broke the spell between us by opening the door and gesturing for me to go outside.

Once we were in the drive, a new debate seemed to emerge as his eyes moved back and forth between the Harley and his truck. When he glanced back at me, I knew he was factoring me in. It shouldn't have pleased me as much as it did. But I was in his head, and I wanted more of these moments. I wanted him to factor me into everything, the way nobody ever had before.

"I'm all right to walk," I assured him. The clubhouse wasn't too far away, and I could manage even with the needles in my back.

He nodded, and we set off down the street into the direction of the fading sun. A quiet stillness had settled over us, and I didn't feel the need to fill it, but I couldn't sate my curiosity any longer.

"What's in the warehouse?" I asked.

He gave me a sideways glance. "What do you think is in the warehouse?"

I already knew, but I wanted to hear it from him. When I came upon it earlier, it didn't take long to deduce what the smell was.

"I'm guessing it's weed," I answered. "A lot of fucking weed."

The corner of his lip curled, probably the closest thing to a smile I'd ever seen from him. "You guessed right."

"So you guys grow it? That's the club business?"

"The club business isn't your business," he grunted.

I rolled my eyes. “Like I’m going to blab to anyone. You have me trapped here, remember?”

“It isn’t about that.” Ace turned to me, his expression serious. “You just seem to be a magnet for trouble, and I don’t want you getting wrapped up in the club life.”

Whatever that meant, I didn’t know. But his words re-opened the wound that triggered this entire chain of events. “Why did you ask Trouble to insert herself into my life?”

“Don’t be too hard on her,” he answered. “She was just doing her job.”

His response didn’t answer my question, but I’d come to expect that from Ace. He was loyal to his friends, and apparently, that included Trouble. He wouldn’t throw her under the bus, and if I tried to argue the ethics of what they’d done, he’d be quick to point out my own shortcomings in that arena. If there was one thing I knew by now, it was that Ace didn’t bother to sugarcoat anything. If he even bothered to speak to you at all, he’d tell you what he thought point blank.

We arrived at the clubhouse in just under five minutes, and it appeared that every motorcycle in the compound was lined up out front. The entrance door was propped open, the sound of laughter and rock music floating out into the evening air. Ace led me inside with the quiet confidence of a man who knew he belonged here while I staggered along beside him.

The interior was about what I expected, dotted with well-used furniture and pool tables throughout the space. Along the back wall, Ace’s club brethren drank beer and talked shop at the bar. I wasn’t entirely certain of his motives for bringing me here until we reached a separate corridor at the back of the building. This area was set up like a hotel with rooms along either side of the hall. Some were closed while others remained open, and it didn’t take long to figure out what they were used for.

As we passed one door, a grunting sound filtered out, followed by the audible slapping of flesh coming together. My stomach roiled, but the question on my mind died in my throat as Ace stopped beside one of the empty rooms and gestured me inside.

The space was small and basic. A nightstand, a bed, and a table. But all those objects blurred into the background as my eyes found the pretty brunette nurse I recognized from the hospital. She was sitting in one of the chairs, flipping through a magazine, comfortable enough to indicate this wasn’t her first visit here.

A bitter taste coated my tongue as my eyes carved a path over her. My green-eyed monster tried to find something wrong with her, but I couldn't. She was a divine composition of beauty, grace, and perfect symmetry. Her presence knocked me off balance, and I couldn't really understand why.

"Kylie, this is Birdie." Ace kneaded the tension from his neck as he glanced back and forth between us, obviously uncomfortable with the exchange.

Kylie looked over me with a hint of curiosity in her eyes. I wondered what she saw when she looked at me. Realistically, the faults she might find in me were limitless. But whatever she was thinking, I couldn't tell.

"Why don't you have a seat?" she suggested.

"What's going on?" I crossed my arms and looked at Ace.

"Kylie's a nurse," he answered as if I didn't already know this. "Sit down so she can take the needles out of your back."

I tried to think of a legitimate protest, but before I could, Ace disappeared out the door, leaving me to fend for myself.

I looked at Kylie, and she looked at me. An awkward silence ensued, and I was tempted to tell her I could just remove the damn things myself. The last thing I wanted was to show weakness in front of her, but admittedly, I was curious. I wanted to know more about her, and this might be my only opportunity. Who was she to Ace? Did he love her? Did she love him? My thoughts couldn't be silenced.

Against my better judgment, I took a seat at the table and waited. Kylie had a spread of first-aid supplies already laid out, but first, she walked around behind me and reached for the hem of my shirt.

"Just going to take a peek to see what we're working with here," she said. Her voice was calm, and I assumed that was probably a benefit to her patients. She didn't make a fuss over the gory scene on my back but rather went to work gathering her supplies.

"I'm going to remove the clumps first," she explained as she reached for a pair of tweezers.

I nodded and held my breath as she started to work behind me. The room was so quiet I could hear myself breathing, and I felt the need to fill the silence. But Kylie beat me to it.

"How do you know Ace?"

The question was casual, but I wondered about the motivations behind it. I found it odd that she didn't know about me. For over a year now, Ace

had been a thorn in my side. At some point, logic would dictate that we should have crossed paths. And if she was, in fact, his girlfriend, wouldn't she have a say in him holding me captive at his house?

I wasn't sure how much to divulge, but I decided against bringing up my current hostage situation. I doubted she would help anyway, and I didn't want to go that route.

"He's a friend of my sister's husband," I explained. "Do you know Lucian?"

"No," she answered. "Other than the hospital, of course."

That fact alone spoke volumes because I knew how close Ace and Lucian were. It was another oddity that she didn't.

"How do you know Ace?" I returned.

She set down the tweezers and pulled away to gather a couple of other items before returning. "I'm just going to apply some glue and gauze. We'll have to let it dry, and then it should pull out the remaining spines."

She hadn't answered my question, opting to work quietly until she finished. When she got up again, she washed her hands in the sink and then turned to me.

"It's going to take about thirty minutes to dry, so we have some time."

I nodded, and she studied me.

"I'm a friend of his," she answered finally.

Friend. The tone of her voice indicated that was a loose term, and I got the impression it was a restriction she didn't like. I also didn't believe they were just friends. She hadn't dropped everything to come all the way out here just because Ace asked her to. When she looked at him, it was evident she knew him in a way I didn't.

"Does that mean friends with benefits?" I asked.

Kylie tilted her head to the side, a smirk playing across her lips. Admittedly, I'd said it because I was looking for a reaction. But she was unfazed, and instead of giving me what I wanted, she called me on my bullshit.

"I'm not the enemy, you know."

At that moment, I wished I could be half as cool as she was, and I hated myself a little bit for being so petty. I didn't know why Ace was bringing out this side of me. I felt like he already belonged to me in some way, and that was ridiculous and irrational.

"I'm sorry." I blew out a breath. "It's been a long couple of days."

“It looks like it,” Kylie acknowledged as her eyes drifted over my scrapes and bruises. “Mind if I ask what happened?”

“Nothing major.” I shrugged. “Just got lost wandering around the compound.”

Something shifted in her eyes, and I knew I’d said the wrong thing when she sat down. “You’re staying here?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“At the clubhouse?”

I swallowed and tried to be casual, but it felt like I was delivering a blow I didn’t necessarily like. “At Ace’s house. Lucian asked him to keep an eye on me, I guess.”

“Huh.” Kylie removed a cigarette from her pocket and lit up, surprising me.

“Is that a problem?” I hedged. “You can tell him to turn me loose if it is.”

She turned her head to the side and released a puff of smoke. “I’ve never been to his house.”

I didn’t even know how to respond to that.

Her delicate fingers flicked the ashes into the tray beside her as she shrugged. “He told me he doesn’t bring women to his house.”

“Well, I’m sure he’d rather not have me there,” I assured her. “I’m a pain in his ass, and he’s just doing a favor for my sister.”

Kylie didn’t look convinced, but she accepted it the way I assumed she must accept everything. With a cool manner I could only dream of possessing.

“How old are you anyway?” she asked.

“Twenty.” And I’d never felt it until that moment. When she observed me, there was concern in her eyes. It was the same way Gypsy often looked at me. As though I was too young to navigate this world by myself. But my age was just a number. Mentally, I’d been forced to grow up a long time ago.

“You’re very pretty,” Kylie noted as she snuffed out her cigarette. “I can see why he likes you.”

“He doesn’t like me.” I laughed awkwardly. “He can barely tolerate me.”

She nodded, but it was apparent she was just humoring me. “I guess we should probably check that gauze, huh? I’m sure you’re ready to be done

with the pain.”

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Chapter 10

Ace

AN HOUR HAD COME AND gone by the time Kylie finally came to get me. My discomfort with the situation was obvious, and she seemed to pick up on it as she approached.

“I told Birdie to lie down and rest for a bit,” she said.

I nodded. “Did you check her knees and ankles too?”

“Yes.” Kylie leaned against the bar, glancing up at me with an expression that spelled trouble ahead. “What happened to her?”

“She’s reckless.” I blew out a breath and shrugged.

My words didn’t improve Kylie’s expression, and I didn’t really expect them to. I wasn’t in the habit of explaining things to her because we didn’t have that type of relationship, but tonight I’d have to make an exception.

“You got her high,” she noted sourly.

“She was in pain.”

“I’d venture a guess that goes without saying. That girl has problems, Ace.”

Her observation triggered a defensiveness I didn’t know how to deflect. “She’s fine. Don’t talk about shit you don’t understand.”

“I’m a nurse.” Kylie glared. “Give me some credit, yeah? What is she doing with you anyway?”

I didn’t know how to answer that question. How could I when I didn’t even understand it myself?

“If you want to help her, maybe you should consider—”

“She doesn’t need your help,” I ground out. When it came to Birdie, I couldn’t check my protective instincts. She wasn’t the kind of girl who

wanted people to know about her past, and I certainly wasn't going to let anyone make assumptions about her, Kylie included.

"What's going on here?" Kylie pursed her lips. "Who is she to you?"

My response should have been automatic, and that was what the real problem was. Birdie was nothing to me. A friend of a friend. A pain in my ass. But I couldn't say it.

"She's a lot younger than you," Kylie pointed out. "Have you given that any thought?"

I dragged a hand through my hair as my frustration compounded. "I know she's young."

Kylie seemed taken aback by my tone, but I didn't like what she was implying. Maybe it was just in my head, but her words sounded accusatory. Even if her intentions were good, I didn't like how she was looking at me as though I would hurt Birdie somehow.

Birdie appeared at the end of the hall, and like a magnet, my eyes found hers. For a second, she held my gaze, and I forgot about all the shit that made this situation so messy. But then something shifted as her attention broke away, and I could practically see her slipping back into her invisible armor. We were in a room full of my brothers, and they hadn't missed the pretty blonde either. To them, Birdie was all legs and tits and ass. It lit a fire under my own feet before I even realized what I was doing.

"Come on," I told Kylie. It was time I got my fucking head screwed on straight.

She followed me over to Birdie, and I resisted the urge to ask her if she was okay.

"You need to rest," I said.

Birdie's eyes bounced back and forth between us before I turned her around and led her down the hall to the room. "Nobody will bother you in here."

She stood there silently, and I didn't know what else to say. So I left her there and led Kylie down the hall to a different room. Before I closed the door behind us, my eyes connected with Birdie's one more time. She looked hurt, but she also looked like it was exactly what she expected from me. Every person she'd ever cared about had betrayed her, so why should I be any different? Tension coiled in my gut as I shut her out with an audible click of the door.

I sent Kodiak a quick text, instructing him to keep an eye on Birdie and make sure she didn't leave the building. He replied with a thumbs-up, and I turned my attention to Kylie. On the bed behind her, she already had her overnight bag full of her preferred torture tools and first-aid supplies. When she noticed my eyes roving over it, she shrugged.

"It's Friday, remember?"

Right. Because she was supposed to come for the weekend. And Kylie had only ever stayed in the clubhouse. She hadn't been to my house. I'd kept our arrangement as simple as it could possibly be, but now it felt like everything was too fucked up to navigate.

She wanted answers, and I felt like I owed them to her even though it wasn't the kind of relationship we had. I thought this thing between us was the closest I could ever get to a relationship. We'd never been intimate because it wasn't sex I needed from her. It was pain. And for as long as I'd asked, she kept coming back to dole it out. But now, I was aware that I hadn't imagined what I already knew. Kylie wanted more from me. I didn't know how long she'd wanted more, but it was written clear as day in her eyes.

She wasn't naïve, and she wasn't one to mince words, so it didn't surprise me when she approached me with a quiet hunger, her hands flattening against my chest. "Is this still working for you, Ace?"

It was a loaded question, but the answer should have been simple. Birdie had been infecting my every thought for months, and now she was here, in my space. I couldn't shake the torment I felt every time I looked at her. But it was so fucking wrong, and this was just so much easier. Kylie didn't ask for more from me. She didn't need me to be sensitive or try to figure out her feelings. All she needed was to give me what I thought I wanted. Every boundary I'd set made no sense now, and part of me was tempted just to make Birdie hate me by fucking Kylie here and now. But when I looked down at her, I knew that wasn't fair to anyone.

"For fuck's sake." I pulled away and shook my head. "I'm sorry, Kylie. But aren't you tired of this? Aren't you tired of waiting around for me all the time? Aren't you tired of the fucked-up shit I ask of you?"

Her answering smile revealed a sadness I never knew she felt. "That's what we agreed on from the beginning. I knew better than to hope for anything else from you, Ace. I didn't think it was possible. But the way you look at her... I think maybe it is. Just not with me."

I sat down on the bed and rested my elbows on my knees as I leaned forward and stared at the floor. “I never thought it was possible either,” I admitted. “I didn’t want this. I still don’t. But there’s something about that girl. She drives me fucking crazy.”

Kylie sat down beside me and sighed. “She’s beautiful and tragic, and I think that’s kinda your thing. Just... be careful with her, okay? She seems fragile.”

My voice was gravelly with unnatural emotion. “She is.”

Quiet descended on us, and I felt like an asshole, but this was the right thing to do. I’d let this situation go on for far too long, and Kylie deserved better.

“Find a man who takes you out to dinner. Buys you flowers. Someone nice.”

Her shoulders shook with laughter. “That would be a change of pace, I suppose.”

“You deserve nothing less,” I told her. “And if any fucker ever hurts you, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.” She gathered her purse and then looked up at me as I stood. “Can I at least have a hug before I go?”

I dragged her into my arms, embracing her in a hug that was more of a thank you. She’d put up with my shit and never asked for more, and even now, when she rightfully could have eviscerated me, she was nothing but a class act.

I’d never kissed Kylie. I’d never just held her. I’d never given her all the things she probably wanted, and I hoped she would find someone who could give those things to her. When I released her, and she headed for the door, I knew letting her go was the right thing. I felt a weight lifting from my chest as this chapter of my life came to an end. She represented a part of my past I’d been holding onto for far too long. Without her, I knew there would be no more pain, but for the first time in my life, I was okay with that.

She glanced at me one last time with a smile that assured me she would be all right. “Take care of yourself, Ace.”

Chapter 11

Birdie

MY EYES LINGERED ON THE door that separated me from him. He was in there with his beautiful, bright-eyed nurse. She was probably touching him. Kissing him. Breathing him in. Learning his body in a way I never would.

It felt like an arrow straight through the heart I didn't know I had. Why did it matter? He wasn't anything to me. Except Ace and I had history. From the moment he first captured me in his net, he'd been playing games with my heart. He couldn't possibly know it, but I thought about him often. I wondered what forces of nature conspired to create the man he was. The quiet, prickly bear of a man who had somehow managed to become a dependable nuisance in my life. Maybe that was why I found myself so drawn to him. Nuisance or not, I'd never been able to depend on many people. In fact, I could count them on one finger. But Ace made two.

Only, that rationalization didn't justify the way my eyes were burning or my body was trembling. It physically hurt to think of him in there with her. I wanted to hate her, but I couldn't. She'd been nice to me, and I think that was the worst part of it all.

I gently closed the door and padded back to the bed, weighing my options. More than anything, I wanted to escape. I wanted to run away and leave him and his mind-fucking ways behind. But I couldn't, not in my current condition. I'd tried twice already, and I'd paid for it dearly. My body was exhausted. Limp. Throbbing. The weed was wearing off, and my emotions were catching up with me.

I wanted to text Gypsy, but I didn't have a phone anymore. Trouble had betrayed me, and now Ace too. I had never felt as alone as I was at that

moment. And just when the tears began to splash against my cheeks faster than I could wipe them away, the door creaked open, and there he was. My tormentor in a leather vest.

His whiskey-colored eyes locked onto mine, and I felt my breath pause. I was humiliated as I tried in vain to wipe away the evidence of my emotions, but it was too late. He'd seen the tears. I didn't know what to expect from Ace—I never did—but when he strode toward me, his face hard, I leaned away on instinct. He caught me around the waist and hauled me up against his chest, his fingers locking around my jaw as his breath blew across my lips.

"Birdie." His voice was hoarse, troubled, and I couldn't figure out why. But in the next moment, I had my answer. Without warning, he leaned in and grazed his lips over mine, jump-starting my heart when he released a deep, lamented sigh. I collapsed into him, dragging in breaths of him like a drug I couldn't shake. My desperation fed his, and we both crossed enemy lines as the kiss escalated from a subtle touch to a full-on war. His fingers dug into my scalp, holding me in place as his chest rumbled in approval when I melted against him.

Sparks short-circuited my nervous system as I curled my fist into his shirt, parting my lips and drinking him in. He tasted of sweet mint and smelled of leather and cloves. It was my first real kiss, and I was fucking high. My fingers scraped up into his hair, twisting the locks at the base of his neck as I tried to pull him closer. I was already on my toes, and I wanted to climb him. I wanted his body against every square inch of mine, and the desire was completely foreign to me.

Heat expanded into my belly, melting down between my thighs as my hips rubbed the hard flesh poking against me. I could smell his arousal, wild and masculine. He wanted me. He wanted me so much he swallowed every torturous sound that escaped my lips like he owned them.

And then, abruptly, it was all over.

"Birdie." He reared back like I'd burned him, peeling my hands away as he tried to catch his breath. I waited for what inevitably came next—his rejection—but he just looked at me and shook his head. "Not here."

I assumed that meant it was time to go back to his house, but instead, he led me into the fray of the clubhouse, which had grown more congested in the past thirty minutes.

"Let's grab a drink," Ace said, his eyes avoiding mine.

He'd just spun my world out of orbit with a kiss that would wreck me for anyone else, and now he wanted to grab a drink? I was still coming back down to earth, trying to make sense of this insanity as he led me up to the bar.

"What do you want?" He turned to me in question, his face devoid of any obvious emotion. Just like that, he'd returned to his unruffled self while I still felt like I was on a roller coaster.

I tried to think of what I'd normally drink when I was out. Even though I wasn't of age, I had a fake ID, but I never had to use it. Most people assumed by the way I carried myself I was well over twenty-one.

"What kind of red wine do you have?" I asked the woman behind the bar.

Her lips tilted in amusement as she shook her head. "We've got liquor, beer, and whiskey, sweetheart."

My eyes moved over the inventory as a flush crept down my throat. I felt out of my element, and I couldn't tell if she was mocking me. A familiar flutter of irritation sparked inside me, and I tried my best to tamp it back down. Beside me, Ace seemed aware of my feelings, which surprised me, but not as much as what he did next.

His hand found the base of my neck, fingers lightly grazing the skin there as he leaned closer. His warmth calmed me in a way I didn't expect. "How about a Disaronno on the rocks?"

I nodded on autopilot, but internally, I was wondering how he knew what I liked. Then the photos came back to mind. Had I ever ordered that in front of Trouble? I couldn't recall a time that I had. Disaronno was a special occasion for me. Something I usually reserved for the quiet moments when I was alone and in my thoughts.

"Good choice." The bartender nodded. "An Old-Fashioned for you, Ace?"

He jerked his chin and thanked her, and we took a seat at the bar. Silence bloomed in the space between us, and I wondered what was going through his mind. I didn't have much time to consider it before another familiar face appeared beside us. I'd seen the guy around here earlier. He was tall, built, and handsome in a rugged way. I guessed that was the point of the whole Beards of War theme. The tattoo on his forearm read Kodiak, and I assumed that was his club moniker.

"Hey, brother," he greeted Ace with a nod. "Good to see you."

Ace grunted out a response just as the bartender returned with our drinks and slid them over to us. Kodiak ordered a beer for himself and then stretched his hand across the bar to me.

“I won’t wait for this crotchety fucker to introduce us. I’m Kodiak.”

I offered him a polite smile and a handshake, noting that Ace’s gaze lingered on the connection, his spine rigid. “Birdie.”

“Pretty Birdie.” Kodiak winked at Ace as he squeezed my palm in his. “I like that.”

He held on for a few seconds longer than necessary, and I wondered if he was intentionally taunting Ace or if he was actually flirting with me. When he finally let go, he leaned against the bar and took a sip of his beer, his eyes bouncing back and forth between us.

“What happened to Kylie?” he asked. “I saw she bounced early tonight.”

My fingers grew rigid around the glass in my hand as I waited for Ace to answer. It was a question I had intended to ask myself, and his response could send me plummeting over another emotional cliff I wasn’t prepared for.

“Kylie won’t be coming around here anymore,” Ace replied gruffly.

I wanted more details, but Kodiak shrugged as if to say the cookie typically crumbled that way around here. Ace’s phone rang, and when he fished it from his pocket, Lucian’s name flashed across the display. He excused himself to take the call, and I wondered if Lucian was checking in on me for Gypsy. And then I wondered what Ace would tell them.

Kodiak rapped his knuckles on the bar beside me as he invaded Ace’s seat. He removed a joint from his pocket and lit up, angling it toward me in question as smoke slipped between his lips. “You like the green shit?”

“I’m okay right now,” I answered, silently noting that the only person I ever wanted to share one with was Ace. “But thank you.”

He bobbed his head in time to the music. “Have you tried any of Ace’s strains yet?”

An image of the warehouse on the edge of the property came to mind as I nodded. “I think I’ve tried a couple. They were pretty intense.”

“Fuck, yeah.” Kodiak played a little drum beat with his hands as he spoke. “His shit is pure gold. Which one did you try?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “One made me crash hard, so I’m assuming that’s for sleep.”

“That would be Huckleberry Dream,” Kodiak informed me. “We named that one after him.”

“After who?”

“Ace.” Kodiak snorted. “AKA Huck. Shit, didn’t you know that?”

I didn’t know that, but I latched onto that little tidbit of information as I rolled the name over my tongue.

“Why does everyone call him Ace?” I asked.

“Everyone in the club has a moniker,” Kodiak informed me. “When he joined, he told us to call him Demon. It was the only thing he could think of. After a while, we realized it wasn’t a good connotation. So one day I said to him, you know, I don’t think you look like a demon. In fact, I think you’re pretty fucking Ace. And it just stuck after that.”

I tucked that little tidbit away for later, wondering exactly what that meant. I had so many questions, but I didn’t want to dive too deep with someone I just met. “So Ace creates the strains here?”

“He’s the breeder.” Kodiak nodded. “Got a wicked green thumb. Who would have guessed, right?”

“I certainly wouldn’t have,” I admitted as my eyes moved in the direction of the hall where Ace was still talking. “What’s your favorite of his creations?”

“Oh, that’s hard to choose.” Kodiak stroked his beard. “But I think I’d have to say Mary-Kate’s Last Dance. It isn’t for the faint of heart, but that shit will cure anything that ails you.”

Curiosity got the best of me as I considered the label. “Did you name that one too?”

“No.” He took another sip of his beer, the levity disappearing from his voice. “That was all Ace.”

Before I could ask anything else, Ace returned, his eyes narrowed at Kodiak. He didn’t have to say a word. Kodiak moved out of his seat and drained the rest of his beer. “Right, I guess I have shit to do.”

Ace nodded, and I said goodbye. Sipping the amber liquid in my glass, I savored the sweet amaretto warming my throat all the way down to my belly. I tried not to study Ace too closely, but when I noticed the condensation from his glass dripping down onto his fingers, I thought about tasting him again. The sweet bourbon on his lips invading my mouth and soaking into my brain, warming me all over. I wanted that, and it was becoming a problem.

As if Ace could sense my thoughts, he stood and cleared his throat.
“Ready to go?”

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Chapter 12

Ace

BIRDIE WAS QUIET WHEN WE got back to the house, but I could sense a storm brewing in her blue eyes. I could still smell her, still taste her on my lips, and I was itching for more. I couldn't even understand how it happened, but when I walked in and saw her crying, the only thing I wanted to do was take the pain away. I'd never kissed a woman before. I didn't know what the fuck I was doing in that department, but as soon as my lips locked onto hers, it didn't matter. One taste and I was fucking gone. I wanted to fall balls deep into her pussy until my dick gave out. But then I felt deprived for even considering it. Obvious vulnerability aside, she was too young for me, and the last thing she needed was an emotionally crippled robot like me.

Fuck.

I walked into the kitchen and poured a glass of water to give my hands something to do. All I really wanted was to get back to my shop and keep myself busy before I did something stupid. Like touch her again. But after the events of the day, it wasn't likely I'd convince Birdie to spend more time with Trouble anytime soon, and the way Kodiak was making eyes at her earlier ruled him out too.

"What did Lucian want?" Birdie asked from the sofa.

When I glanced at her, she had her feet curled up beneath her, just a glimpse of silky skin peeking out from under her skirt. My eyes traced the line of her thigh all the way to the hem where it disappeared. I needed to do something about the throbbing dick in my jeans, sooner rather than later.

“He was just returning my call,” I told her. “I checked in earlier to see how everything was going with the baby.”

Birdie swallowed and turned away, hiding any emotions that might give away her feelings. In profile, she was still the most enchanting woman I’d ever seen in real life. She came from Gypsy blood, and those exotic qualities were evident in her features. But where her sister had darker traits, Birdie was the opposite. Pure vanilla hair contrasted the honey-kissed glow of her skin, highlighting the glacial blue eyes that were her siren’s song. She was feminine and soft and more than any one man deserved, but Kylie was right about her. Beneath the goddess-like veil, she was broken, and the best thing I could do for her was draw the line now before I hurt her even more.

“How is he?” Birdie asked. When I blinked, she clarified. “The baby?”

“Doing well. Lucian won’t leave his side, I’m told.”

She nodded, expecting as much. “I’d like to see him again soon, but I suppose that’s probably off the table, isn’t it?”

I didn’t like to be the asshole, but there was no point lying to her. “Probably at least for a while. Until you adjust to your circumstances.”

“That’s what Gypsy wants?” she asked.

When I didn’t answer, she took that as affirmation.

“So, what happens now?”

I sat down at the kitchen table, maintaining eye contact but keeping my distance. “Well, we need to establish how this situation is going to work. I can’t have you sitting around here all day.”

“Obviously.” Birdie rolled her eyes. “I never asked to be here in the first place.”

“Gypsy mentioned you were in school, but you haven’t finished.”

She crossed her arms and leaned back against the sofa. “Well, I can’t now, can I? At least not under my real name.”

She was right about that. There were far worse consequences for Birdie than being imprisoned by me. If that detective from California ever found her, she could be looking at hard time. And I didn’t have any intention of letting that happen, so whether she liked it or not, she was stuck with me.

“What were you studying?” I asked.

She made a flippant gesture with her hands. “I told Gypsy I wanted to go to design school, but I didn’t really. It was just something I came up with to get her off my back.”

“She cares about you,” I told her.

“Yeah, she cares about me so much she heaped me into the too hard pile and made me your problem.”

“Well, maybe if you weren’t such a brat, she wouldn’t have done that.”

Birdie’s hands curled into fists for the second time that day. She was irritable and on the verge of a potential meltdown, and it showed. “Maybe you could just let me go, and then I wouldn’t be anyone’s problem. I’m a grown woman. I can take care of myself.”

“Hardly,” I snorted.

Her eyes narrowed, and an unsettling calm washed over her face as she studied me. “What about you, Huck? Are you really so perfect? From what I’ve heard, you’ve done time in prison yourself. So who are you to talk?”

The muscles in my back rippled with irritation as I stood, nearly knocking the chair over behind me. Birdie’s eyes widened, and all her bravado disappeared as I shot her a withering glare. “Don’t fucking talk about what you don’t understand.”

She didn’t bother to say anything else before I slammed the front door behind me.



By the time darkness settled in, I’d managed to get some of the regular maintenance done on the Harley. My temper had cooled after Birdie’s comment, but I still wasn’t eager to face her. Standing in the driveway, I had a long smoke while I contemplated all the shit we had to work through. In the end, the only conclusion I could draw was that I still didn’t have any idea how to tackle this clusterfuck.

When I finally walked back into the house, I’d already braced myself for whatever I might find. But what I saw was the last thing I ever imagined. In the kitchen, Birdie frantically waved a smoking pan over the sink while she cursed under her breath. The counters looked like a war zone with unidentified liquid splattered all over and half chopped vegetables lying on the floor.

“What the hell are you doing?” I grumbled, trying to hide the amusement in my voice.

She blinked at me, frustration pinching her features. “I don’t know. I was just trying to make something to eat.”

Guilt settled into my gut as I considered her words. She was hungry, and I hadn’t fed her. It was one of those basic human needs I told myself I’d be able to meet, and I hadn’t. I’d failed.

“Have a seat.” I pried the pan from her fingers and nodded toward the kitchen table. “I’ll take care of dinner.”

She hesitated like she was about to argue, but for once, she chose not to. I started cleaning up the mess she made while she watched on. I couldn’t quite figure out what she was trying to cook, and I doubted she knew either.

“Didn’t your sister ever teach you how to cook?” I asked as I set a pot full of water on the stove.

“She didn’t know how to cook either,” Birdie huffed. “Until Lucian taught her.”

A note of sadness in her voice led me to believe that even though she was happy for her sister, she missed the way things were before.

“Come here.” I gestured for her.

“What for?” She cocked her head to the side, revealing her uncertainty.

“We’re making pasta.” I pointed at the box I’d pulled from the cupboard. “You can’t fuck up pasta.”

Birdie joined me in the small space between the stove and the counter, and I didn’t really know what the fuck I was doing. Having her within reach wasn’t doing my self-control any favors. I wanted to taste her lips again. I wanted to grab her by the hips and hoist her up onto the counter and make her forget every awful thing that had ever happened to her as I fucked her the way she should be fucked.

“What do I do?” She looked up at me with those big doll-faced eyes.

“Wait until it boils and then we’ll pour it in.”

With nothing else to do, we stood there and stared at each other. I didn’t know what she was thinking, but I wanted to.

“Why did you break up with Kylie?” she asked.

I shifted, leaning up against the counter. This wasn’t the conversation I wanted to have, but I knew her curiosity wouldn’t be sated until we did. “It was just time. She deserved more than what I could offer her.”

Birdie swallowed, and it drew my attention to the fading bruises around her neck. I wanted her to tell me about them. And then I wanted to kill the motherfucker who thought he could do that to her.

“Do you think it hurt her feelings?” she pressed.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But she always knew it wasn’t going anywhere.”

“What does that mean?” Birdie braced herself against the counter as if she anticipated my answer.

I couldn’t look at her when I said it, so I nodded to the box of pasta, and while she poured it in, I gave her the only explanation I could offer. One that also served as a warning. “I’m not capable of caring about someone that way. The house and the white picket fence? That shit’s not in the cards for me.”

Birdie eyes hardened. “Who is it in the cards for? That fairy tale is a delusion living on borrowed time.”

Coming from her, it didn’t sound right. She was too young to be so jaded. But I couldn’t bring myself to tell her otherwise. I didn’t want to think about someone proving her wrong someday because, in my mind, nobody would ever be good enough for her.

“Watch the clock.” I opened the cupboard and retrieved the colander. “We’ll check it at eight minutes.”

The rest of the lesson was uneventfully quiet, and though I wondered what was on Birdie’s mind, I didn’t ask. We ate dinner together in silence, and I sensed her anxiety growing as we wound down for the evening. She still hadn’t spoken about what happened last night. She hadn’t told me what she needed, but I anticipated that tonight would go a lot smoother.

At least, that was my intention.

Chapter 13

Birdie

AS THE EVENING PROGRESSED, I felt myself falling inward, caving into a mixture of old fears and new, along with the odd thought that didn't really make sense to me. I had a long list of things that needed to be done. For starters, following up on Joe, scouting information, and figuring out how the hell I was going to get that video. But at present, I was trapped with a bear of a man who seemed more complicated by the second, and I wasn't entirely sure that this wasn't the best place for me right now.

I valued my freedom, but letting someone else take the wheel for a spell held some appeal. My life had been careening wildly out of control for as long as I could remember, and I was just fucking exhausted. Even though Ace was a cranky bastard, he managed to calm me whenever he was near. He took care of me in a way that nobody ever had, and in the grand scheme of things, that meant something. I just hadn't quite figured out what that something was.

"You want a smoke?" He stood in the doorway of my room, his eyes moving over my still unpacked suitcases. As his self-imposed bedtime approached, my anxiety crept over me, squeezing the life out of rational thought.

When I didn't answer, he nodded to a plastic bag on the bed. "I got you something today. Why don't you have a look?"

He disappeared down the hall while I opened it up and inspected it. I wasn't sure what to make of the fact that he'd read me so well or figured out my issue. But when I picked up the nightlight, relief filled my lungs. It was a fear I'd never been able to shake, and I hated that I couldn't. It was a

weakness. A constant reminder that even though I was all grown up, my past would always cling to me.

The memories of Ricky locking me in dark closets for days on end while he went on his benders weren't so distant as soon as the sun went down every day. Sitting in my own urine as I listened to him terrorize other girls was about as horrific as it got. Or at least I thought it was. Until Gypsy did a stint in juvie, and he came for me instead.

I installed the nightlight and sat on the bed before Ace reappeared with two joints in his hand. He offered me one and then lit it, and I tried not to let onto the disappointment I felt. I liked the ritual of passing it from his lips to mine as I soaked in the salt of his skin and the earthiness of the herb. I'd never done something so intimate with anyone, but it felt unimaginable not to now that we had.

"I'll give you ten minutes." His eyes moved over my face. "And I'll leave the door open tonight, but don't fuck that up by pulling any more shit. Got it?"

I was too proud to admit his offer made me feel better, so I just nodded. But when he headed for the door, I wasn't ready to let him go. I wanted him to feel as defenseless as I currently was. I wanted to level the playing field.

"Huck?" I called out.

He turned, a red flush creeping up his neck. If I didn't know any better, I would say he was embarrassed. "Everyone calls me Ace."

"I'm not everyone." I couldn't hide the annoyance in my tone. "And I want to call you Huck."

His eyes flashed with heat, and I felt it deep between my thighs. I didn't know why I couldn't stop myself from fucking it up.

"When can I try Mary-Kate's Last Dance?"

In the span of a second, his nostrils flared, and his eyes pooled with a darkness I didn't even know he possessed.

"Don't ever ask me that," he growled as he reached for the knob. "Don't ever say that name again."

The wood reverberated off the frame as he slammed it, and I flinched inwardly, wondering what I'd triggered. It wasn't an accident. I'd done it intentionally, always poking at someone else's wounds so I could pretend mine didn't exist.

But this time... this time, I wished I hadn't.



Huck was quiet throughout breakfast, and so far, he'd managed to avoid all eye contact. That didn't stop him from grunting orders all morning, though. *Get up, Birdie. Take a shower, Birdie. Eat your breakfast, Birdie.* When I finished my yogurt and granola, he had another one.

"Go get dressed, Birdie."

I peered at him over the rim of my coffee mug. "I am dressed."

Finally, his eyes moved over me. Slow and calculating, he couldn't hide the irritation brewing there. "I meant jeans and a T-shirt. That shit you're wearing now isn't going to fly."

I glanced down at the white summer dress I'd pulled out of my suitcase this morning. It was one of my favorites, but clearly, the art of appreciation was lost on him. Most normal red-blooded men seemed to like the way it fit my body. But Huck wasn't a typical man, and now it seemed like a sloppily executed move on my part.

"I like this dress." I clipped out through gritted teeth, prepared to defend my choice.

"You can like it all you want, but you're not wearing that to work."

"Work?" I blinked at him, certain I'd misheard him.

"Yeah, work. What normal folk do to earn a living. I have a business to run, and you're coming with me until I can figure out something else to occupy your time."

My lips parted, a protest loaded and ready to fire from my tongue, but then something occurred to me. His shop was in Las Vegas. This was the opportunity I'd been looking for. I could escape. Go somewhere. Do something.

I didn't know what those things were. In a matter of days, I'd been cut off from my entire world. No phone. No Gypsy. No Trouble. I was an island now. But there was still the matter of Joe to deal with. I had to get my hands on that video. It was the only way I could ever truly be free, and I couldn't do that if I was sitting here, allowing myself to get wrapped up in Huck.

I made a show of irritation as I slipped down the hall and into my room, but I didn't know if he bought it. Rummaging through my suitcases, I

realized his request for jeans and a T-shirt wasn't going to be so easy to fulfill. I had a couple of pairs of jeans, but they weren't exactly the working type. Regardless, they'd have to do.

I tossed my dress aside and slid into them as I considered the possibilities for my escape. I'd have to leave everything behind, but it wouldn't be the first time. Grabbing the only thing that mattered—my mother's hag stone—I snuck it into my pocket and threw on a white tank top.

Before I could think of anything else I might need, Huck appeared in the doorway, his eyes moving over me with lazy scrutiny. I couldn't read his expression, and that irritated me.

"This is all I have," I muttered. "Take it or leave it."

"Fine," he grumbled. "Get your ass in the truck."

⋮

Chapter 14

Ace

THE SHOP WAS BUZZING WITH activity when we arrived twenty minutes later than what was typical for me. I owned the joint, but it didn't mean I skipped out whenever I felt like it. I showed up and punched my timecard every day like the rest of the guys. If being in prison had taught me anything, it was consistency.

The first couple of years after I got out, I couldn't bend or break the structure that had been ingrained into me. For thirteen years, I'd lived and breathed by their rules. It never occurred to me there was any other way until Lucian made a point to tell me it was okay if I didn't get up every morning at five. The smallest decisions were the hardest ones. What to eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. How to spend my downtime. Being free wasn't as easy as I'd anticipated when I was still caged inside. One day, I ran into a guy I knew from prison, and even though I'd never spoken to him, he seemed to recognize the war in my eyes. He told me about his club, the Beards of War, and invited me to check it out sometime. They were men like me. The misfits, the condemned. They took me in, and I found my place in this world.

Lucian helped me figure out what the fuck I wanted to do with my life, and now, here I was, five years later, free as a bird with a little Birdie in tow. As I paraded her through the shop, all the tools paused, and every set of eyes turned to examine her.

I knew bringing her here wasn't my best idea, but I didn't know it would make me want to murder every one of my employees. Birdie took their gawking in stride, ignoring it completely. She wasn't a stranger to the

wandering eyes, or the entitlement men felt when they looked at her. Everyone wanted something. And for the first time since I'd known her, it really hit me how fucked up that was.

"Here." I led her into the office and grabbed a spare work shirt off the rack. "Put this on."

She eyeballed the blue material with apprehension. "Do I have to?"

"Yes," I gritted out. "I'm putting you to work today. Wouldn't want to ruin that pretty white shirt of yours."

She rolled her eyes, the way she usually did when something didn't go her way. Truthfully, the shirt was mostly for safety reasons. I didn't want her getting burned or scratched or anything else, considering she'd had enough of that to last her a lifetime already. But I also didn't need the guys in the shop trying to look down her top every time she bent over.

"I bet you just love this, don't you?" She groaned as she slipped the shirt on over her tank top.

"Bossing you around?" I smirked.

Her eyes flared. The conversation should have stopped there, but she started it.

"Trust me, you'd know when I was bossing you around," I added.

Pink crept into her cheeks, and my cock began to swell again. I didn't think it was possible, considering I'd practically rubbed it raw in the shower this morning, but there it was, that hunger I couldn't satiate. Like any man, I thought about sex, but I always considered myself too fucked up to share something like that with someone. During most of the years when I would have learned how to navigate relationships and the like, I'd spent in prison with a bunch of other savages. Emotions and women were too complicated a subject for me to ever figure out, so it was just easier to watch porn and pretend I was content with my hand. When that didn't work, Kylie was always happy to provide some pain. And the pain made everything better, at least for a little while.

But this was something different. I couldn't stop thinking about what it would be like with Birdie. Just once, I wanted to know how she felt from the inside. Except I knew once wouldn't be enough. I didn't think a thousand times would be enough, and that was the issue.

"So, what now?" She cleared her throat, and I wondered if she was thinking about it too. Then I shook my head. I needed to crash that train of thought before I plowed straight into her.

I handed her a pair of safety glasses and some gloves. “Now we get to work.”



“What’s wrong with it?” Birdie asked, leaning over to examine the guts of the truck. There was an emotional element to her voice. A mixture of curiosity and concern. She’d managed to surprise me today, and people didn’t often surprise me.

I’d given her an ass load of busywork—stupid shit at first like sweeping the floor and tidying up the workbench—but she wasn’t satisfied with that. She wanted to know what I was doing, and I finally put her to work. Birdie wasn’t happy unless you threw a challenge her way. Her mind worked fast, and she liked puzzles.

So far, I’d let her help with some PM work and two inspections, but now I had to tackle a mechanical issue. Normally, I didn’t like anyone else in my space while I was working. My guys had an understanding that unless I asked for their help, they stayed in their lane, and I stayed in mine. But Birdie was intuitive about my needs. She didn’t touch something unless I told her to, and she asked questions with an eagerness that pleased me. Her hands were smaller than mine, which was a benefit I’d already exploited several times over, and she was a fast learner. Oil and grease smudged her cheeks, and her pretty blond hair was a mess too, but she’d never looked more tempting than she did right then.

Christ.

“I’m not sure what the problem is yet,” I mumbled, trying to focus on the task at hand. “It’s a process of tests and elimination now. We’re going to have to throw her up on the lift.”

“Will you show me what to do?” she asked.

I considered refusing her because it was a big job, but then I wondered how many times Birdie had ever been excited about something like this in her life. She’d told me herself she didn’t really know what she wanted to do. She needed a purpose, and if this was something she liked, I owed it to her to let curiosity lead her. As long as she was safe.

Always safe.

"After lunch." I blinked away the dark thoughts lingering just beneath the surface. "Let's eat."

She checked the clock on the wall, noting that it was noon exactly. I guessed it wouldn't take her long to pick up on my inflexibility when it came to my schedule. In the office, I unpacked what I'd made us for the day. Turkey sandwiches with vegetables and an apple on the side. Birdie's nose scrunched up when I handed them to her.

"Uggggg," she groaned. "More vegetables. Wheat everything. Do you always eat this healthy?"

I pointed at the sink, gesturing for her to wash up beside me. "You only get one body. Might as well take care of it."

Her elbow bumped against mine as we washed up together, but I felt her eyes on my face, and I knew that wasn't the end of the conversation. "Yeah, but you smoke. Seems kind of contradictory, doesn't it?"

"Everyone has their vices." I shrugged. "What's worse, weed or sugar?"

Birdie considered it as she towed off her hands. "But isn't that a problem with your job? I mean, don't the two clash?"

"It's only a problem if I fuck up," I told her. "And I never fuck up. I don't smoke at work either."

She looked up at me, eyes bright and blue. I couldn't look away, and it was pure instinct that drove me to wipe a grease smudge off her cheek with my thumb. She was shorter than me, but it felt like a good fit. It felt like I wanted to tug her against me and do shit I wasn't supposed to think about.

"You've turned out to be quite the little grease monkey," I murmured, my face tilting toward hers. I didn't know what the fuck I was doing. I just knew that if I didn't taste her lips again, I was going to hate myself for it.

Birdie's eyes fluttered shut, and her chin tilted up toward me, offering the access I wished she'd just deny. My fingers trailed over her jaw and down her throat, feeling the drumbeat of her pulse beneath the soft skin.

"Fuck it." My lips crashed down onto hers, and I wrapped an arm around her waist, dragging her against me. She made a soft noise as my dick poked against her belly, and I wanted to play that sound on repeat all day long.

"What are you doing to me?" I growled as her fingers curled into my shirt.

“What are you doing?” she accused, pausing long enough to take a breath before we were at each other’s faces again.

Her lips parted for me, and that was her first mistake. But then she parted her legs as I hoisted her up into my arms, scooting her ass onto the counter as half of my shit clattered to the floor around us. My palm came up to cup the back of her head, fingers tangling in her hair. She smelled so fucking good. She tasted so fucking sweet.

My head spun as I tried to get a fucking grip. I needed to pull away, and I needed to stop this, but Birdie wasn’t stopping. She was firing on all cylinders, her fingers digging into my biceps as she tried to pull me closer. I had a mental list of a million reasons this could never happen, but right now, I couldn’t think of one.

“Huck,” she murmured against my lips.

Goddamn her for calling me that. Goddamn her for getting inside my head this way. She was a sorceress. A witch. Some mythical creature sent to destroy me. The levelheadedness I was known for was nonexistent right now.

“You shouldn’t want this, Birdie,” I growled. “Tell me to fucking stop.”

“I can’t.” She pawed at me, anywhere her hands could reach, and it was too goddamned much.

I grabbed her by the hips, hauling her body forward as I pivoted toward her. My entire body shuddered as I dragged the heat of my dick against the seam between her thighs. She tipped her head back, forcing me to chase the sweetness of her lips.

“More,” she begged. “Please, Huck. I want to know what this feels like.”

Her whispered confession froze me, and when my eyes locked onto hers, I realized how fucked up I was for doing this to her. She’d never been treated right. She’d never known love. Her whole life was a desolate landscape of one user after another. At least, that was how I imagined it. But I was selfish, and I needed those details. I needed to know exactly what she meant.

“Tell me,” I commanded, unrelenting in my grip on her body.

She blew out a breath as her eyes found mine. “I want you to be my first. The first man who I choose.”

She could have said anything else, and I would have come to my senses. Anything but that. I didn’t tell her what I knew to be absolute. If I was her

first, then I'd be her last. She had summoned the demon in me who refused to share his toys.

Obsession.

I could feel it breeding. Overtaking everything. I hadn't been able to admit it, but she intoxicated me. What I wanted from her was more than she could ever give. It was everything. Her breath, her words, her fucking mind. Those eyes that plagued my every waking hour and haunted me in my dreams. I was bending, and if I didn't stop now, she would break me.

Every cell in my brain screamed at me to do the right thing. But her spell was more than I could resist. I couldn't stop kissing her. Tasting her. Pawing at her.

I flicked open the button of her jeans, and the storm raged on in her eyes when she looked up at me. A challenge. A plea. I only wanted to touch her once. I needed to feel how wet she was for me. And when my palm slipped down over the soaked cotton of her panties, I wasn't disappointed.

"Christ, Birdie." My voice was barely audible when my forehead fell against hers. "Just tell me to stop."

"No." She tilted her hips up to meet my palm.

My eyes fell shut, and I shuddered when I dragged a finger against the cotton-covered seam of her pussy. An inch south, and I could have been inside her. I could have felt her want soaking me as I slipped past the point of no return. But I needed to hold onto what little self-control I had left.

I stroked her through the material, watching her eyes melt into darkness. Her chest rose and fell as I unbuttoned the work shirt, two hard nipples scraping against the white material of her tank top.

She wasn't wearing a fucking bra.

I didn't know how I could have missed it earlier, but now, it was painfully obvious. Birdie made a noise that got caught in her throat as I dug my fingers into the cotton, circling her clit with a friction she desperately needed. My throat worked as I dipped forward, intending only to rub my face against her tits. I did it a few times before it wasn't enough anymore. My lips paused over the sharp peak where her nipple poked against the fabric. Her fingers curled into my hair, and she cried out as my tongue soaked through the material, dampening it until I could see the pretty pink bud.

"Huck," she chanted, grinding her hips against my palm.

My mouth latched onto the soft globe of her breast through the tank top, throat working as I sucked. She was getting close. I could feel it in the tightening of her muscles. Her thighs squeezing around my hips. Every lash of my tongue incited a fresh wave of goose bumps on her skin. I was in control. But then she reached down and dragged her nails over my jeans, scraping against the hardness of my cock.

“Birdie,” I rasped. “Don’t.”

Her only answer was a growl as she tipped her head back to reveal the delicate flesh of her throat. I yanked my hand out of her jeans and grabbed both sides of her ass, dragging her against me as my lips found her neck. My teeth bit into her skin, claiming her as I jackhammered my body against hers.

The counter shook, and more shit fell to the floor. But I kept going. I kept grinding my dick against her, knowing that just beneath the barrier, her pussy was soaked for me. Birdie clung to me, nails biting into my arms. She was shaking. Breathless. On the verge of desperation as she pleaded for me to keep going.

And then she fractured, her body shuddering against me before she went completely limp in my arms. In the aftermath, she almost fell out of my grasp, but I caught her. Cheeks flushed and eyes heavy, she looked up at me, and then down between us, where my throbbing dick was still pressing at the zipper of my jeans.

Confusion clouded her eyes, and it was evident she didn’t know what to do now. Neither did I. Her lips were swollen from our kiss, and red patches bloomed on the surface of her skin where I’d sucked. She was thoroughly marked by me, and for now, that was enough.

Leaning forward, I kissed her one last time and then swatted her on the ass as I helped her down. “Let’s eat.”

Chapter 15

Birdie

HUCK WILLIAM FALLON.

A little light snooping around his office while he disappeared into the bathroom had given me some insight into the man who'd just crawled inside my soul and rattled my caged heart. It was still beating hard from our encounter, and I was still trying to come back down to earth.

I didn't even know how it happened. One minute, he was looking at me with those soulful whiskey eyes, and the next, I was spreading my legs for him. He was beautiful. Animalistic. *Addictive*. I realized when he was kissing me, touching me, wrecking me... it would be so easy to fall into a habit I couldn't shake. I wanted him in ways I'd never wanted a man. I craved the intimacy of his eyes on mine while he was inside me. Fucking me. Owning me. Destroying me.

His office smelled like him, and it wasn't making it any easier to pull myself out of this quicksand. Now was my opportunity to run. I told myself that was what I was going to do this morning. But maybe I could stay. *Just a little longer.*

In this bubble, none of the things that could destroy me existed. The video. The detective. My past. It was just Huck and me. He was teaching me how to fix the broken, and I thought maybe he could figure out how to fix me too.

My fingers trailed over his desk, touching all his things with a possessiveness I didn't recognize. He was a simple man, and his office reflected that. Wooden rolling chair. Six ballpoint pens. Bills marked "paid" with tidy black ink. There were tools I didn't recognize. Wires and spare

parts. I imagined that his brain must look like this too. He had a mind unlike anyone else I knew, and I wished for the life of me I could figure it out.

When I turned to look for something else to put my fingers on, I found him lurking in the doorway. He'd been watching me, and his expression bordered on tense. He didn't like people touching his things. I sensed that when I was working with him and by the way his guys used their own tools on their own side of the shop.

"You better get used to it," I told him. "If you plan to keep me around."

His shoulders relaxed, and he stepped inside, draping his long, heavy-duty body into the wooden chair. Carefully, and without words, he unwrapped his sandwich and began to eat. I parked up on his desk, my legs swinging freely as I nibbled on my own sandwich and left the veggies behind. Huck noticed, and it seemed to bother him, but he chose not to say anything. This time.

The rest of the day went by surprisingly fast, and when I checked the clock on his dashboard during the ride home, it was hard to believe we'd put in a solid eight hours. But Huck's work was never done, which I realized when we got back to the compound, and he drove straight to the warehouse.

"Come on." He offered me his hand to help me down from the truck. "I need to check on the plants."

The door to the warehouse was secured with another pin code and sitting just inside were two men with guns resting in their laps. When they saw me with Huck, they nodded, resuming the business of scrolling on their phones.

The smell was the first thing to hit me. It was potent. Fresh and unmistakably weed. The building was large, and all I could see were rows and rows of green gold. Huge oscillating fans and light fixtures hung from the ceiling, replicating the wind and sun the plants required to grow. While it was at least ninety degrees outside, the low rumble of an air conditioner cooled the building to what felt like seventy. It was also more humid than the dry desert air outside, and I couldn't imagine the amount of work or knowledge it took to maintain this place.

"You really grow all of this?" I asked as I trailed after Huck.

"I mostly breed," he rumbled. "The other guys do the grunt work. Rotating, feeding, watering. But I still have to check the crops to see if we need any adjustments."

As he spoke, he examined several of the plants, kneeling to rotate them. He used his senses while he worked, smelling, touching, studying. I didn't know what it was he saw, but when he walked back to the front by the guards, he grabbed a clipboard from the wall and jotted down his notes. There was a quick conversation with the guards as Huck instructed them to call Kodiak and make the adjustments. And just like that, we were on our way again.

Back at the house, Huck kicked off his boots, and I did the same with my sneakers, noting how filthy I was. I needed a shower, but my curiosity left me lingering in the kitchen, waiting to see what he'd do next.

"So this is all you guys do?" I sat down at the kitchen table while he poured two glasses of water and brought me one. "You just work and grow weed, and that's it?"

"What did you expect?" His lip tilted at the corner. "Murder and mayhem?"

"Something like that." I shrugged.

"It's mostly quiet around here," he answered vaguely. "If shit goes down, it doesn't happen at the compound. That's a hard and fast law in the club. The guys keep their wives and kids here, so if you're wondering if you're safe, I can tell you there isn't a single place in this world where you'd be more secure."

"Okay."

Silence descended upon us, and my cheeks heated as I wondered what was on his mind. Was he still thinking about this afternoon? Had my reactions been normal? I didn't know the answers to these questions, and it left me feeling off balance.

I didn't know anything about normal. Wanting someone was a completely foreign concept for me. Even if it was natural, I worried I'd done it wrong. I didn't know how to just relax and let go. But Huck had a way of making it all okay when his hands were on my body, and everything felt so damn good.

In my mind, I knew I'd try having sex with someone someday, but it had always been a nameless face. A mechanical action. I would lay there while he fucked me sweetly. That image didn't come close to what happened today. Huck didn't even penetrate my body, but he penetrated my mind. Nothing about this afternoon was mechanical or routine. I was a slave to the chemical high he provided, and I wanted more.

His gaze lingered on my face as tension bloomed between us. He'd taken nothing from me today. He'd asked for nothing. Secretly, I wanted him to ache for it. I wanted to watch him unravel as he lost himself to the pleasure of what I could do for him.

"Huck—"

"You should go wash up," he interjected. "I'll get dinner started."

My tongue darted out to wet my dry lips, and his eyes flared. I was familiar enough with that expression to know he wanted me. But for whatever reason, he was still holding himself back. As I walked down the hall, paranoia invaded my thoughts. He couldn't know about my past, could he? Did he know I was the toy all the other men had used up and tossed aside?

My eyes stung as I stood beneath the scalding heat of the shower. It wasn't really necessary, but I scrubbed my whole body twice. It made no difference, and I knew it wouldn't. No matter how many times I scrubbed it, I'd never wash away the past.

When I finished, I wiped away the steam in the mirror and stared at myself. I felt empty and alone. It always came back to the surface. My self-worth was entirely tied up in the way I looked. I'd learned from a young age it was the only thing that mattered, and once I had, I'd brandished my appearance like a weapon. But internally, it felt like a curse to have a body men coveted. I often thought that if I didn't, I would have been gifted with something else. Maybe I'd be appreciated for my mind, or my talents, or anything other than a beauty that would eventually desert me.

When Huck looked at me, he wasn't impressed by the clothes or makeup or all the efforts that usually paid off with other men. For that reason, I decided not to bother with any of it when I walked out of the bathroom. My face was clean from makeup, hair tied into a messy topknot. I draped a silky robe over my nude body and cinched it at the waist.

Something had shifted in me today, and I didn't know exactly what it was. But when I walked down the hall and Huck's gaze landed on me, it wasn't approval I needed. It was acceptance. His eyes were dark and hot as they swept over my frame, pausing to linger on my face.

"No makeup." I shrugged.

"You never needed it to begin with," he answered gruffly.

I sat down at the kitchen table and watched him cook. Whatever it was smelled delicious, and I was pleasantly surprised when he dished it up.

“Alfredo?” I examined the dish as he poured me a glass of wine. It was a brand I drank often, and I hadn’t seen it in the house until now.

“How much did Trouble tell you about me?” My nails bit into my palm as he sat down across from me.

He refused to make eye contact as he stuck his fork into the pasta. “She hung out with you for over a year, so she told me a fair bit.”

“And why was this important?” I gestured to the wine and pasta. “Why did it matter what I liked to eat or drink?”

He took a bite, choosing to ignore me. It was a simple question, but the rigid set of his body told me otherwise. He didn’t like where this conversation was going, and it only cemented my determination.

“What else do you know about me?” I demanded. “Who else did you recruit to spy on me?”

As he took another bite, my frustration took root as I dissected the words he wouldn’t say. He had more information on me than I ever could have known. The demon who lived inside me didn’t like that. She didn’t like being exposed, and his silence was dousing her temper in kerosene.

“Answer me.” My voice took on a life of its own. Heat licked at every surface of my flesh as my breathing accelerated. The spiral had started, and I couldn’t stop it. Huck must have noticed. He’d seen it happen once before when Lucian hurt my sister, but he wasn’t doing anything to stop it. He wasn’t even trying. My head felt like it was going to implode. Rage simmered inside the cauldron of my heart, quiet and calm before the tidal wave of fire.

“Tell me, Huck.” My voice cut through the vacant silence. “Tell me all the dirty, sordid details you collected about my life.”

His fork clattered to the plate as he finally turned to look at me. And he must have known it was the wrong choice. He must have known his words would provoke me.

“Everything,” he said. “I know every goddamned thing there is to know about you, Birdie. Except for what’s in your mind. Those are the only secrets you can ever keep from me.”

Blackness seeped into my vision, and I felt my control slipping away as I lunged at him. The demon was taking over. She became the master, and I the slave. Garbled words flew from my lips as I tried in vain to eliminate the threat. *He couldn’t know my secrets. He couldn’t know my past.* My fists pummeled anywhere I could reach, and Huck just took it. Every time I

launched at him, I expected him to stop me, but he didn't. He let me keep going, and it only infuriated me more.

"Fight back!" I screamed. "Fight me, goddammit!"

I was out of breath and full of hatred for myself when he finally gave in and took mercy on me. Before I could even make sense of it, he had me in a vise grip, completely locked down beneath the weight of his body.

"Stop," he commanded.

But I couldn't. I wouldn't. The demon wanted to have her way, and there was no negotiating with her. He should know that. If he claimed to know every filthy thing about me, he should know I was truly capable of anything.

"Birdie." His voice softened when he gripped my face in his fingers, trying to focus my attention on him. My breath was erratic and unsteady while my heart pounded so violently in my chest I thought I might die. And to my absolute horror, wet tears had begun to leak from my eyes.

"Birdie," he repeated. "Look at me."

Somehow, I managed to do that much. My vision was blurry and unfocused, but his face became clearer as I blinked away the pain.

"You don't get to know me," I sobbed. "Not unless I say so."

I sounded like a child, and I felt pathetic for allowing my emotions to run wild again. I was humiliated and vulnerable, and there wasn't a single thing I could do about it.

"Come here." Huck dragged me across the table where he had me pinned. He cupped the back of my head and pressed it against his chest before he wrapped his arms around me. His heart echoed against my cheek, the steady rhythm lulling me into a motionless haze as adrenaline seeped from my system.

The episodes always drained me, depriving me of energy for anything else until I recovered. But this time was different. This time, I was wrapped up in Huck. His scent, his warmth, and his strength enveloped me in a sense of security I'd never allowed myself to feel. We were intimately close, my ass planted on the table with my legs spread wide as his hips rested against my stomach. Worst of all, I'd wrapped my arms around his sturdy frame like he was my salvation. But I didn't let go. I didn't want to. And neither did he.

He dragged his nose through my hair, breathing me in. And then he pressed his lips against the shell of my ear, repeating the process all over

again as he kissed his way down my jaw. When he finally got to my lips, I was hungry and wet for him. Dinner was scattered on the floor around us, long forgotten as his fingers grazed the hem of the silk robe against my thigh. He pulled it aside, then repeated the action on the other leg. Leaning back, he studied my face before his eyes drifted to the part of me he'd exposed. I was open for him. Vulnerable to him. He could see everything, and I didn't try to hide it. This was the broken, filthy part of me he needed to see. It was now or never. He could take it or leave it.

His attention drifted up while he tugged at the loose fabric covering my breasts. When he finished, all that remained was the rope around my waist and the fabric pooling at my sides. I held my breath as I waited to see what he would do next. After everything that had just happened, more than anything, I wanted him to want me, yet I was terrified he couldn't. It didn't make sense, but it was undeniable. He'd seen me at my worst, and I wanted him to tell me it was okay. I wanted him to tell me it didn't matter how fucked up I was, he wanted me anyway.

Just like with everything else, Huck did it in his own way. He reached for the zipper on his jeans, slowly dragging it down while his eyes locked onto mine. They were filled with dark promises and threats that reflected in his voice.

"Tell me to stop, Birdie. If you don't, I'll never let you go."

"Don't stop." I forced the words from my raw throat. "Don't you fucking dare."

A low, feral growl rumbled from his chest as he tugged his briefs down. And there it was, his masculinity on full display. His cock hung heavy and thick between his thighs, a tiny drop of liquid glistening from the tip. He was swollen for me, and I knew the sheer size of him would hurt, but I wanted him inside me. I wanted it so much my body physically ached for it.

He gripped my thighs and yanked me forward as his fingers came to rest on my jaw, holding me in place while he assaulted me with his lips. He kissed me like he couldn't stop, and I recognized that because I felt the same way. There was no sweet talk. No more asking permission. His dick nudged against me, smearing his pre-come into my pussy. My fingers curled into his hair, tugging as he spread me wider, opening me up to his hips.

The dangerous game we were playing resonated somewhere in my mind when he started to push inside me, raw. There was nothing between us. It

was reckless, and it was bliss. The fat head of his cock stretched me to the point of pain, and still, I chanted for more. I wasn't satisfied until he buried himself deep with a sound so full of agony it would forever be burned into my mind.

"Fuck me, Birdie," he rasped. "You're my goddamn heaven."

His hands came to rest under my ass, squeezing me as he pulled back and thrust forward again. I looked up at him in fascination as his eyes rolled back and his mouth grew slack. He was drugged, high on me, and it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

In and out, he thrust, over and over again. He fucked me like a beast, a slave to his own demon at that moment. His hands skated over my body in worship, touching and admiring every curve and every soft patch of skin he found. One blissful sensation melted into another as he sucked my nipples into his mouth. Tugged on my hair. Branded my skin with his teeth and his lips. I held onto him for dear life, too lost in the sensations exploding in my body like fireworks. It hurt, and it healed me. I'd never felt such pain and pleasure together, and I couldn't string together a logical thought. I just kept begging him for more. More. More. More.

He fucked me like an animal, the table sliding against the floor with every thrust. His dick was starting to swell inside me as his head lolled back, eyes closing.

"Birdie," he pleaded as he was on the threshold of sanity. "This pussy is mine now. Fuck, you feel so good. Come for me, angel. I can't hold back."

I melted around him as spasms ricocheted through my core. I wanted to hear him say those filthy words again and again. *My body was his*. He could have everything but my heart because that would only ever be mine. At least that was what I wanted to believe.

But then he buried himself deep, shuddering out his release inside me with a breathlessness that seemed to purge years of pent-up anguish. I felt him throbbing, his come warming me as it leaked into my womb. He didn't pull away. He opened his eyes, and they clashed with mine as he leaned in to kiss me.

"Mine," he declared between whispered breaths. "You're fucking mine."

Chapter 16

Ace

BIRDIE LOOKED UP AT ME with soft, crystalline eyes and lips swollen from my kiss. She was messy and perfect, and I didn't want to leave the warmth of her body. My dick was still inside her as I silently chanted my claim to her on repeat.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

But then reality began to decay the fantasy, and the weight of what I'd done settled over me. I'd just taken from her the one thing I said I never would. I poisoned her with my seed. With the demonic DNA woven into every fiber of my body. My actions proved that I wasn't any different than the monster from my past.

You did this. You killed her. You brought her here knowing this would happen. Because you're fucking evil, and it spreads to everything around you. There is no salvation for you. Everything good will die in your presence.

My head collapsed forward, and I didn't know what to do next. The only thing I ever knew how to do was retreat. I pulled away and broke the eye contact between us as I tried to gather my thoughts. Zipping up my jeans, I glanced at Birdie one last time. She was still mostly naked, on full display, and it physically hurt me to look at something so beautiful, knowing that I might have caused her further pain. Ed was right. I could never have something as good and pure as her.

"It's late," I told her. "You should go get ready for bed."

My eyes drifted away from her, unable to witness what I'd done. Birdie moved robotically, wrapping the robe around herself and concealing her

body as she stood. I felt her gaze on my face, but she never said a word.

When she padded down the hall, I finally felt like I could breathe again as I collected my thoughts. I waited until her door slammed shut before I grabbed my phone and keys and headed outside.



“Ace.” Lucian looked surprised to see me at his door, but he didn’t hesitate to usher me inside. He didn’t ask me the reason for my visit, and I didn’t expect him to. I wasn’t even really certain of it myself, but Lucian had always extended an open-door policy to me. I’d just never really used it before.

I walked inside and sat down on the sofa while he lingered on the threshold of the kitchen. “Can I get you a drink?”

“No, I’m good.”

He nodded and took a seat in the padded chair across from me, both of us quiet while we observed each other. Beneath his eyes, dark circles lingered, and I gathered he wasn’t getting a lot of sleep in early fatherhood.

“You taking care of yourself?” I asked.

He smiled in a way that was typical of the reclusive man I’d come to know. He never wanted anyone to worry about him. “Always.”

The room fell quiet, and I knew he was giving me space. He never felt the need to fill such stretches with meaningless words, but in my disconcerted state, I wished he would. “How’s the baby?”

“A champion,” he answered proudly. “He’s resting with Gypsy right now, or else I’d bring him out to show him off.”

Admittedly, it was weird for me to see Lucian as a father and a husband. They were both fairly new developments in his life, and something I’d never really expected to see. For as many years as I’d known him, he’d only ever been married to his work as an attorney. When he wasn’t saving lost souls like me, he was finding what small semblance of peace he could in a confessional booth. But if anyone deserved a second chance at happiness, it was him.

“I know a lot has changed recently,” Lucian observed, seemingly aware of my thoughts. “My attention has shifted. But as long as I still have breath in my lungs, you should know my home is always open to you, Ace.”

I didn’t do well at reciprocating these expressions of emotion, but Lucian never expected that from me anyway. He was one of the few people in this world who could read me without words. I didn’t have to say much around him because he understood me. But right now, I wanted to. I just didn’t know where to begin.

He leaned back and studied me, trying to figure out the best way to approach whatever was on my mind. Lucian never came at anything without giving it a lot of thought first, and that was one of the things I respected about him.

“I’ve been wondering how things are going with you taking on Birdie. It’s a big ask. But I know Gypsy is grateful. You are in both of our debts.”

I scrubbed a hand over my beard, craning my neck from one side to the other to release some tension. “She’s... challenging.”

Lucian observed me in a way that told me he was well aware of my internal struggles.

“Do you remember the first time I met you?” he mused.

“How could I forget?” An awkward laugh burst from my chest. “You were the only visitor I had in ten years.”

He’d found me rotting away in a prison cell, and for reasons I couldn’t fathom, he’d decided to help me. But I was more machine than man at that point, and it wasn’t an easy road.

“You didn’t say one word the entire visit,” he recalled. “You just sat there, staring at me like I was some kind of lunatic.”

“Yet you kept coming back.” I shrugged.

He chuckled, but the humor slowly disappeared from his eyes as he went on. “Twenty-three visits. That’s how many it took before you finally spoke to me. I told myself that if you didn’t respond by number twenty-five, I would have to move on.”

I shifted uncomfortably, recalling the time in my life when I didn’t have a voice. Beneath my facial hair, I still bore the scars from the fishing line I’d yanked from my lips. Ed shouldn’t have bothered to sew them shut. I didn’t have anything to say for a very long time.

“You were the first person I’d spoken to in seventeen years,” I admitted.

Lucian's fingers draped over the arm of the chair, tapping out a steady rhythm as he considered my words. "The guards told me you were either deaf, dumb, or stupid. But as it turned out, you were the smartest son of a bitch I'd ever taken on as a client."

I shook my head in dismissal, but Lucian wasn't finished.

"Every time I stop to think about how far you've come, it amazes me."

"I still have a long way to go," I murmured.

"You've overcome more than most people would be lucky to survive, Ace. And as long as I've known you, you've been too hard on yourself. So whatever it is that's brought you here tonight, here's my advice. Don't let the past spill into your future. Every second, every minute, every hour... they aren't guaranteed. We have to make the most of the time we've got while we're here, and you can't do that if Ed continues to control your thoughts. It's up to you to decide now. What kind of man are you? The mold he created for you or someone else. Someone who you choose to be."

I leaned forward and rested my arms against my thighs, hiding the disgrace I felt. Lucian's advice was always solid, but I wasn't so sure he'd say the same once he knew the depraved thing I'd done. I was ashamed and repentant, but unlike Lucian, I didn't believe in an ethereal power that could forgive me for such sins. My dark soul would have to bear this stain for eternity.

"I took Birdie," I blurted. "I had sex with her."

I almost couldn't look at Lucian to see his reaction. I couldn't bear the disappointment I was certain I'd find there. But his face never changed.

"I expected this would happen," Lucian admitted. "You two seem to have a connection."

"That's it?" I grunted. "That's all you're going to say about it? Aren't you going to ask if she even wanted it?"

Lucian leaned back and shook his head. "I don't need to. I know your character. And I also know that you came here to punish yourself, but you came to the wrong place. I'm the last person who's going to berate you for something I did myself with Birdie's sister. So if you are looking to hear how fucked up you are, I wouldn't hold your breath."

"But it is fucked up." I shot up from the couch and began to pace.

Lucian waited for me to calm before he spoke again, his voice softer. "It was your first real experience, Ace. You stepped outside of your comfort zone, and now you're at war with your thoughts. This is a process.

Remember that you went through something similar every time you experienced something new after you left prison. It's only natural for you to be conflicted, but at some point, you will have to stop punishing yourself. You deserve good things in your life just as much as anybody else. The only person getting in the way of that is yourself."

I choked out a stuttered breath. "It's not that easy."

"I know it's not easy," Lucian conceded. "But you'll get there. Take it one minute at a time, just as you have with everything else. And remember that as long as Ed still has a voice inside your thoughts, he controls you."

I collapsed back onto the sofa and stared at the wall. Lucian was right. He was always right. But it didn't make it any easier to believe that there could be good in what I'd done.

"Ace, what are you doing here?"

I twisted to see Gypsy approaching with a sleepy yawn, carrying a tiny bundle cradled in her arms. She looked worried as she sat down beside me, and I understood why.

"Is Birdie okay?" she frowned.

I nodded on autopilot, lying for the sake of sparing her any further grief than necessary. She'd asked me to take care of her sister, and so far, I was failing miserably at it. But it was evident she didn't buy my lie as the room stilled and she waited for further explanation.

"Lucian, could you go heat a bottle?" Gypsy asked, her eyes never leaving mine.

He offered me an apologetic glance as he left me alone with his wife while he disappeared into the kitchen.

"Here." Gypsy leaned over and extended her arms, and before I knew what was happening, I was holding the baby. "You can't lie to me with a baby in your arms."

I must have looked panic-stricken because she laughed. "Don't worry. He's sleeping. You'll do just fine."

Unsure of what to do, my entire body went rigid as I cradled the baby against my chest, afraid that even the slightest of movements might hurt him or wake him.

"How is she really?" Gypsy asked, using my distraction as her opening.

"She's..." Words failed me. I felt flustered, and it must have been obvious. My cheeks burned as a flush crept up my throat, and I didn't know how to answer her question.

“I know I’ve put a lot on you by asking this,” Gypsy said apologetically. “Birdie can be difficult to handle. She has a pure heart, but...” Her words drifted off, and she tangled her fingers together in her lap as she gathered her thoughts. “But sometimes, she doesn’t always show that.”

“She does her best,” I answered, my tone defensive.

Gypsy seemed to come to some sort of understanding as she observed me. “Has she had any... outbursts?”

It felt like I was betraying Birdie to talk about her this way, even if Gypsy was her sister. But I knew this was the deal I’d made, and if I didn’t give Gypsy answers, she was likely to want to set Birdie free. Even if that might be the best thing for her right now, I wasn’t ready for that.

“She’s had one.”

Gypsy swallowed and shook her head. “One isn’t bad. I mean, it isn’t good. But I expected it, as I’m sure you probably did too.”

“We sorted it out,” I offered, leaving out the part where I’d fucked her rage out of her.

Gypsy seemed lost in her own thoughts before she answered. “It’s her way of never becoming a victim again, I think... to be the aggressor instead. She tries to suppress her emotions, and then eventually, they boil over.”

“I can handle it,” I assured her, though truthfully, I didn’t believe it myself.

“I know you can.” She paused, and I didn’t think I would like whatever she had to say next, and I was right. “But Birdie’s pretty good at pushing people away. When you look at her, you see a grown woman. Someone who carries herself well beyond her years. But emotionally, she is still so young. And I’m afraid she’ll always be like that. She isn’t capable of relationships or even friendships. Caring about someone means those feelings could be used against her. Do you understand?”

I sank deeper into the couch, watching the baby sleep peacefully in my arms as I considered what she’d said. She was warning me away from her sister, while at the same time, she had inserted her into my life.

“I just don’t want either of you to get hurt,” Gypsy whispered.

I jerked my chin in agreement, though it wasn’t necessary. What happened between Birdie and me would never happen again. She was my responsibility, and I couldn’t fuck this up. She needed a haven. A place to heal from the damage in her past and become who she was meant to. And

that place probably wasn't necessarily with me, but right now, I was the best option she had.

"You look like a natural." Lucian returned with a bottle in his hand, glancing down at me with his son in my arms. I'd always known that he trusted me, though I wouldn't blame him if he didn't. My past was murky, and as an ex-con, there was no telling what I was truly capable of. But he'd always believed in me, and that was never more evident than when he allowed me to continue holding his son as he offered me the bottle.

I didn't know what I was doing, but they guided me through the process as the baby began to stir, and a fierce protectiveness grew within me as I watched the innocent baby they had created. I knew that just like Lucian, I would do anything to protect this child. In some strange way, they were my family.

I stayed until the baby fell back to sleep, and I handed him off to Lucian. Gypsy walked me to the door, appreciation shining in her eyes. Those wild eyes were similar to her sisters, but they had softened in the time she'd been with Lucian. Everything about her had softened. I wondered if someday, Birdie would ever find that peace. And even though I wanted it more than I could put into words, it also felt like a punch to the gut. Because I knew it wouldn't be with me.

I slipped out the door, disappearing into the darkness and reaching for the helmet on the back of my bike.

"Hey, Ace?" Gypsy called out from the doorway. "Birdie hasn't been answering my texts."

I secured the helmet around my head and straddled the hog as I glanced at the halo of her silhouette across the driveway. "That's probably because I dumped her phone into a glass of water."

"Oh," Gypsy replied in a strained voice. "I guess that explains it."

I fired up the beast, and then added, "I'll tell her you said hello."

Chapter 17

Birdie

I SAT IN THE STEAM-FILLED bathroom with the shower running for a good forty minutes while condensation collected on my cheeks. I didn't know if it was more of those disgusting emotions I hated or simply the water, but inside, I felt as though I'd been torn in half.

I couldn't bring myself to wash away the evidence of Huck's touch. Even if it broke me, I wanted his scent on my skin. Because somehow, I knew it would probably be the only time I ever experienced it. I had felt him slipping from my grasp the moment we locked eyes. It was the only event I could consider a choice of my own making. My first time with someone I wanted. Someone who, on a deeper, more primal level, I needed. He had rocked my soul and rattled everything I thought I knew about sex. It was intimate. It was passionate. It was an all-consuming fire. And for one fleeting moment, I felt whole again.

But now, alone in my thoughts, reality doused me in an emptiness I couldn't shake. I'd never taste him again. I saw the horror of what we'd done in his eyes. He was ashamed of himself, and it only confirmed my worst fears. He didn't see me as something that could be reborn. I was and always would be the dirty, used-up doll.

I wiped away the moisture from my face as I brought my knees to my chest and allowed my head to dip forward. My breath stuttered a few times, but eventually, it evened out as I came to accept my situation for what it was.

I'd been living in a fantasy land for the last week, wanting to believe that Ace was somehow my savior. He wasn't and never could be. I had a

debt to pay. Burning fires that still needed to be put out. There was no rest for the wicked like me, and I couldn't do what was necessary while I was trapped beneath his thumb. My only option—the best thing for both of us—was for me to take my life back.

Tomorrow. It would be the only chance I had. I assumed he'd take me to work with him again. But I anticipated his distance, and I planned to exploit it. That was my only hope.

Fighting off the exhaustion I felt, I forced myself upright and turned off the shower. Mechanically, I dried my body and picked through my clothes until I found a pajama set. Once I was dressed, I took stock of my life packed into the pretty pink suitcases, trying to determine what was important. But as it turned out, I couldn't find a single thing I couldn't live without.

The low murmur of the television down the hall caught my attention, and it sparked my curiosity. Huck didn't watch TV after dinner, and dinner had long since passed. In fact, he was usually in bed by now. He hadn't come in to lock my door or warn me about the lights. Maybe he didn't plan to, but I couldn't help it. I wanted to see for myself.

When I walked down the hall, I was surprised to find Trouble lounged on the sofa like a lazy cat as she flipped through the channels. She glanced up at me, and our gazes locked, giving me little chance of slipping away without a word. But I was oddly frustrated by the relief I felt when she was the first to break the silence.

"Hey." She offered me a shy smile.

"Hey." I stood motionless, uncertain what I was even doing. By all rights, I had no business talking to her anymore. In just a short period, she'd gone from my puppy dog tagalong to my gatekeeper. But looking at her now, it was obvious she wasn't enjoying this situation any more than I was.

"You want to sit down?" She gestured to the sofa beside her. "There's not much on TV. Never is this time of night. Ace only has the basic package even though the dude's loaded as hell."

She was making small talk, and I was still radio silent. But somehow, I found my feet moving in the direction of the sofa before I sat down and stared at the screen like a zombie. I wondered if it was obvious how horrible I felt, but Trouble didn't leave me to wonder for long.

"I can't imagine this is easy for you," she said.

"When has life ever been easy?" I deflected.

An infomercial came on, and the presenter spoke boisterously about a new mop that would perform miracles in your house. Trouble and I both watched with glazed expressions before she opted to try again.

"I just want you to know that I really am sorry for the way things went down between us." Her voice was sincere, and when I glanced over at her, the innocence in her expression made it hard for me to keep hating her. The thought of her alone in this world without anyone to help or guide her was what drew me to her in the first place.

"As it turned out, I think you were the better con," I noted, somewhat sourly.

"Well, despite what I may have led you to believe, I had a good teacher," she answered. "My dad was a con. Once he figured out he could leverage me in his games, everything became fair play."

There was a bitter note to her tone that implied the situation wasn't ideal, and against my better judgment, I felt sympathetic for her.

"You played on my emotions," I told her. "How did you know what would appeal to me? How did you know I would want to help you?"

"I didn't." She chewed on her thumbnail, a nervous habit I'd never been able to get her to break. "Ace did."

I leaned back against the sofa, blowing out a breath. "He knows everything about my life. I don't understand why. Why does that information matter to him?"

Trouble lowered the volume on the TV and turned to me, her eyes conflicted. "I don't know why. I'll admit that it was an unusual thing for him to ask of me. He doesn't usually get so wrapped up in people. It was like an addiction for him. Every time we talked, he wanted more and more details. And then I eventually realized I wasn't the only one keeping an eye on you. He was too. I've never seen him so strung out on someone before."

I wanted that to mean something, but it didn't. Ace had proven that tonight with his actions. And now, more than anything, I wanted to know his secrets too, so we could be even.

"I know it's not my place to say," Trouble went on, "but I think you should be careful, Birdie. Ace has your best interests in mind, but he isn't necessarily great at the execution. He's emotionally stunted. I don't know a lot about his past, but I've seen the way he is with women. He can't give you anything more than a safe home. That's the extent of his capabilities, and if you expect more, you will find yourself sorely disappointed."

In my heart, I already knew what she told me was true, but it didn't make it any easier to accept.

"You mean like it was with Kylie," I stated.

"Yes," she answered. "I think Kylie believed she could fix him somehow if she just waited long enough, and I could see how it's an easy trap to fall into. Ace is a lovable guy, but he never had a real relationship with her. They didn't kiss, or sleep in the same bed, or go on dates together. She'd never even been to his house."

I tried to process what she was telling me, but my brain felt like it was going to implode from all the new questions that popped up. Her confirmation should have given me peace, but instead, it only created more torment.

"He never kissed her?" Somehow, I'd voiced that question out loud without really meaning to.

Trouble arched a brow and shook her head. "Never. It's one of his rules."

"How could you know that?" My tone was accusatory, doubtful, but she didn't seem to care.

"Kylie and I sort of became friends. I'd see her in the clubhouse every weekend, and when Ace wasn't around, she'd just sit there, trying to occupy herself until he returned. I guess I felt a little sorry for her. Anyway, we started talking, and everything just kinda came up. She thought I might have some insight into the inner workings of his mind, but I didn't."

"Oh," I murmured, at a loss for what to say.

"Yeah." She nodded.

And now things were officially awkward. I didn't want to hate Kylie. I had no reason to. But a part of me still resented her simply because she got an entire year with him. A year of his touch, his body. But never his kiss. A kiss he'd given freely to me without even asking.

What did that mean?

As I was trying to figure it out, the front door opened, and the man in question appeared. He looked tired and disheveled; his beard obviously whipped from the wind on his bike. As my eyes drifted up his body, I noticed his were on me. Nobody said a word, even after a full minute had passed since he'd made his presence known.

"Is that all you need from me, boss?" Trouble's voice cut through the silence.

He nodded, and I forced myself to break eye contact to look at Trouble.
“I’m going to bed. So I guess I’ll probably see you around?”

“You will.” She offered me a smile. “Pretty much guaranteed.”

I used the opportunity of her pending departure and brief conversation with Huck to slip down the hall and into my bedroom. I shut the door behind me and turned on my nightlight before using the dimmer switch to turn the lights off myself.

Climbing into bed, I waited anxiously to see if Ace would make an appearance before he disappeared into his own room. His boots echoed down the hall, pausing at my door for a minute, but he never turned the knob. Instead, I heard the lock click into place before he continued, wordlessly.

No surprise, sleep never came for me that night.

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Chapter 18

Birdie

AS I EXPECTED, HUCK WAS just as gruff and accommodating the next morning. Throughout breakfast and as he barked orders of what I needed to do next, I caught him staring at me. He had that same strained expression from the first time he met me. As though I was a puzzle his brain just couldn't figure out. Regret lingered in his eyes, and I didn't know if it was because of what happened or the fact he couldn't rid himself of me.

I ate my breakfast and dressed in a mechanical fashion, careful to tuck a wad of cash and some cards into the zippered pocket of my jacket. I didn't anticipate it being cold today, but I thought if Huck questioned it, I could just tell him it was cold in the shop, which was true.

However, when I appeared down the hall, he barely even glanced at me before he had me marching out the door to his truck. He was a grumpy fucker today, and it only managed to grate at the raw wound between us.

The entire ride to his shop was silence filled, and neither one of us made a move for the radio. Every once in a while, I'd glance over at him, and then I'd feel his eyes on me when I looked away. It was a quiet game of cat and mouse, but trying to decipher what was on his mind only managed to give me a headache. As soon as we pulled into the lot of the shop and he led me inside, he gave me a good indication of how the day was going to go.

I followed him down the hall to the office, and he dragged out a lockbox full of hanging folders with a thick stack of papers jammed inside it. "You can organize those today."

And with those explicit instructions, he left. The heavy metal door slammed shut behind him, echoing the sound of my chest splitting down the

middle. I needed to get out of here. That much was evident. But it wasn't going to be easy when I had to walk through the shop to do it.

I sat down with a sigh and yanked the stack of papers from the lockbox. Even though I knew leaving was the right thing, the actuality of running out on Ace felt wrong. But why? It didn't make any logical sense, especially after his treatment of me last night. I could see how what Trouble said was true. Women tried not to fall in love with him, but somehow, they did. I just didn't want to be another one of those women.

The morning ticked by slowly as I sorted through paper after paper and jammed them into the corresponding files. Some were bills, tax documents, health records, and the occasional personal document. I found a scanned copy of Huck's driver's license and stared at the glowering face in the photo for far too long. He hadn't changed. His beard was the same, along with the same whiskey-colored eyes and the few lines etched into his face.

I couldn't understand how he felt so familiar to me. How I had dreamed of him long before I'd ever met him. If my mother were still alive, I was certain she would tell me it was a sign I shouldn't ignore. She believed strongly in fate and some magically divine plan the universe gave each of us. But look where that notion got her.

Still, against all rational thought, I wanted to know what was behind Huck's mournful eyes and the barbed gates he kept around himself. How did he come to be that way? And what was it about me that made him feel like he needed to collect and dissect every detail of my life?

These were questions I'd probably never have the answer to, and when I checked the time, I realized I needed to turn my focus elsewhere. Escaping wouldn't be my reality if I didn't sort through these papers fast enough and find a way for Huck to put me to use in the shop. Certain he'd anticipate that I would take all day with this, I ramped up my production, only to be interrupted twenty minutes later.

A guy I recognized from the shop floor opened the door and then paused, startled to find me sitting there. He was wearing a leather vest just like Ace, only his had a prospect patch.

"Oh shit, sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to interrupt. I just need to grab one of the files for a customer."

I nodded, but the interaction didn't end there. On autopilot, his eyes drifted over my body, flaring with heated interest that he tried to shake off a second later. I couldn't be certain of my own motivations anymore, but I

saw this as an opportunity. A way to prod at Huck and see how he really felt.

“Wait a second,” I told the interloper after he’d secured the file he wanted.

“Yeah?” He looked down at me as though I was bad news, and I didn’t try to hide my answering smile because he was right about that.

“What’s your name?”

He glanced at the door behind him as if he knew he shouldn’t be caught in here with me. “It’s Blake.”

“Blake.” I leaned back in the office chair and crossed my legs, drawing his attention there. “I’m Birdie.”

He tipped his head forward with what I assumed was meant to be a respectful nod, but instead, his eyes got caught on my chest. The jacket I’d packed was now secured around my waist, and the black tank I wore today dipped low enough to show just the top swells of my breasts. Blake wanted more, and I was prepared to eat him alive.

“I feel so silly asking this.” I toyed with a strand of my hair, blinking up at him. “But there are a few papers in here that I don’t know how to categorize. Would you mind giving me your opinion?”

Again, Blake glanced at the door, but ultimately, he allowed his dick to lead him as he stepped forward to be my savior. “Sure, I can help you out with that.”

I grabbed the first paper on the stack and slid it across the desk even though it wasn’t necessary. He had slowly closed in on me, invading my space to the point his arm was practically touching mine as we both leaned forward.

“Like this one.” I shrugged. “Does it go under miscellaneous?”

It was a stupid question since it was obvious that the bill should go into the utility file, but Blake pretended to consider it anyway. At least until his eyes grazed over the name at the top, and his back went rigid. “These aren’t business expenses,” he noted. “It looks like they’re Ace’s personal files.”

“Yep.” I nodded as if I didn’t understand the implication of his statement.

I doubted Ace would want his prospect in here rifling through his personal documents. But if that were the case, then why did he have me in here doing it?

Blake scratched at his stubble, shaking his head. "I'm honestly not too sure."

Yet he didn't move. I smiled up at him, and he swallowed. For a minute, we sat in limbo while I waited to see if he'd make a move. But as it turned out, it wasn't necessary.

The door slammed open, shocking the hell out of both of us, and Blake took a step back, bumping into the counter as Ace glowered at both of us from the doorway. His eyes lasered in on Blake, and I knew in that instant I'd fucked up. I'd only intended to prod at him, but it was clear I'd woken the beast instead.

"Get the fuck out," he growled at Blake. "Pack your shit. You're done here."

"Wait—" I jumped up from my seat in protest. "It wasn't his fault. I asked him a question, that's all."

"Yes, sweet little innocent Birdie just loves to ask questions," he mocked. "Don't you?"

My mouth slammed shut, and I think it was the first time I'd ever truly been speechless. There was so much venom in his tone. His gaze was glacial, and I'd never seen him like this. Ace was always a brick wall of emotion, but right now, he was completely devoid of humanity.

"Did I stutter?" he barked at Blake. "I said get out. You're done."

"Fuck this shit, man." Blake glared at me before he bolted out the door, slamming it behind him.

I tried to find something to say to make this situation better somehow, but Huck had other plans. He was already locking the door and pulling the shade shut before he stalked toward me like a predator intent on destruction.

"What part of you belong to me don't you fucking understand?" He slammed both his palms down on the desk behind me, caging me in with his steel frame.

I glanced up, my eyes searching his for some part of him that I recognized, but all I saw was fire. Huck was about to teach me a lesson I wouldn't soon forget, and as terrifying as that thought might be, it also sent shivers up my spine.

"What do you expect?" I shot back. "You left me to my own devices. This is what I do best, isn't it?"

"Don't play that game with me," he snarled, his fingers biting into my jaw. "My dick was inside you last night, Birdie. Your ass, your pussy, and

even that goddamned mouth I want to duct tape all belong to me. Get that through your head. You're owned."

"Fuck you," I spat. "I don't belong to anyone, least of all some barbaric caveman like you."

Before I knew what was happening, Huck had me twisted around and bent me over the desk while his steely fingers tugged at my jeans. I heard the button snap off, and then the denim scraped over my skin as he pulled them down to my knees. He didn't waste any time jamming his fingers between my thighs, cupping my pussy as his beard scratched against my cheek.

"Tell me now this doesn't belong to me," he growled.

The zipper of his jeans came down, and then his belt jangled as he removed it. I didn't know what to expect next, but when I felt the crack of leather against my ass cheeks, it sure as hell wasn't that.

"Jesus," I hissed. "That fucking hurt."

"Good," he rumbled, right before he did it again.

I tried to wiggle out of his grasp as I sucked in air, but he just pinned me down with a meaty palm in the center of my back and continued to whack my burning skin with the belt.

"You motherfucker!" I glared back at him, but his focus never moved from my ass. His eyes were liquid heat, molten with satisfaction. He liked his marks on me. He liked them so much he didn't stop until my entire ass was red.

My head collapsed to the desk, thinking that was it. He'd leave me here with my ass on fire while he went back out in the shop to brood for the rest of the day. But that wasn't the end. It wasn't even close. The next thing I knew, I felt his cock nudging against me. In truth, I was soaked for him even though it didn't make sense to me. I didn't want him to know it, but there was little protest from my mouth when he spread me apart with his palms and buried himself deep inside me with a groan. It was feral. Possessive. And he didn't have to tell me what he was thinking. It reverberated through me like a gunshot.

Mine.

The horror was how true it felt, even right then. Gone was the man from the night before who'd fucked me like he wanted to crawl inside my soul and never leave. Today, he was an animal, and his only intent was to take.

Insanity fueled his thrusts, his expansive frame ravaging me from the inside out. The agony that rumbled from his chest proved it wasn't just mechanics for him. He needed this. The moment had possessed him, and it sounded like he would die without it.

When the traitorous sound of pleasure slipped from my lips, his fingers curled into my hips with a growl. He snatched the long tail of my hair and pulled, forcing me to arch my body. Heaving my tank top up, he palmed a fistful of my breast, kneading the delicate flesh as his hips battered against me. The steady rhythm punctuated his labored breathing and my heightened state of confusion and arousal.

I was so wet for him, I felt my arousal coating his cock and dripping down onto his balls. He slid in and out of me effortlessly, soaking up whatever my body offered him, but it wasn't enough. His frustration only seemed to grow as he pinched my nipples and bit at the side of my throat, dragging his teeth across the sensitive flesh.

"Huck—" I tried to interject, desperate to see his face. I wanted to witness the pain there. I wanted him to reveal that much, but my voice only seemed to anger him.

His fingers dug deeper into my hip, and he slammed forward, rattling everything on the desk around us. There were no words. Only anguished sounds as he thrust harder, faster, deeper. I caught a glimpse of him as he let go of my hair, and I collapsed back onto the desk. His head tipped back, and his mouth parted as he became a slave to the moment. And then he ruined it by yanking his cock out of me, milking the angry flesh with his fist as the orgasm shot through him. Jets of hot come sprayed across my back and into my hair before it dripped down my sides.

Huck sighed, long and deep, his eyes opening to meet mine. They were completely vacant when he zipped himself back up and stared at me like this meant nothing. He'd intentionally left me unsatisfied, but he wasn't finished. He had one last parting gift for me as he left me standing there, bent over and on display, still covered in his come like the trash he thought I was.

"Fuck you."



As I peeled myself up off the desk and gathered the shattered pieces of my pride from the floor, I came to a hard-won conclusion. Ace and I were never going to work. Not as captor and captive, not as friend or foe. We were oil and vinegar, and that was the only absolute in this situation.

I thought I was fucked up, but he'd just proven he was the most fucked up of all. He couldn't care about anyone. Trouble had warned me, and I didn't want to believe it. This was the smack in the face I needed.

Cleaning away the evidence of his hatred, I put myself back together as best I could, too weary to face him again in this state. It wouldn't be long until lunchtime. Maybe I could sneak out while he was in the bathroom cleaning up.

Until then, I sat back down and stared blankly at the remaining stack of papers. There were still far too many, and I didn't feel like organizing anymore, but the alternative was being left alone with my thoughts, which wasn't any better. So I continued to sort, at least for a few minutes, until I reached the middle of the stack and came to a dead halt.

There, buried in the middle of all the boring bills and records, was a ragged old cutout from a newspaper. It was folded into thirds, and I opened it delicately, careful not to tear the paper.

Inside was the face of a young girl with long, brown hair and pretty dark chocolate eyes. It was an obituary. But the name was the first thing to catch my attention as Kodiak's words echoed through my mind.

Have you tried Mary-Kate's Last Dance?

It was no coincidence that this girl's name was Mary-Kate Welles. According to the obituary, she was only fourteen when she died. My chest constricted as I stared into her eyes, wondering what happened to her. The expression on her face was not that of a happy young girl. It was one of torment and sadness, and I felt that kinship with her deep in my soul.

Did Ace know this was in here? Who was she to him? My mind filled with questions, but there were no answers. I knew because I read the obituary three times over. No details were provided for her death. The small block of text simply existed to alert the world she had lived and died. The

caption didn't wax poetic about her hobbies, or her favorite foods, or how pure her soul was. It was absent of sentimentality, which left me to conclude that nobody had cared enough to include those things.

I didn't even know her, but my eyes stung with emotion. How easily could that have been me if I had stayed in California? If I had allowed things to continue as they were, would this last evidence of my life be interchangeable with hers? Just a short blurb that I had at some point existed, but now I didn't. No details save for a grainy pic that nobody would remember or care about.

I became irrationally hungry for more information about this girl, but Huck had taken my phone, and the only internet access I had was in this office. Was it possible that he'd left the computer unlocked?

I glanced at the door and stirred the screen to life with the mouse, noting two options. The master account was for Ace, but a second guest option didn't require a password.

With jittery fingers, I typed her name into the Google search bar, and within seconds, pages upon pages of information popped up. It surprised me, and then it terrified me. My eyes grew unfocused as I read through the titles of the articles, one after another.

Fourteen-year-old Little Rock foster child murdered at the hands of a monster.

Arkansas teen confesses to sexual assault and murder of a fourteen-year-old girl.

Huck Fallon sentenced to life behind bars for grisly crimes at just fifteen years old.

My stomach churned as I read the name again and recoiled from the desk, desperately reaching for the garbage can before I spewed the contents of my breakfast inside. My skin felt clammy, and I couldn't breathe as the room darkened around me to a mere pinpoint. This was my sign. I had to get away. I had to get away as fast and as far as I could.

I leaned back and closed my eyes, catching my breath for a few seconds before I opened them again with a renewed sense of determination. A glance at the clock confirmed it was almost noon, and I couldn't sit here with Ace pretending like everything was okay. Not after this. I had to make my move now.

Zippering up my jacket, I moved toward the door, peeking down the hallway in an attempt to see something. But I couldn't. Not from this angle. I would have to go in blind.

Holding my breath, I snuck out into the hall, careful of each step that I took. The shop was loud with music blaring, wrenches turning, and the sound of a compressor somewhere in the distance. But it still felt like every step might give me away.

I made it to the end of the hall and spotted Ace working on the same truck from the day before. His back was turned to me, and for a second, I just stood there frozen. Watching him work was like watching an artist. Someone who could look at the tangled mess of broken parts and pieces and find a way to put them back together to make them whole again. *So how could he possibly be the monster those articles said he was?*

As if he could sense me, he started to turn, and I dived behind the nearest truck, hoping he didn't see me. I watched his feet from beneath the bumper, waiting for him to move. But he didn't. My breath evened out as I took stock of the situation around me. Several other trucks were parked in the shop. If I could sneak beneath them one by one, I might be able to get closer to the exit.

Army crawling around the greasy shop floor wasn't as easy as I anticipated. Though my knees were mostly healed, there was still some bruising beneath the skin that made it sting every time I put pressure on them. But I kept going. Slipping from one truck to the next, holding my breath, and checking the location of Ace's boots across the building. I wasn't entirely sure how I would get to the exit once I made it, but I'd have to cross that bridge when I came to it.

Just as I was getting ready to bolt to the last truck, the rumble of an engine scared the ever-loving bejeezus out of me. I wasn't expecting it, and when I glanced up, I realized it was coming from the truck I was currently parked beneath.

Crap.

My heart pounded as I scurried backward, glancing around frantically. There wasn't anyone around, but I still doubted my ability to make it the next fifteen feet out in the open. So I went up and over instead, climbing carefully into the back of the truck and ducking down, hoping the driver hadn't noticed. It was a utility work vehicle, so there was a lot of equipment

in the back, and only a small space for me to wedge my body into. I curled into myself, becoming as small as possible as I waited with frantic breaths.

I was dead certain I'd be discovered as the truck began to roll forward, only to pause again when the driver rolled down his window and started up a conversation with one of Ace's guys. I snuck a peek at the clock on the wall, noting only about five minutes were left until Ace took his lunch. At this rate, I wouldn't even be out of the garage.

My irritation grew as the conversation continued. I had to get out of here. Just as I began to reconsider my plan, the conversation came to an abrupt end when the guy on the floor received an incoming call, and the truck lurched forward again. I settled in and tried to relax, finally breathing when we rolled outside, and I felt the sunlight on my face. But I knew I wasn't home free yet. Part of me was still waiting for Ace to yell at the driver to stop before he came and dragged me out of the back, but it never happened.

We turned onto the street, and the driver cranked up his music, leaving the window down so that I could hear his awful singing. I counted the stoplights and looked up at the skyline for familiar buildings, but it looked like he was taking me farther and farther into a residential area. That wasn't going to work.

At the next stoplight, I peeked up to check on the driver. He was distracted by his one-man concert, so I figured it was now or never. I climbed to the back of the truck and hoisted myself down onto the ground, pausing only for a second as the people in the car behind us looked at me as if they'd just seen a ghost.

I gave them a little smile and wave as though everything was cool and walked casually onto the sidewalk. The light turned green, and the driver took off none the wiser. I looked around, trying to figure out where the hell I was. There was a strip mall up the street, and I figured it would be a good place to grab a cab.

Twenty minutes later, I found myself at the entrance of my apartment. I just needed to grab some clothes, whatever items Ace might have left behind, to get me through until I could figure out where I'd be staying for tonight. But as soon as I turned the corner, I noticed my parking space had another car parked inside it. Another glance up at the door confirmed there was a new patio set on the balcony that hadn't been there when I left. And

that was when it dawned on me that none of my belongings would be inside.

The place had been rented out.

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Chapter 19

Ace

“NOT HUNGRY TODAY, BOSS?”

“Huh?” I peeked out from my toolbox and found Smokey staring at me in concern. When I glanced at the clock, I figured there must be something wrong with it, but there wasn’t. I was off my game, and it was obvious to most of my guys in here today. They’d all seen the show when Blake blew out of here with his tail tucked between his legs, and then I came out ready to light a fire up anyone’s ass who got in my way.

Goddamned Birdie.

She was on my mind, screwing up everything, and now I was forty minutes late for lunch. That shit was totally out of character for me, and everyone here knew it.

“I just wanted to finish what I was doing,” I muttered. “But I suppose I should take a break.”

“I’ll hold down the fort.” Smokey nodded.

I wiped my hands and stuffed the grease rag into my back pocket. Truthfully, I didn’t think I was ready to face Birdie. Not after the way I’d treated her. I’d never been so goddamned mad in my life, and that terrified me. I wasn’t accustomed to losing my cool, but she had a talent for bringing out the darkness in me. All for some bullshit game I should have seen from a mile away. She’d provoked me, and I walked right into it—hook, line, and sinker.

This was exactly why I told myself from the beginning I couldn’t let myself get wrapped up in her. I’d crossed over the territory of obsession into full-on possession, but after today, she’d probably never want to look at

me again. And I wouldn't blame her. But it didn't mean I was letting her go either. I was in this now, balls deep until the end. There was no going back to the way things were. Not after the way she made me feel today.

I wanted to hate her for playing me so easily. For getting inside my mind and fucking with all the emotions I never wanted to feel in the first place. She made me feel, and it wasn't something I was used to.

Birdie Blue was my fucking nightmare and salvation wrapped up into one terrifying package. She'd left her mark on me, branding it into my rusted-up, broken-down heart. I didn't know why I was still fighting it. Good or bad, right or wrong, she was the other half of my soul that I'd always known was missing. And consequences be damned, I was keeping her.

I headed for the bathroom to wash up, giving myself ample time to figure out how to approach this situation. Handling Birdie with kid gloves was out of the question now. She'd seen the worst of me, and I owed her some kind of explanation. But how could I explain my feelings when I didn't even understand them myself?

The shade on the office door was still shut, and my palm lingered on the knob for far too long. I didn't know what I would find inside. What version of her would I see? I was afraid to bear witness to the damage I'd done. Gypsy warned me that Birdie would retreat and shut down. But when I opened the door, it was worse than that.

There was nothing. An empty chair, a stack of papers, and only the faintest lingering of her scent.

She was gone.



My gaze trailed down the length of Las Vegas Boulevard while I calculated the number of casinos I had yet to cover. Over the past six hours, I'd been to her old apartment, Trouble's studio, and at least ten casinos and clubs I knew she liked to frequent. In addition to that, I also had some of my guys scouring the smaller joints, and Trouble was on her scent like a bloodhound too.

But still nothing.

I'd called Lucian, explaining the situation, and he'd agreed to give me some time to find her before he alerted Gypsy. The last thing she needed was to add her sister to her long list of concerns. But with every hour that dragged on, my confidence that I'd even find her dwindled.

I'd fucked up. I'd fucked up beyond comprehension. And for a split second, as I sat there on my bike, I wondered if this was the best thing for her. At least when she was out there, away from me, I couldn't hurt her. But that was just a fantasy. I couldn't let her go. The crushing sensation I felt in her absence brought everything into focus with a certainty I'd never felt before.

I had to find her and bring her back to me. It was the only fucking way.

Kodiak sent a text to let me know he'd checked all the places on his list, and she wasn't at any of them. Paralyzing uncertainty and one lingering question were all that remained.

Where the fuck could she be?

⋮

Chapter 20

Birdie

I MADE MYSELF AT HOME in the hospital corridor, staring at the screen of the burner phone I'd picked up this afternoon. Every several minutes, I would check it again, waiting for it to ring, but it never did. Six times I'd called Joe today. He always got back to me within an hour at the most. *Always*. But not this time.

I knew he hadn't changed his number because it went to the same annoying voicemail I always heard. When my efforts to reach him didn't work, I panicked a little and started checking the jail rosters in California to see if by some chance he'd been arrested. Although I'd love to see his greasy ass behind bars, the reality wasn't that simple.

Gypsy and I had learned a long time ago that Ricky and his sleazebag friends had friends on the inside. Politicians, corrupt cops, even a couple of judges... they were all in on it, frequently visiting the block of horrors that I grew up on to partake in their underage delights. On the few occasions there had been raids, Ricky was tipped off by his high-ranking friends, and all the girls would disappear until things calmed down again. Turning in Ricky or Joe or anyone else wasn't an option when you couldn't trust authority. The two girls who tried had disappeared, and I never saw them again. Years later, California changed the laws to protect victims of human trafficking instead of punishing them as they'd done to Gypsy. But I still couldn't trust that the corruption wasn't alive and well. Sex would always be a thriving trade. And if Joe ever ended up in a position to barter for a deal, my name would be at the top of his list to throw under the bus.

Regardless, my searches for him turned up nothing, which left me feeling even more out of sorts than I already was. Surely, he wasn't still pissed about our last encounter. Joe was motivated by one thing, and that was money. In the third voicemail I'd left, I told him I was prepared to pay one last large sum of cash for the videotape. More than ever, I wanted a life free from the dark cloud perpetually hanging above my head. But unless I got my hands on that video, I might as well kiss everything I knew goodbye.

Chasing down Joe kept my mind occupied, but it didn't last for long. Inevitably, it would drift back to Ace and the things I'd discovered this afternoon. I didn't think I could handle the details of his crimes, but the longer I kicked the scenario around in my mind, the more I realized it just felt wrong. Ace could be moody and downright hostile when he felt like it, but he would never truly hurt me. I knew that in my heart as much as I knew I needed air to breathe. He was emotionally crippled. I'd heard it and even witnessed it myself. He didn't deal with things in the best way, but he dealt with them the way he knew. And I understood that on a primal level.

He wasn't in prison now, so that had to mean something. His best friend was a criminal attorney, and they had a history together. There had to be more to that story. Huck might be fucked up, but I was well enough acquainted with evil to know when I was looking it in the eye. And he wasn't evil.

"Birdie? What are you doing here?"

I looked up to find Kylie standing there in her scrubs with an expression of concern on her face. She looked worried about me, and I felt guilty for coming here, but with nobody else on my side, I was out of options.

"Hey." I shifted on the uncomfortable bench, hoping this wasn't the dumbest idea I'd ever had. "I'm here to see you actually."

"Me?" She blinked. "Why?"

"Well, that depends." I offered her a nervous smile. "Can I trust you?"



Kylie's apartment was clean and well put together, just like her. Everything in the space painted a picture of a happy life, including the family photos that hung from the wall. It explained a lot. Someone as emotionally well balanced as she was could only ever come from a family like that.

"That's my brother." Kylie pointed at one of the men in the photo. "He's the doctor in the family. And my sister Kelly is a surgeon."

"Wow," I murmured. "Your parents must be pretty proud."

She shrugged lightheartedly. "I'm somewhat of a black sheep. I went into the medical profession because I felt like I had to take that path to make them proud. But honestly, if I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't have."

Her words surprised me, but it was proof that even though someone's life might look perfect on the outside, there was no such thing.

"Hope you don't mind peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for dinner." She walked into the kitchen and pulled out a few ingredients. "I don't do much of anything exciting. By the time I get home, I'm too tired to cook."

"I bet." I took a seat at the island bar across from her. "PB and J is good with me. I didn't even know how to cook until..." The words faltered when I realized I was about to mention Ace. Kylie seemed to sense where I was going and took a hard left turn in the conversation.

"What about your family? What do they do?"

I threaded my fingers together in my lap, considering the best lie to give her. I always had several at the ready, but it was a lot of work to keep the stories straight. It was exhausting, in general, to lie. So I was only somewhat surprised after the day I'd had that the truth spilled from my lips instead.

"I only have a sister. Our mom passed away when we were young."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Kylie's tone held genuine regret. "That must have been really hard."

I shrugged like it didn't bother me anymore, but the truth was, I didn't know if it would ever stop bothering me. "We survived."

She slid a plate across the bar and followed with a glass of water before she sat down next to me, and we ate together in silence. There was definitely some unresolved tension between us, and I didn't really know what I was doing here. I just knew that I couldn't go to a hotel or Gypsy's, and Kylie was the only other person I knew in Vegas. But it was clear we

really didn't have anything in common, and I wasn't entirely sure she didn't harbor some resentment toward me.

"How about some wine?" she asked as she finished her plate and went rummaging through one of the cupboards. "It seems like we both need a glass."

"Yes, please." My shoulders relaxed at the suggestion. "Wine would be great."

She poured us both a glass and then gestured to the balcony. "Want to go sit outside? It's a nice night for it."

I nodded and followed her out the door, and we both took a seat and stared off into the horizon where the fading sun created a wash of burnt oranges and gold across the skyline.

"Do you blame me for what happened between you and Ace?" I asked.

Kylie looked over at me and laughed. "You mean do I blame you for converting a man incapable of a relationship into a love-sick puppy dog?"

An awkward laugh burst from my lips. "Yeah, no. He isn't in love with me."

Kylie rocked back in the chair and lit a cigarette. "I don't blame you for what happened. If I was a man, I'd probably feel the same about you, drop-dead gorgeous as you are. What Ace and I had was a business arrangement. I knew it could end at any time, and so did he. That's all it boils down to."

I swirled the crimson liquid in my glass before letting the flavor explode across my tongue, secretly trying to decipher the distinct notes before I swallowed. I always felt like drinking wine was a little like drinking the blood of the region it came from. The hard labor, the sun, and the rain that had gone into making the blend. Each bottle was unique, and this was a good one. It only made me appreciate Kylie more. I was afraid to ask her, but I knew I had to. For the sake of my own sanity, I had to know.

"By business arrangement, you mean..."

"Men hire me to do things to them," she said. "Things that society considers taboo or fucked up, but it fulfills them."

Her answer didn't make me feel any better. I didn't know if I could actually stomach the details of whatever she was talking about. My mind was running wild with possibilities, wondering what kind of sexual deviance Ace was into. It must have been evident because Kylie took pity on me.

"Have you seen his scars?" she asked quietly.

I swallowed and shook my head. Ace knew most of my secrets, and I hated feeling as if I knew hardly any of his.

"If he ever shows you his scars, then maybe you'll understand," Kylie explained. "What I gave to him wasn't love. It was just what he needed to feel normal."

"Are you telling me you hurt him?" I stared at her in disbelief.

She released a breath of smoke and turned away from the judgment in my voice. Even now, after everything, I felt protective of Ace. Maybe it didn't make sense, but the thought of anyone hurting him was unbearable.

"Everyone deals with their traumas differently," Kylie answered. "Just as I'm sure you have your own way of dealing with yours."

Her response made me shut my mouth as I'm sure she knew it would. I didn't want to believe my issues were that obvious, but maybe I wasn't as hard coated as I always considered myself to be.

"At the risk of sounding like a mother, I just think you should be careful," Kylie warned. "Ace has a lot of issues he's never really worked through. I think he wants to care about you, but whether he's capable of being in a healthy relationship remains to be seen."

The distant sounds of traffic and city noise engulfed us.

"Do you know anything about Mary-Kate?" I asked.

"Who?" Kylie glanced at me.

So that was a no. I wasn't about to tell her what I'd found today. It wasn't my place to tell, and it felt like saying anything would be a betrayal somehow even though that was silly. I didn't owe Ace anything, especially after today. Still, I had to wonder just how many people were aware of his past. Clearly, Lucian was. But what about Gypsy? Had she sent me to live with a monster intentionally?

"Never mind." I scrubbed a hand over my face and yawned, exhausted. "It's been a long day. I'm just tired. Thank you for letting me crash here tonight."

"No problem." Kylie offered me a sleepy smile. "I think I'm about ready for bed too. Let me know if you need me to give you a ride somewhere in the morning. I leave at seven for work."

"Okay," I agreed, though I knew it wasn't necessary. She'd already done enough for me, and by morning, I would be gone.

Chapter 21

Birdie

I HESITATED ON THE THRESHOLD of Saint Vincent's, half fearful that if I stepped inside, my skin would melt from my body like a scene in a horror movie. This was not a place for con artists or degenerates like me. No amount of holy water or Hail Marys could save my wretched soul. But I wasn't here for salvation. I was here for answers, and I hoped I would find them inside.

I only half expected to find him here. Before Lucian had the baby with my sister, he would be here without fail on the same days during the week. But things had changed after the events of the past year. He was anxious anytime he had to leave his wife and child at home, so I didn't know how frequently he visited anymore.

Regardless of my uncertainty, I gripped the handle and stepped inside. The building was large and empty. The kind of empty that made each step echo off the walls. Pausing at the holy font, I stared into the water, observing my distorted reflection in the stillness. That girl didn't look like me. And I knew exactly who was to blame for the difference from only a couple of weeks ago.

My beating heart slowed to a crawl as I closed my eyes and dipped a trembling hand into the bowl. Even if I didn't believe in it, maybe there was still a chance I could wash away the sins of the past. I made the sign of the cross, not really knowing what else to do. A shiver moved over me, and I wrapped my cardigan around my shoulders as I walked down the aisle between the empty rows of church pews. At the front, I lit a candle and studied the display before I took a seat in an empty pew.

For a while, I just sat there with my thoughts. The silence was peaceful, even if I did feel out of place. I thought about Ace and the many directions my life had taken over the years. With a deep breath, I unzipped the tightness in my chest and allowed every anxious, horrible thought I'd ever had to spill out onto the floor and shatter beneath me. But I couldn't rid myself of one awful feeling.

I didn't want it to be true.

The things I'd read about Huck William Fallon did not fit the idealism of him in my own mind. He couldn't be the embodiment of all my worst fears. *He couldn't be like the men I hated so much.*

The door to the confessional booth swung open, and I heard the soft click as it shut. My attention remained on the floor beneath me as the soft footfalls headed in my direction.

He sat down next to me, and neither of us spoke for a while. I didn't know where to begin, and maybe he didn't either. I'd never particularly cared for Lucian. When he forced his way into our lives and blackmailed my sister, he swiftly became enemy number one. I was certain she'd probably kill him by the time their contract had ended, but instead, she fell in love.

Now I knew enough about him that I could respect him. But I would always be wary, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Because in our world, fairy tales didn't really exist.

"Ace is going out of his mind looking for you." Lucian's deep timbre reverberated off the walls around us.

My head dipped further, and my fingers gripped the edge of the pew. "Is it true? Did he murder that girl?"

Lucian sighed, and I held my breath, waiting for a response. Ace was his closest confidant. Knowing Lucian, he would probably take the high road and tell me I needed to ask him about it myself. It was what I expected. But I guess I didn't know as much as I thought about this man after all.

"He has a complicated past," Lucian murmured.

"Don't we all?" My heels drummed against the tiled floor, a nervous habit.

"Not like this."

The weight of Lucian's statement held so much anguish, I couldn't help but look at him. The pain was etched so deeply into his features, it looked

as though he was recalling pieces of his own past.

“Tell me,” I pleaded.

Lucian turned to me, pinching his brows together. “How do I know you won’t use it against him?”

My eyes narrowed as the accusation even though I probably deserved it. “Have I ever?”

“Not Ace,” he conceded. “But everyone else—”

“I wouldn’t do that to him.” My words came out sharper than I intended. I didn’t care if people called me a con, a liar, and a trickster. But even I had my hard limits, and Ace was one of them.

Satisfied with my response, Lucian leaned back against the pew and closed his eyes as he folded his hands together. “He’ll never tell you himself. As long as I’ve known him, even I’ve only managed to get bits and pieces over the years. The rest came from his files.”

“What files?” I asked.

“I don’t typically make it my business to tell anyone what isn’t my story to tell since I’m legally bound to confidentiality. However, in this case, I’m also morally bound to do what I believe is right. Gypsy feels that you are safest with him, and I’m inclined to agree. But I understand with your background, you would need answers to these questions.”

“Please don’t talk about me like you know me.” I glowered. “Or anything about my life.”

Lucian shrugged unapologetically. He was married to my sister, and though I was certain she’d probably given him intimate details of our childhood, I didn’t intend to discuss it with him.

“You can’t hide what happened to you forever,” he noted. “It’s only fair that if I tell you about Ace, you show him the same courtesy. Take it from a man who learned the hard way, there is nothing to be gained by hiding our demons.”

A ball of tension bobbed in my throat. I had no intentions of opening up to Ace or anyone else, but Lucian didn’t need to know that.

He stood and walked to the row of candles, his back turned to me as he observed the burning flames. “Huck was the child of a couple who belonged to a radical sect of the Baptist church,” he began. “Most people refer to them as a cult, and I’d have to agree that’s more accurate. His father was a preacher, and his mother was... by all accounts... a mentally unstable woman who believed she could abolish evil through sexual rituals. It was

during one of these rituals, with a man who wasn't her husband, that Huck came to be conceived."

"Wow," I murmured. "That's awful."

"His mother died from complications during childbirth, but Huck survived. As you can probably imagine, his non-biological father Ed wasn't at all pleased by this development."

Acid heaved up my throat, threatening to spill out as bitterness coated my tongue. "Did he blame Huck?"

Lucian glanced at me, considering his words carefully before he answered. "He did more than blame him. He beat him, burned him, and mutilated him. All under the guise that Huck was evil, and it was the only way to cure him. His body is a testament to the abuse he suffered in his childhood. But it's the scars in his mind that damaged him the most. When he was eight years old, Ed sewed his mouth shut and told him he was never allowed to speak again. And for seventeen years, he didn't."

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even move. The horrific image of Huck as a small traumatized child left me shaking. The acknowledgment of his pain hit me point blank in the heart. I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. I wanted to burn the whole fucking world down.

"How could nobody realize this was happening?" I demanded, though I knew from my own experience that abuse wasn't that difficult to hide.

"Ed had Huck homeschooled by a member of his congregation for many years," Lucian explained. "He told her the boy was disturbed and blamed the wounds on self-mutilation. You have to understand... this was a radical group with beliefs far outside the realm of normality. Even if he didn't attempt to hide it, I'm not entirely certain these actions would have warranted a cry for help from any of his flock. He was a well-respected man in his community. People looked to him for guidance, and they believed what he preached."

"That's insane," I growled. I didn't want to believe it, but I knew firsthand exactly how many people turned a blind eye to disgusting behavior. People in a position of authority were often the scariest. They had power, and they were virtually untouchable.

"The problem only compounded," Lucian continued. "As Huck grew up, he started to act out. Vandalizing the church. Getting into fights. It all went into his record, creating the image of a problem child. When Ed enrolled him in public high school, there were numerous accounts of

behavioral issues. He'd broken desks, destroyed books, and intentionally flunked subjects he knew well. I suppose you could say it was the only way for him to communicate his frustrations, but to everyone else, it just confirmed their beliefs about him."

Lucian was in an almost trance-like state as he continued to spell out the details of Huck's childhood. Details I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to know about anymore. It was all leading up to the big event. The truth I wasn't certain I could handle. Lucian painted a picture of unimaginable horrors, and the worst part was that I could relate. Huck was damaged, incredibly so, and it was becoming painfully obvious how that happened. But I still wasn't sure what to think about the crimes he'd been convicted of.

It would be hypocritical for me to say regardless of what happened in his past, there was no excuse for the crime committed against that girl. Because if I said that, then I'd have to apply the same logic to the worst thing I'd ever done.

"So how did it happen?" I choked out.

Lucian took a moment to contemplate, and I worried he wasn't going to tell me after all. But I realized before he spoke that this was just as difficult for him to recount. "Mary-Kate was a foster child who'd been shuffled around the system. She'd been abused herself, and she spent a lot of time on the street when she wasn't couch surfing at any safe haven she could find. During that time, she encountered Ace while he was scavenging the trash for food. They developed what I guess you could call a friendship."

I couldn't even imagine what he'd just described. Ace digging around in the trash for his food? It was too awful to consider.

"Did he talk to this girl?" I asked.

"No." Lucian shook his head. "He still didn't speak, but she confided in him, and they passed notes if he really had something to say. She told him her foster dad tried to touch her, and that's how she ended up on the streets. Huck, being Huck, he didn't have a clue what to do with that type of information. His solution was to sneak her into his bedroom and let her crash there during the night after Ed had gone to sleep. The agreement was, Huck would go to school, and she would leave and keep herself busy until dark. But Huck didn't realize she was sneaking back into the house during the day. She'd probably done it a handful of times before she finally got caught."

"By Ed?" I asked.

Lucian nodded. "It was too late. By the time Huck came home that day and walked into his bedroom, she was already dead. Ed had assaulted her and flown into a rage when she tried to fight back."

I doubled over, repressing the urge to puke. Why those words triggered or surprised me, I would never know. But I felt my body rocking in an attempt to self-soothe as I imagined the sad girl with the dark chocolate eyes.

"This doesn't make any sense," I croaked. "If Ed did it, why did Ace get locked up?"

"Ed was the local preacher," Lucian stated with disgust. "And Ace was the troubled mute kid everyone in town already knew was a problem. He was the perfect scapegoat."

"But how?" I demanded. "How could they just arrest him?"

"He wouldn't speak to them. There was no defense. Everything was written down as it was spoken in Ed's words. Ace was told to sign the confession, and he did."

"Just like that?" I asked in disbelief.

"Just like that. Signed, sealed, and delivered. Another victim of a broken justice system."

"Why would he sign it?" I pressed. "I don't understand."

"It happens more often than you might imagine," Lucian replied. "And in Huck's case, it was simple. Ed had convinced him he was responsible for her death. Huck brought her into the home, and Ed claimed it was his evil spell that forced his hands. In Huck's mind, he accepted responsibility, and he believed he should be punished for it. Punishment for things he couldn't control was all he ever knew. There was nobody to advocate for him or tell him otherwise. By the time I heard of his case, he'd already spent ten years in prison."

I was grateful Lucian was still turned away so he couldn't witness the tears spilling down my cheeks. "You freed him. It seems like it would be impossible."

"It almost was." He pinched the muscle at the base of his neck. "I visited him for months before he finally spoke to me, and I'd almost given up at that point. That was just the first hurdle. I still had to build trust and get him to open up to me about what really happened. I did my own research and put together a theory, but I needed him to confirm it. The process for overturning a conviction is a long, desolate road. I didn't know

if we'd ever get there, but after three years of fighting, Ace finally walked free."

"What happened to Ed? Did he just walk away?"

"Not quite." Lucian shook his head. "After the investigation was reopened, several other missing young women were linked to Ed. Evidence turned up in the house that would have inevitably led to his arrest, but before that could happen, Ed drove his car into a tree and killed himself."

"Coward," I scoffed.

Lucian turned to study me. "Ace doesn't think he deserves good things in his life, Birdie. In his eyes, he still believes it was his fault his mother and Mary-Kate died. For as long as I've known him, he's punished himself for it."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

"I don't know." He sighed. "Honestly, he came to my house the other night, and I could tell something wasn't right. The thing is, Gypsy asked him to look after you, and she's my wife, so at the end of the day, I just want her to be happy. But not at the expense of Ace."

"What does that mean?" I couldn't hide the hurt in my voice. "You think I'm going to screw him up even worse?"

"I think you have the capability," Lucian corrected. "I just want to make sure those aren't your intentions. That you understand I don't want to see him hurt."

"It isn't my intention." I squeezed my fingers against the grainy wood. "I'm not going back there anyway, so it doesn't matter." Even as I said it, it felt like a lie.

Lucian sat down beside me on the bench and stared at the floor. "He's different with you. I've never seen him so out of sorts."

That statement shouldn't make my stupid heart beat faster, but it did. Still, I had questions. Things I needed to know for myself.

"Did you tell him to stalk me for over a year?"

"I asked him to keep an eye on you," Lucian answered. "You were supposed to leave Vegas, in case that hasn't already been established several times."

I ignored his jab. "Does keeping an eye on me extend to the type of food I eat? Or the wine I drink? Or implanting secret spies into my life who I think are my friends?"

An odd expression passed over Lucian's face. He probably thought I was crazy, but he didn't verbalize it. Instead, he looked lost in his own thoughts, like pieces of a puzzle were falling together. And then he stood, checking his watch, as anxiety crept back into his features. His thoughts had returned to my sister and the baby.

"I have to go," he said abruptly.

"You're not going to call Ace and tell him I was here?"

His lips curled into a smile. "Oh, I will. But you should have about a twenty-minute head start by the time he gets here."

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Chapter 22

Birdie

TWENTY MINUTES WAS NOT A lot of time to get out of this part of town, especially since I didn't even know where I was going. Instinct drove me toward the parking lot of the church, but I hesitated on the stairs, considering Lucian's words.

Ace is going out of his mind looking for you.

Did he feel bad for what happened? Was he even capable of feeling anything? Sometimes, I couldn't tell. Now I understood the reasons for his behavior, but it didn't make it any easier to figure him out. The things Lucian told me would take days to process, if not weeks.

Regardless, the images were burned into my mind. To imagine Ace as a little boy without words was to feel heartbreak in its purest form. He'd never been loved. He'd never been protected. Even as an adult, he was still learning how to communicate with the world and navigate his emotions. I wanted to fix him. I wanted to heal him. But not with the pain he thought he needed. What Ace really needed was love, but how could I show him the way when I didn't even know it myself? I think that truth hurt the most. *I couldn't be what he really needed.*

With Ace's history, I couldn't imagine he'd ever find a single redeeming quality in me when he learned who I really was. He thought he'd seen me at my worst. The rage, the cons, the lies. He'd even spoken with Detective Taylor, but he didn't know the worst thing I'd ever done. And if it ever came out, I knew with horrific certainty that he wouldn't ever want to look at me again.

My phone rang, shaking me from my thoughts, and a glance at the screen confirmed it was the past calling.

“Joe?” I answered.

“Miss me?” The slimy voice on the other line sounded distant as if he had me on speakerphone.

“I’ve been calling you,” I grumbled. “Are you ready to make a deal or not?”

“So eager,” he mused. “How about I’m ready to talk about it?”

I pinched the phone in my grip as I forced myself to stay calm and play his stupid game. “Okay, so talk.”

“Not on the phone,” he scolded. “Meet me inside the Rio. I’ll be at the bar.”

“You’re in Vegas?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions, Birdie. Are you coming or not?”

He’d intentionally asked me to meet him in a public place, knowing I wouldn’t agree otherwise. Not after the last time. Even though it was the last thing I wanted to do, it was my only option.

“Fine. Give me twenty minutes.”

“See you then.”

He hung up, and I glanced around the empty lot, still torn by the thought of leaving here before Ace arrived. But it was done. He wasn’t part of this, and I needed to remember that. The only thing that mattered now was getting my life back.



The Rio wasn’t on my list of usual haunts in Vegas, but it was right up Joe’s alley. After the cabbie dropped me off, I walked straight into the bar and scanned the patrons, but I didn’t see him.

Something in my gut warned me this was too convenient. He didn’t need to meet with me in person; he just liked to toy with me. That was his MO. And now here I sat, looking like a fool while he probably watched on from a machine, snickering at his ability to control me like a puppet.

Twenty minutes passed. And then thirty. The first three texts I sent him went unanswered, but on the fourth, he finally responded.

Joe: Something came up. Another time.

Seriously? I stared at the screen, dumbfounded. Now he was definitely playing games with me. But even this was out of character for him. Regardless, I wasn't about to waste my time sitting around while he figured his shit out. Clearly, he thought my threat to expose him was a joke. Maybe he thought he was untouchable. Maybe I was really screwed. I texted him back anyway.

Birdie: You know what's about to 'come up' in your world, Joe? The police at your door if you don't give me that fucking tape.

I waited five minutes and still no response. With a groan, I marched back toward the exit and stepped outside into the afternoon heat. The Rio was a short walking distance from the Strip, and I figured I could use the time to blow off some of my pent-up frustrations. There was also the matter of figuring out where I would go.

More than one time today, I'd considered hopping on a plane and saying fuck it all. I didn't know where I'd end up or what I would do, but maybe there was another life out there for me. Only, I knew there wasn't. Vegas was my home. I'd tried leaving before, and even then, I couldn't stay gone long. Now I had Ace and Gypsy and my nephew to consider. But unless I got the evidence on that tape, I had no future at all, and that was what it all boiled down to.

I turned the corner on the sidewalk and almost stumbled over a bum napping in the middle of it. The foliage was thick here, and I often saw the homeless utilizing that real estate for shade and comfort. Farther down the ravine in the storage lot were shipping containers converted into homes. Definitely not legal, but people lived there too. That was Vegas for you. There was a very thin line between abject poverty and the filthy rich, and it was sometimes only a matter of feet.

"Birdie."

I froze when I heard my name, and when I turned, I noticed it was the same bum I'd just passed a minute ago. The question was how the hell did

he know me? It freaked me out, and everything in my gut screamed at me to get out of there.

“You have the wrong person.” I kept walking, but so did he. I could hear his footfalls behind me, growing more urgent as mine did too.

“Hold up,” he said. “I have a message for you.”

Whatever it was, I didn’t want to hear it. I stepped up my pace, racing for the pedestrian bridge ahead. At this point, I had two choices. Run out into traffic and become roadkill or get away from him on foot. For once in my life, I was glad I wasn’t wearing heels.

I made it across the crosswalk and onto the pedestrian bridge, but as my luck would have it, nobody else was on it. And from the sounds of it, my stalker wasn’t giving up.

“Leave me alone,” I yelled over my shoulder as I ran. “I’m not whoever you think I am.”

I waited for a response, but there wasn’t one. I understood why a moment later when he reached out and grabbed a fistful of my hair, yanking me back against him. At that instant, I knew two things. He was a lot bigger than me, and he meant me harm.

Before I could process anything else, he slammed my face against the metal grate on the bridge. The wind shot out of my chest on a sharp exhalation, and I struggled to breathe as he did it again, hitting my head so hard I crumpled onto the concrete in a heap.

My aggressor was a blur, a distorted face that might be familiar, but I couldn’t tell. Evil always looked the same. I tried to curl into myself, but he stomped his foot against my knees until my hold gave out. When my body fell back open, he rolled me onto my back and kneeled onto my chest, crushing me with his weight. *Just like when I was a little girl.*

Tears sprang to my eyes, and I hated myself for being weak as I shook my head and pleaded with him. But I had nothing else. I couldn’t save myself in this situation. I couldn’t do anything but try to appeal to the humanity I knew didn’t exist.

He proved it in the next second when he finally moved his knee and allowed me to drag in a breath, only to slap me across the face so hard blackness seeped into my vision. I tried to focus, and I tried to punch and kick, but my body was weak and sluggish. In my mind, I thought I was fighting back, but I realized after a while that they were only small indistinguishable movements. I was losing the fight rapidly.

Another slap. And then another. They kept coming, and I could feel my head flopping from side to side, unable to deflect them. My consciousness seemed to be coming and going, and I was only getting bits and pieces of what was happening as he started to unbuckle his belt and unzip his jeans.

That was when I resorted to the only defense I had left. We weren't too far from the Strip. Someone had to be close by. I gathered all the strength I could manage and screamed until it felt like my throat was bloody.

"Stupid bitch." A large hand wrapped around my neck and squeezed. The only thing I could see was a pair of dark eyes looking back at me as he spat in my face. "You fucking ruin everything."

He slammed his palm against my chest and clambered to his feet, disappearing from my vision. The only thing that remained was a familiar note of black licorice from his clothing that made me want to vomit. Hurried footsteps approached from farther down the ramp, and I could only hope it wasn't another monster lurking around the corner. But when I looked up and saw two frightened girls staring back at me, I'd never been so relieved in my life.

One held a can of pepper spray in the direction my attacker had fled while the other fumbled with the phone in her hand. She was on the verge of calling the cops when I shook my head.

"Please, no police. Just help me up. Get me to the Strip. That's all I need."

They both froze and looked at each other. It was obvious they didn't want to listen to me. I probably looked about as good as I currently felt right now, but after a quiet moment of debate, they did as I asked. Helping me up, they balanced my noodle of a body between them as they walked me the remaining distance. I could barely move my arms when they found a place to prop me as I requested.

"You need to go to a hospital," one of the girls said. "We can't just leave you here like this."

"It's okay. I have someone you can call." I tried to pull the burner phone from my pocket but realized it was gone. Whoever attacked me must have taken it.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "Can they take you to the hospital?"

I nodded. I was good at pretending everything was okay, even if it wasn't. I just needed to not think about what almost happened. If I could just get outside of my head, everything would be all right.

“Do you have the number written down somewhere?” The girl pulled up the keypad on her phone.

I shook my head. I didn’t need to write it down. Since Ace had texted me whenever I popped back up in Vegas, I knew his number by heart. Gypsy taught me long ago to memorize important numbers, and it occurred to me now that his was at the top of my list. Rattling off the digits, she dialed for me, considered handing me the phone, and then realized that wouldn’t work. I leaned my head back against the concrete wall and fought the exhaustion pulling at my heavy eyes.

“Just tell him I’m ready to come home now.”

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Chapter 23

Ace

I DOUBLE PARKED THE TRUCK on the side of the street and bailed out the minute I recognized the blond halo of hair. My feet were moving in her direction before my mind could catch up to what was happening. I was running on adrenaline and zero sleep, but this time, it wasn't just my paranoia that something was wrong.

She was slumped against the building, head drooped forward with a curtain of hair around her shoulders. I couldn't see her face, but I saw the matching expressions of concern on the two women beside her.

"Birdie?" I choked out her name, but it was too quiet for her to hear. I was still too far away, yet somehow, she knew. She knew I was there.

Her head lifted, and I came to an abrupt stop on the sidewalk, causing a chain reaction as pedestrians bumped against each other when they swerved to avoid me. Haunted eyes locked onto my face, relief swelling in the icy blue depths as she brought a trembling hand to her mouth and choked back a sob.

She was battered and bloody, and the horror of what I saw transported me back in time. I was trembling, vibrating, pieces of my past shifting and breaking apart the deep-rooted emotions I'd buried long ago. Fear and fury swirled in my gut, mixing into a toxic cocktail I could no longer control. It bled into my veins and infected me as my body lurched forward with one objective in mind.

Maim. Kill. Destroy.

"Who did this?" I snarled, making all three girls jump as their heads swiveled in my direction.

“Do you know this guy?” one of the unfamiliar faces asked Birdie.

She nodded, her eyes never leaving mine.

“Huck?” The pain in her voice snapped me out of the alternate reality I’d found myself in. I blinked, trying to shake off the grip of the past and focus on my present. On my future. On my whole fucking world as I knew it.

“Birdie,” I choked out her name again as I knelt before her to examine her face.

“Just take me home,” she pleaded. “I want to go home.”

Home.

Her home was with me. I wanted to tell her as much, but I couldn’t speak. In a matter of seconds, she’d turned me mute again. Her battered face was too fucking much. I buried my face into her body, clinging to her like a fool as I vowed to kill whoever did this to her. I would make them suffer in a thousand different ways until they begged me for death. It was the only possible outcome. Nobody touched this angel.

Birdie’s fingers came to rest in my hair, stroking me in a way that soothed the murderous thoughts ravaging my mind. I should have been the one to comfort her. That was my job. But I didn’t know how, and it was never more evident than when I looked up at her and saw the exhaustion on her face.

I stood and gingerly lifted her body into my arms, cradling her against my chest. Turning toward the women who had called me, it occurred to me that I owed them more than they could ever know.

“Thank you,” I forced out. “For staying with her.”

“Please take her to a doctor.”

I nodded, and they watched on as I moved in the direction of the truck. It was still idling, and it appeared I’d forgotten my keys in the ignition during the chaos. But it was the douchebag in the Porsche behind me who drew my attention.

He kept honking, screaming out obscenities as I took my time securing Birdie into her seat. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to sit there and inventory every bruise and scratch on her face so I could provide a detailed checklist for the doctor. But traffic had become congested behind us, and the Porsche fucker was only getting louder and more obnoxious.

“Hey, asshole!” he yelled out his window. “I don’t have all goddamned day. Move your fucking truck, moron.”

“I’ll be right back.” My fingers grazed over Birdie’s jaw before I tucked her hair back away from her face. “Hold tight.”

I shut the door and walked around the truck in the direction of the blaring horn. As soon as the Porsche fucker saw me, his hand froze mid honk. But it was far too late for this pissant. He frantically scurried to roll up his window as I approached, but I jammed my hand through the gap and pushed it back down with force, relishing the sound of the motor as it sputtered and gave out. Then I lodged a palm around the scrawny fucker’s throat and met his eyes.

“You got anything else you want to get off your chest?” I asked.

He shook his head, slobbering all over himself as he tried to speak. “No, man. I’m sorry. It’s just... your truck is parked in the middle of the road—”

His half-assed apology died in his throat when my fist connected with his face. There was a satisfactory crack before blood began to pour from his nose, and he screamed like a baby. It was the release I needed at that moment, and I didn’t think twice about leaving him there, sobbing in his hundred-thousand-dollar car.

Birdie glanced at me in question as I climbed back into the driver’s seat and flipped on my blinker, pulling back into traffic. But I didn’t think anything needed to be said about it. She leaned her head back against the seat, her eyes drifting shut, and I reached over and stroked her arm.

“No sleep.” I couldn’t hide the concern in my voice. “Just stay awake with me, angel.”

“I’m fine,” she murmured, but it was obvious she wasn’t. “Just take me home.”

I tried to keep her awake and distracted by stroking her arm, but that only seemed to lull her deeper into delirium. I was so worried about getting her to the hospital that I almost lost sight of the road in front of us several times. It wasn’t like me to be so reckless, and I didn’t know how to fix this. I only knew that I had to get her to a doctor, and I had to do it now.

“Birdie, stay with me.” I squeezed her hand in mine. “Tell me about your favorite dessert.”

Her head swiveled in my direction, and when she smiled, it was bloody. “Shouldn’t you know that already, stalker?”

In spite of the gravity of the situation, her smartass remark relieved me. She was still Birdie. She was still my girl.

Her gaze drifted up to the roof of the truck as she seemed to consider it. "Cotton candy ice cream."

The answer didn't surprise me. I imagined her on a hot summer day, legs stretched out in the grass as she tasted the airy sugar melting across her tongue. I wanted to taste it on her lips, and I resolved then and there, I would always have ice cream for her in the freezer.

"As soon as you feel up for it, I'll buy you some," I told her.

She nodded, her eyes drifting shut again. I was about to shake her out of it when she spoke. "What about yours?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

I felt her eyes move to my face as tension crept over my features. It was a loaded question. One I hadn't planned on reciprocating.

"How can you not know?" she asked.

I considered my answer. My default setting was to shut down. To protect me and my past. But I already knew Birdie had seen the obituary in my personal files. I'd found it in the stack, along with her internet searches on my work computer. She had learned something about me, and it ate at me the entire time she was gone.

I'd resolved a long time ago not to give a fuck what anyone thought about me, but this was different. I needed her to know the truth. I needed her to know that despite what my actions may have led her to believe, she was safe with me. So even though it went against every instinct I'd ever had, I answered her question honestly.

"My father didn't allow sweets. And when I went to prison, I never had any money in my commissary to buy them. When I got out, there were so many choices I didn't really know where to begin. So I just didn't."

Birdie's hand drifted across the seat, and her head rolled to the side while she studied me. "Then I guess we'll have to figure that out, won't we?"

The levity of her tone didn't sit right with me. I didn't know if it was the trauma she'd sustained or something else, but it wasn't a normal reaction for someone who'd recently read that I'd been convicted of murder. It especially wasn't a normal reaction for Birdie. I expected her to have questions, but if she did, she wasn't voicing them.

Regardless, it wasn't important right then. I was just content to keep her awake and talking. But when I pulled into the hospital lot, she perked up long enough to shake her head.

“I’m not going in there.”

“Yes, you are.” I tried to keep my cool. “Birdie, this is non-negotiable.”

“They’ll report it to the cops. They’ll run my name, and it will get back to the detective—”

“No, they won’t. We’ll use a fake name and pay with cash. It will be okay, I promise.”

She looked like she wasn’t sure about anything anymore as her body sank lower into the seat. But it was clear she needed medical attention, and I couldn’t let her leave here until she received it. I had to know everything was okay. I wouldn’t ever gamble with Birdie’s life.

Before she could argue further, I got out of the truck and walked around to her side, lifting her into my arms again to carry her inside.

“I can walk,” she protested, but even as she said it, her energy waned.

“No, you can’t.”

Once we passed through the doors, all further arguments from her ceased. It didn’t take long before a nurse was at my side, helping her into a chair and wheeling her down the hall. The first thing she did was look at me like I was the one who had done this to Birdie, and it rubbed me the wrong fucking way from the start. But I kept my cool, trying to focus on the reason we were here.

“Can I take you back alone?” the nurse asked.

Birdie shook her head frantically, her hand reaching out to cling to mine. “No. He’s coming with me.”

Chapter 24

Birdie

HOURS HAD PASSED AS I lay on the bed in the emergency department, watching nurses come and go. They checked my vitals. Cleaned my face. Asked me questions. Took me to other departments for scans and tests. The process dragged on and on. I was exhausted, but every time I started to drift off to sleep, I woke in a panic, thinking I was there alone. I expected to wake up and see Detective Taylor at the end of my bed, ready to handcuff me and haul me away.

In my fragile state of mind, I knew I couldn't live this way anymore. Ace could see it too. My anxiety was a living, breathing animal in the room with us. I couldn't bother to hide it anymore. Not when it was taking every ounce of energy I had just to exist.

The adrenaline had worn off, and now there was only pain. I felt it everywhere in my battered body but mostly my swollen face. The doctor and nurses kept looking at Ace, casting their quiet assumptions about him. Regardless of how many times I'd told them a stranger had attacked me, they didn't want to believe it. I guess it was easier to believe the monster was right in front of them in a leather vest and biker boots.

He handled it like he did almost everything else. He was cool and collected, never trying to answer for me or direct the conversation. As I told a shortened version of the supposed mugging gone wrong, I knew Ace was absorbing every word I said, wondering if it was the truth. I also knew there would be more questions later. When they asked me if anything sexual had occurred, his face mottled with red when I hesitated. He looked like he was

about to blow a gasket, and I could practically see him making plans to destroy whoever did this to me.

“All right.” The doctor scanned the notes on the computer mounted to the wall. “It looks like everything came back clear. No major head injuries, but you’ll be sore for a while with those bumps and bruises.”

“So I can go home?” I asked.

He glanced at me and then to Ace. “If that’s what you want, I can’t stop you. But I do need to ask you one more time if you’d like to file a police report?”

“No.” I shook my head as I started to peel away the covers. “I just want this day to be over with already.”

“Easy there.” Ace glowered at me as I attempted to get out of bed. “Slow down, turbo. I have some questions.”

“What questions could you possibly have?” I blinked up at him.

He turned to the doctor. “Does she need any special care? What about restrictions? I’m sure she shouldn’t be doing anything for a while, right?”

The doctor, who had previously seemed put off by Ace’s quiet demeanor, now showed surprise at his mounting concern for me. His eyebrows rose as Ace continued to rattle off question after question. It was as if he’d been rehearsing them in his mind the entire time, which I had no doubt was true.

“A few days of bed rest probably wouldn’t hurt,” the doctor answered when Ace finally took a breath. “But I’d say take it at your own pace. If you feel like an activity is too much, then it probably is.”

Ace didn’t seem content with that answer, and even though I was raring to go, it was clear he wouldn’t leave until he was satisfied. “Okay, so three days of bed rest? Or more? Should I bring her back on day three? How do we know if anything warrants another visit in that time? What if she gets a headache, or feels nauseous, or—”

“For the love,” I interjected. “I’m going to be just fine. You don’t need to ask all these questions.”

But it was apparent when he turned to me, and I saw the panic in his eyes, he did. And I understood why. He thought that if he did everything just right this time, nothing horrible would happen to me. He wouldn’t let me down like he believed he’d let down Mary-Kate. That realization struck me right in the only soft spot I had left, and I sat back down on the bed and folded my hands together.

I let him continue to harass the doctor, and only when he had a detailed list on a piece of paper did he decide it was safe for us to leave. I was pretty sure as he helped me out of the hospital that they would be reporting the entire incident to the police regardless, but I'd given them my fake ID and Ace had paid for everything in cash. So I only hoped that would prevent this incident from coming back to haunt me.

Ace loaded me into the truck and secured my seat belt, finally giving me the green light to rest. As soon as we were on the road again, and I felt his presence next to me, it was exactly what I did.



I came to just as Ace was settling me into bed. As my eyes opened up and I took in the room around me, panic began to set in. The room wasn't familiar, and none of my things were here. My nightlight wasn't here. And already, I felt like I couldn't breathe as I imagined him leaving me in this place alone. On instinct, my fingers wrapped around his wrist, clinging to him, and he shook his head.

"It's okay. This is my room."

I blinked, trying to focus through the blurriness that had settled into my vision from sleep. But as tired as I was, curiosity held me captive as I sat up and took everything in. His room was large and empty. There was a bed, a dresser, and a closet that was only about half full. But it smelled like Huck. Notes of cedar and leather and cloves lingered on the bedding, comforting me in a way that was new.

"How are you feeling?" His eyes wandered over my face as he gently tucked my hair behind my ear.

"Like hell," I murmured. "Probably about as good as I look."

"You need to rest," he answered decidedly. "That's all. You'll be fine in a few days."

I knew that was true, but I was too proud to admit I didn't want to sleep alone. There was still a lot lingering between us—too many uncertainties to name—but right then, I needed Huck. And I'd never needed anybody.

He leaned over to the bedside table, pulling open a drawer and retrieving a tin. But then he looked up at me like something else had occurred to him, and he grabbed a second bottle of weed. I watched in fascination as he rolled us a joint before he slipped it between my lips.

His palm came up to cup my cheek, tracing the physical evidence left behind from the attack. His eyes had melted into a deep amber, and his voice was gruff when he brought the lighter to the paper. "Now you can try Mary-Kate's Last Dance."

I swallowed, a torrent of emotions opening up inside me. This blend was sacred to him. This blend was his medicine. His way of fixing the broken like me. I inhaled it slowly, savoring each taste he gave me as he alternated between resting it against my lips and taking it away for a long second. The entire time, his eyes never moved from my mouth, and I felt the heat of his stare all the way into my soul.

Finally, he dragged the joint to his lips and inhaled, tasting me on his tongue as I watched with a hunger I couldn't deny. I was bruised and battered, but I'd never wanted anything more than I wanted him right then. Ace seemed to read my thoughts as he leaned forward and pushed his lips to mine, releasing the smoke from his lungs into my mouth. Slowly, it slipped out between us as he started to kiss me. His tongue slid between the seam of my lips, and I opened for him the way I always did. He rewarded me with a growl that rumbled from his chest while his fingers cupped the back of my skull. Holding me in place, he rolled over and mounted my body with his massive frame. I wrapped my legs around him, fingers digging into his back as his body dipped forward, and I felt the heat of his cock rubbing against my shorts.

"Nobody else gets this," he murmured as he kissed his way down my throat.

"Nobody," I agreed, shaking my head as delirium began to settle into my bones. I felt grounded. Uninhibited.

Huck leaned back on his calves and removed his vest, and then to my surprise, his T-shirt. I was glad he'd done it when I was too relaxed to function because I didn't think I'd be able to absorb the shock of what I was seeing in any other state. His chest was a work of art, a rippling sea of muscle and ink. But it was also deeply scarred; the word "demon" clearly etched across the skin, forever embedded into his heart. I sucked in a breath that felt like fire as my eyes moved over the history written on his skin. He

was burned, cut, and riddled with too many marks to count. There was nothing I could do for them now, but I still reached up to touch him, my fingers sliding over his skin. His eyes fell shut, and he shuddered as he placed his hand over mine, holding it against him in a way I knew he'd never allowed before.

When he came back to me, his eyes were darker. Hungrier. And I felt that want reflected in my own as I unbuttoned my shorts. "Help me," I pleaded.

He tugged them off for me, followed by my tank top, and then his own jeans and briefs. We were both stark naked when he lowered his body over mine, and for the first time, I felt what true intimacy was. His warm skin against mine. His scent all over me. His lips against my lips. We came together in a slow burn, desperate to destroy any distance between us.

Ace slipped his fingers between my thighs, groaning when he felt my sticky want for him. He retrieved the dwindling joint from the nightstand and inhaled, repeating the process of breathing his fire into my lungs. I inhaled him as deep as I could take him, until my chest felt like it might explode, and then I let go, watching the smoke slip between us. Satisfied, Ace snuffed out the blunt and tossed it aside as he rolled his hips against me.

I knew by the heaviness settling into my body that we were working against time. But I also knew I wouldn't be satisfied until he collapsed beside me, exhausted and spent while his come dripped down my thighs.

"Huck." I clung to his body, pulling him closer. "Don't let me go."

He didn't deny me. His mouth worshipped mine as his cock nudged against me, and then he slowly pushed inside until he was as deep as my body could take him.

"Fuck." His eyes rolled back in his head as he arched back and began to move.

I echoed his sentiments as my body came alive for him. Time seemed to stretch on and on as we felt each other in this sacred space. My fingers floated over the infinite landscape of his war-torn flesh. Everything was more intense than I could have imagined it. Each stuttered breath I drew from his lips between kisses tasted like spun sugar and gossamer dreams. Our shadows danced across the room as the light faded between us. Every thrust of his hips pinned me to the bed, a cloud of softness beneath me. And suddenly, I was weightless, suspended in the moment as I dug my fingers

into his biceps, my head lolling back against the pillow. This was my utopia, and in this paradise, I could only feel pleasure. Pleasure so intense it jackknifed through my body, splitting me in two as my orgasm came without warning. It was mind-altering, earth-shattering, and it stretched on for an infinite length of time that couldn't be measured.

His cock pulsed inside me, throbbing with the life force of a man who'd embedded himself so deeply in my being that every barrier between us shattered. In the stillness, he pivoted his hips one last time, drawing his head back as the tension fled his body on a choked sigh. His come flooded my womb, warming me from the inside out, and he collapsed beside me, my leg still tossed over his hip, our gazes locked.

I couldn't stop touching him. Breathing him in. I wanted to draw out this space in time, but I felt it slipping away. Sleep was coming for me, and somehow, I knew when I woke, I wouldn't be the same again.

⋮

Chapter 25

Ace

THE LAST GLIMMERS OF EVENING light faded into the shadows of the room, becoming one with darkness. Beside me, Birdie still clung to me, her breathing deep and even. I listened to every beat of her heart, an assurance that she was still here with me. We were both naked, wrapped up only in each other, and I was too relaxed to move.

My eyes were tired and heavy, but I resisted the urge to close them. I wanted to stay alert in case she needed me. And for hours, that was exactly what I did. Until finally, against my will, sleep pulled me under too.

When I woke again, it was because Birdie's breathing had changed. Somehow, even in my sleep, I'd been aware of her. When I opened my eyes, she was curled against my chest, her fingers tangled up in mine.

In the darkness, I couldn't see her, but her grip on me told me she was awake. I'd fucked up and forgotten about the nightlight, and I knew that was what had woken her. I didn't know how to evade the inevitable panic attack, but Birdie did.

"Just tell me you're here," she whispered against me. "And I think everything will be okay."

Even though she could feel me, and I could feel her, she needed that assurance. I wouldn't deny her. Never again would I deny her.

"I'm right here." My lips settled against her forehead, breathing her in. "I'll always be right here, Birdie."



When Birdie finally stirred from her sleep, I was awake but hadn't moved from my place beside her. I was used to chasing the daylight, rising early and getting shit done. It had been over a decade since I'd slept in, but today, I hadn't woken until after eleven. The day was slipping away from us, but for once, I found that I didn't care. I had plenty of capable guys back at the shop in my absence, and this was exactly where I needed to be.

"You're still here," Birdie murmured as she looked up at me.

I couldn't blame her for expecting me to be gone. Not after I'd run out on her the last two times we'd had sex. I wanted to tell her it would never happen again. I wanted to explain the tangled mess of feelings unraveling in my thoughts, but I didn't know how to relay them.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Probably about time for you to eat some breakfast." My fingers grazed the length of her arm, and she shivered.

"I don't know if I can move." She glanced down, observing her naked body, and a blush crept over her cheeks.

"I don't need you to move. You stay in bed. I'll get breakfast."

She yawned, stretching out and curling her toes inward before she rolled onto her side. Her face was still slightly swollen, and the bruises had begun to change colors. It would be some time before they went away, and every day would be a reminder. A conversation we'd need to have, but not right now.

Her eyes moved down between my thighs to the cock that was already swelling in her presence. Her nipples tightened in response before her gaze returned to my face, eyes soft and calm.

"We're naked."

"Yep," I answered.

"You brought me to your room, and you stayed with me."

"Yep."

Darkness seeped into her features, and the shutters came down on her face. She was thinking too much about all the ways this could go wrong,

and I didn't like it. I couldn't break down her walls if I didn't know what they were.

"Birdie." I reached for her hand, sheltering her small fingers in mine. There was so much I wanted to say, but I didn't know how to verbalize it. All these feelings were new to me. I'd never known anyone could make me feel so fucked up but still have me coming back for more.

"I want you in my bed every night."

The words I blurted didn't come out the way I'd hoped, and I didn't know how Birdie would take them. Gypsy warned me that she would push me away. This was probably the exact opposite of what I should be doing with her, but I was past caring about everything that made this wrong. Our ages, our fucked-up pasts, the shared inability to connect with anyone else. There were a lot of reasons we shouldn't be together. But there was one that we should, and it was this undeniable feeling in my chest every time she looked at me.

"I thought you didn't do relationships." She studied me, and I knew this was a test. How I answered this question would set the course for wherever we were going.

"I don't do relationships." I sighed. "At least I didn't. Until you."

"You told me to get fucked two days ago," she reminded me with a brittle voice.

I dragged a hand over my face and shook my head. "I know I did." My voice cracked as I tried to explain it to her. "Birdie, I'm fucking deranged. I don't know how else to say it. I'm probably the worst thing for you. I'll say stupid shit, and I'll fuck up. I'd be lying if I said I won't. This is all new for me. These feelings, this need to have you around me all the time. I don't know what to do with any of it. I just know that I fucking need you. And I want you to need me too."

Her eyes softened, but she was quiet for so long, I didn't know what to expect.

"And what if I told you that isn't what I wanted?" she asked. "Would you keep me here anyway?"

I swallowed down the bitterness of her question and shrugged. "Yeah, I probably fucking would."

Birdie laughed, and her fingers traced over the calluses on my hand as she considered my admission. In the morning light, her eyes glittered like a

turquoise sea, and I could have stayed right there, watching the sunlight dance across her skin all day.

“You’re crazy, you know that?” she whispered.

I didn’t answer, and she didn’t expect me to. Her fingers gradually moved below the sheet to the scarred letters on my chest. Though it felt strange to let her touch me there, it also felt like I needed it, so I didn’t stop her.

“Was I your first kiss?” she asked.

I hadn’t expected her observation, and I felt the redness creeping back up my throat. But as uncomfortable as it made me, I wouldn’t lie to her. “Yes, Birdie. You’re my first kiss. And unless you count a hand job from a hooker when I got out of prison, you’re the only woman I’ve ever had sex with.”

“Why?” She stared into my eyes, searching for an explanation.

“I was young when I went to prison. And when I got out, I didn’t really know how to deal with women. I’d lived in a metal cage full of savages for thirteen years, and I guess I just never really learned. I didn’t have much of an inclination either, but after a while, Lucian thought it might be beneficial to break the ice and dip my toe in the water. He hired a hooker, and she met me in a hotel room with a bag full of sex toys. She told me she’d do anything I wanted, but I was still learning to find my voice. She asked me if I liked the freaky shit, said she thought I looked like one of those guys when she saw the scars on my chest. She told me she could give me some pain if that’s what I wanted, and that was what I knew, so I said yes.”

“So she hurt you,” Birdie murmured. “And then you asked Kylie to hurt you too.”

I didn’t know how she’d figured out the arrangement with Kylie, but regardless, I didn’t care. I wanted her to know. There was no more room for secrets between us.

“What about me, Ace?” she asked. “How do I fit into all this?”

“What do you mean?”

“The pain.” Her brows pinched together. “You know I could never do that to you, right? I won’t ever do that to you.”

“I know,” I admitted. “That isn’t what I need from you, Birdie. It’s not something I even want anymore. That need died in me the first time I saw you.”

“How?” she pressed. “How can something like that just go away?”

“I was empty before.” I closed my eyes and breathed her in. “And now, I’m not.”

“You’ve been stalking me,” she pointed out. “Collecting information about my life. Watching me. You know all these things about me—”

“Not everything,” I corrected. “There are still things I want to hear from you.”

She shivered, pulling the sheet around herself as she sat up. “Like what?”

“Who did this to you, Birdie?” My jaw flexed. “Tell me.”

“Why, so you can take care of it for me?” She smirked.

“Yes, so I can fucking take care of it,” I deadpanned. “Your days of taking on the whole world by yourself are over. I’m here now, and I won’t allow this to blow over. Don’t think for one second it will go away.”

“I’m not pretending it didn’t happen.” She glared. “I honestly don’t know who it was. He just said he had a message for me, and then he attacked me. I didn’t get a clear shot of his face since he was too busy bashing mine.”

I released an unsteady breath as rage simmered below the surface of my vibrating skin. I wanted to kill this motherfucker. I wanted to stomp his face beneath my boot until the streets of Vegas ran red with his blood. Nobody fucked with Birdie. Nobody.

“You must have some idea,” I said. “Was there anything that happened before this? Any indication someone was after you?”

Birdie bit her lip, a habit she reverted to when she was hiding something. She still had secrets from me, and I didn’t know what they were. But I would find out, and I would get the motherfucker who touched her. Until then, she would just need to learn how to trust me.

I leaned into her and kissed her forehead. “We’ll talk about it another time. Right now, you just need to rest.”

Chapter 26

Birdie

THREE DAYS HAD COME AND gone, and Huck was still right by my side. He'd fed me, showered me, and even gone as far as dragging the television into the bedroom for us to watch. But honestly, I was at my happiest when he just let me curl up next to him while he read to me.

He cooked all my favorite dishes and asked Trouble to do a grocery run after which bowls of cotton candy ice cream started to appear. We were in our own little bubble, and I tried desperately not to think about how long it would be until it burst. I knew it was too good to last because even with the uncertainty hanging over my head like a dark cloud, I was perfectly blissed out.

Morning, noon, and night, Huck was inside me. He fucked me sweet, and he fucked me rough. He took me again and again, never tiring of me. The sex was my new favorite high, and I knew it was his too. We clawed at each other, even in our sleep, our bodies drawing nearer like magnets. It was intoxicating to be wanted so much by him. When he left me for even five minutes, I felt empty. I missed him. It was insanity, but it was the only thing that had ever made sense in my life. We were drunk and falling deeper and deeper into something I knew would mark my soul for eternity. It terrified me, yet I held onto it like my life depended on it.

For a minute, I allowed myself to pretend that this could be my life. That we could just exist on this compound and nothing else would ever matter again. But reality was slowly invading this sacred space, and soon we'd have to get back to the business of life.

There were conversations left unfinished. Messes left to clean. There was also the matter of me getting to the bottom of what happened back in Vegas. Huck wanted the truth, but I didn't think I could bring myself to tell him about Joe or the video. At the end of the day, I was terrified he wouldn't look at me the same. Maybe it was wrong, but I couldn't bear the thought of his passion for me morphing into disgust when he finally understood what I was.

"You hungry?" Huck grazed his knuckles over my rib cage as he lay beside me, smoking a joint. It was getting late, and I was hungry, but I was also ready to eat at a real table.

"I could go for some food. Maybe in the kitchen tonight?"

He glanced over at me, the concern evident on his face. Instead of telling him I'd be fine, I let him think it through, something I'd come to realize he needed. This was a battle he had to fight within himself.

"Okay," he said finally. "If you're feeling up to it."

He helped me from the bed and wrapped my robe around me before we made our way down the hall. I'd seen the aftermath of my attack, and my face was still littered with fading bruises and a few cuts, but at least the swelling had gone down. Huck never looked at me any differently. Even without makeup and my Frankenstein face, he still wanted me.

"You can relax on the couch while I cook," he offered.

I nodded, and he helped me sit down even though it wasn't necessary. My body felt just fine. It was my mind that needed the lobotomy. But I couldn't complain as I watched him work around the kitchen with nothing more than a pair of jeans hanging from his hips. The man was one beautiful piece of art, and he truly had no idea.

"Mexican good?" he asked as he chopped some vegetables. "I was thinking fajitas."

"Do I get tequila with that?" I asked, only half joking.

Ace arched a brow at me over his shoulder, then walked to the cabinet and pulled out a bottle of blue tequila. Our eyes met, and I felt another piece of the wall I'd built around myself crumbling down as I nodded in his direction. We both knew where this would go, but neither one of us was backing down.

He poured me a splash of tequila in a shot glass to sip on, then went back to his cooking. Twenty minutes later, we sat at the table and ate in silence, our eyes drifting toward each other like love-sick teenagers. Being

with him right now was easy. So much so that it almost felt panic-inducing. *Nothing could ever be this easy.*

He cleared the plates, and we moved to the couch with the bottle of tequila, two shot glasses, and a salt box. I knew what was coming, but I just didn't know which of us would be the first to obliterate the line in the sand. Ace had warned me that we'd be having a conversation. And the time for that conversation was now.

He poured another splash of tequila into my glass and then reached for my hand. My insides turned to liquid fire as he sucked my thumb into his mouth and then dipped it into the salt.

"Suck," he commanded, holding my thumb to my lips.

I dragged the flesh over my teeth and let the salt melt over my tongue, never taking my eyes from his. Huck's whiskey gold irises were molten hot, and I had a feeling if we didn't open the discussion soon, our bodies would be doing all the talking.

"Tell me about prison," I blurted while I still had the courage and then followed my statement with a shot of tequila.

Huck licked his lips and leaned back against the sofa to study me. "Do you mean prison or Mary-Kate?"

I was prepared for it, but my breath still caught in my chest. This was a dangerous topic to navigate, but I wouldn't be at peace until we broke this barrier. The problem was, I didn't know how to navigate it without making him shut down.

"Both," I murmured, pouring him a shot. "Anything and everything. Whatever you want to tell me."

I licked my thumb and dipped it into the salt again, and then I brought it to his lips. His eyes darkened as he sucked my skin between his teeth, and I felt his stare deep in the space between my thighs.

"I'm surprised it took you so long to ask." He released my hand and threw back his shot. "That's why you ran from me, wasn't it?"

I shook my head. "No. I planned to run before we even made it to work that day. After we... after you just went cold on me."

Ace glanced at me, and his eyes had noticeably softened. "I was an asshole, Birdie. You deserved better than that."

I swallowed, not really sure how to respond to that. His apology was sincere, and I knew it, but I'd never been good at accepting apologies.

“Did you think I’d done it?” he asked, his voice rough. “When you saw the articles?”

My fingers twisted around the empty glass resting against my thigh. “My thoughts were on autopilot. At that moment, it was easy to believe the worst in you. But after I left, I felt like it couldn’t be true. That wasn’t the man I know you to be.”

“So that’s why you went to Lucian?” His brows pinched together.

“He told you?” I blinked.

“He texted me.” Ace nodded, his attention drifting to the floor. “Did he answer all your questions?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “Is there anything else you think I should know?”

“Honestly?” He shook his head. “I know I’m a hypocrite for saying it, but it doesn’t do me any good to talk about it. That shit happened, and it’s in the past now. But I don’t want there to be any lingering doubts, so if you have them, now’s your chance to ask. I’ll tell you anything you want to know about it.”

My heart did a little backflip as I considered what he was offering me. Lucian told me point blank that Ace didn’t share all the details of his life, and that he never would. Yet here he was, offering exactly that. And it was more than I ever needed, just to hear him say those words.

“I don’t need any other details.” I shrugged. “I guess I just... I want you to know that I’m sorry for what happened to you. I’m sorry you lost so many years of your life because of it. And no matter what anybody else might say or think, you never deserved that, Ace. No child deserves that.”

He released a breath I didn’t know he was holding, and when our eyes collided, his were the most open I’d ever seen them. His fingers came to rest on my jaw, and he leaned in to kiss me for several long, disorienting minutes. I felt drugged when he pulled away, and I sank back into the couch while he poured us both another shot.

“Your turn,” he said gruffly.

I knew it was coming. This was the thing I’d been dreading. But there was no escaping it either. “What do you want to know?”

“Tell me one of your secrets, Birdie. Just one. I want to hear it from your lips.”

I stroked his arm, using the repetitive motion to calm me as I imagined my mother’s lifeless eyes. It was the first thing that entered my mind when

he mentioned it, and I supposed it was the first place I should start.

“Gypsy used to tell me when we were kids that our mom went back to her clan. She said we weren’t allowed because we were only half gypsy. But I know the truth, and I’ve never been able to tell her.”

“What is the truth?” Ace asked.

I closed my eyes, and I could still see her face. Her body was rolled up in a rug, and only her lifeless eyes were visible. “She’s dead. She died when I was so young, but I saw her. I saw her, and I never told Gypsy because I wanted her to believe that she was still alive. That she was okay.”

Huck was quiet beside me, save for the beating of his heart. But I felt his hand on my back, his presence and his warmth, and it was all I needed to purge that darkness from my soul. He understood this feeling on a level nobody else ever could. Long after her death, my mother’s murder continued to haunt me.

Ace and I both took a drink from the shot glass, and then he topped us off.

“I think it would be easier,” I said, “if you just tell me what you know about my life. Let’s just open that can of worms and make a fucking mess and leave it all out in the open.”

He sat in his own thoughts for a few moments, staring off into the distance before he unleashed all the information he’d managed to gather on me.

“I know that you like pink,” he began. “You get bored easily, and you flirt to get what you want. You like wine and dessert, and you always expect people to see the worst in you. You don’t like to talk about yourself, and you’re at your kindest when you think nobody is watching. I think you’re terrified of your own anger. You don’t want people to see you for who you really are because you’re afraid they won’t like it.”

“Gee, is that all?” I replied sarcastically, even though everything he said was so true it scared me.

“I know that Ricky Montoya was your stepfather,” he continued. “He was a piece of shit who didn’t take care of you girls, and I know he let his friends... touch you.”

His voice was rougher than I’d ever heard it, and I couldn’t bear to look at him. I couldn’t witness the emotions that admission brought up in him for fear of condemning myself to a lifetime of shame.

“Birdie.” Ace reached for my face. “Look at me.”

I shook my head, silent tears falling down my cheeks. "I don't want to."
"I need you to."

Slowly, he turned my head toward him, and I held my breath, afraid of what I might see in his eyes. But no matter how hard I tried to find his disgust, his revulsion, his impending rejection... it wasn't there.

"You aren't what happened to you." He dragged me into his lap, murmuring against my lips. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. And nothing they did to you could change the way I see you. Do you understand that?"

I nodded, and he rested his forehead against mine, breathing me in like I was his salvation. There was still a lot more he didn't know. He hadn't heard the worst of it yet. He hadn't mentioned the thing I'd done. The thing I couldn't escape from. And I wondered if it was because he just didn't want to believe it or if he really didn't know.

He reached around and grabbed the bottle of tequila, and we both took another drink straight from the bottle before he discarded it altogether. Our lips came together in a clash of lightning. We were all hands and teeth and heart and breath at that point.

Ace scrambled to get my robe open while I fumbled with the button on his jeans. We were drunk on tequila and each other, but in my mind, I knew I would never feel this again. Never would anyone else affect me this way. And for a moment, I almost blurted it out. I almost begged him to make me feel this way forever.

It was crazy, but the closer we became, the further I felt like I was drifting away from myself. I was lost at sea. Lost to these emotions I couldn't understand or accept, yet with every breath, I paddled harder and harder to hold onto them. Our time together felt doomed, just as everything else in my life had. Good things didn't happen to me. And they sure as hell didn't happen to Huck either.

So I clung to him desperately as he thrust inside me, filling my body and soul with a sense of urgency to honor every second we had together. I closed my eyes and breathed him in. I kissed him. I worshipped his body with my hands. For so long, I had dreamed of this man with the whiskey-colored eyes. But how long did I get to keep him?

I didn't find my release in our feverish romp on the sofa. At least, not in the way I expected. Instead, I cried when I curled into the sacred space between his neck and shoulder. Ace thrust deep, coming inside me on a sigh

as he wrapped his arms around me and squeezed me as if he'd never let me go.

I didn't know how long we stayed there like that, wrapped up in each other, both of us refusing to break away. He was still inside me, and I never wanted him to leave. But in the wake of my emotional reckoning, sleep took me captive.

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Chapter 27

Birdie

A NAGGING SENSE OF LONELINESS stirred me from my dreams, and when I woke, I found that I was alone in Huck's bed. The sheets were wrapped around my body in a tangled mess, evidence that the nightmares were real and not imagined.

It was still dark, but the nightlight Huck had plugged into my outlet shined beside me. The bedside clock display told me it was after midnight. I sat up, focusing on that light as my eyes adjusted. My chest was tight, and I felt like I was on the verge of panic as I looked around for Huck. *Where was he?*

Once I silenced my thoughts, the low murmurs of familiar voices drifted down the hall. Immediately, their presence ratcheted up my anxiety, as did the few broken words I could understand.

"Video... Evidence... Problem."

I wanted to believe it was a lucid dream, but as I swung my legs over the bed and tiptoed down the hall, I knew it wasn't. The light from the television cast an eerie glow over the living room as Huck, Lucian, and Gypsy all stared at the screen.

The grainy footage couldn't be confused for anything else. That memory was as vivid in my mind as it was on TV. And though I'd never known that camera had existed, it was obvious from my rage-fueled expression I didn't care.

Ricky's favorite game was using my love for Gypsy against me. He did the same to her. The things we had sacrificed in order to protect each other

were innumerable. That man was a living, breathing nightmare until he wasn't anymore. Until I made him go away.

Conveniently, the footage left out the events leading up to my crime. There was no evidence of the things Ricky had done or tried to do. This story left out the part when he decided to come for my sister. The film started violently and without warning with a slow-motion play by play of me plunging a knife into Ricky's back before he dropped to his knees in front of my sister.

On screen, Gypsy's face was awash with the obvious horror she must have felt over what I'd done. Deep down, I'd always suspected it, but seeing it recorded, I couldn't deny it. She was so horrified by the scene unfolding before her she couldn't even move. It was clear now that the monster was no longer Ricky. It was me. The girl in the trance-like state who punctuated every vicious stab with a declaration.

"You. Won't. Hurt. Us. Anymore."

Ricky was far past dead at that point. But the rage I'd bottled up over the years was like a Molotov cocktail inside me. It had exploded, and it couldn't be contained. An endless abyss of pain opened inside my chest as I cried for that girl on the screen. The fragile, broken teenager who had done something so unspeakable, she would never look at herself the same way again.

But that wasn't even the worst of it. The worst was the blank expression on Huck's face when he hung his head in his hands and shuddered. I didn't have to be a genius to figure out what he was thinking. I wasn't any better than the man who raised him. I was a killer just like him. And how could Ace ever love someone with such bloody hands?

Silence swallowed up the room, and my shame forbade me from revealing myself. I stepped back into the shadows, listening as the conversation continued. Lucian explained that someone had sent this to their house. Between the three of them, none of them could figure out who would want to blackmail us now, but I knew. It was the truth that had haunted me for months, and I knew exactly who had sent the video.

The same man who set me up at the Rio. The same man who had bled me dry of every cent I could earn for him in exchange for keeping this dark secret. But it was too late. Joe was out for blood now, and it was obvious all my efforts had been for nothing.

My worst fear had just come true. Ace had seen me for what I was, and there was no coming back from that.



Hours had passed before he finally came back to bed, and still, I could not fall back to sleep. We lay beside each other, seemingly lost in our own thoughts. I waited for him to reach out and touch me. To give me some silent signal that it was okay. I wanted to believe that no matter what he'd seen, everything would be okay.

That assurance never came.

In the early light of morning, he slipped from the bed and took a long shower. I didn't know what the day would bring, but I was desperate to rewind time and make all the badness lingering between us go away. Would he touch me today? Or would he simply pretend it never happened? Or worse yet, would he just tell me to leave, finally understanding that I was beyond salvageable?

When he re-entered the bedroom, I sat up, and our eyes locked.

"You're awake." Tension lingered in his body and shadowed his eyes.

"I'm awake," I answered cautiously. "What are you doing?"

He broke eye contact as he walked to his dresser and picked out a T-shirt. "I have things that need my attention. I need to step out for a bit."

His words were vague enough to leave room for multiple possibilities concerning our future, but they only managed to compound my worst fears. I knew I should let him go. I wasn't his responsibility, and it was only fair. But I couldn't. I couldn't let him walk out that door thinking the worst of me. The problem was, I didn't know how to fix it.

"I thought you took the whole week off."

"I did," he answered. "But something's come up, and I have to go."

Desperation drove me to my feet, luring me into his orbit. I reached out and touched his arm, but when he looked down at me, his face was devoid of emotion. I couldn't read him, and it scared me. I needed words, thoughts, emotions. Some kind of reaction.

Leaning up on my toes, I grabbed his face and tried to drag it to mine. He kissed me, but the burning passion had turned to ash.

“Stay,” I begged against his lips.

Pain flickered in his eyes, and he shook his head as he gently peeled me away from him. “I can’t, Birdie. Not today. You need to rest anyway. Trouble will be here to keep you company.”

“I don’t want to rest anymore,” I protested. “I’m done resting. I’m fine now.”

“You aren’t fine,” he clipped out. “You aren’t fine at all.”

Those words hit me like a bucket of ice water, and I couldn’t stop the armor I thought I’d left behind from slamming back into place. He just confirmed everything I’d suspected. There would be no acceptance of what I’d done or who I was.

He couldn’t even look at me anymore.

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Chapter 28

Ace

“WHO WANTS TO START?” KODIAK asked, glancing at the evidence stacked in the center of the table like a land mine.

The small army of bearded brothers I’d assembled had crammed around the table in the hotel suite I’d rented as they waited for their marching orders. Beside me, Lucian remained quiet as he eyed them individually. This wasn’t an easy concept for him to grasp. Trust was not something either of us gave freely, especially when it came to protecting his family. But this wasn’t just about Gypsy anymore. More than anything, it was about Birdie. She was the one at risk of taking the fall, and I’d burn down the world to save her if that was what I had to do.

I trusted every one of these mangy fuckers in this room with my own life, and they wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.

“Before we get to that...” Lucian broke the silence. “I need to ask each of you to reflect on anything you may have witnessed during the times you provided surveillance of Gypsy and Birdie. Was there anyone who might have been paying a little too much attention to the women? Regardless of how insignificant it might be, if anyone at all comes to mind, I want to know about it.”

“Fuck, man, I don’t know.” Kodiak scratched at his beard. “Every red-blooded male in a ten-mile radius was watching those girls. Can’t say that I blame them.”

I shot him a warning glare, and Lucian shifted beside me. “Be careful what you say about my wife.”

Kodiak held up his hands and shrugged. “Not starting shit, I’m just stating a basic fucking fact. I think all my brothers would agree.”

“It’s true,” Razor chimed in. “It would be difficult to identify one person who was more interested than all the others. Both women drew a lot of attention every time I saw them.”

Lucian scrubbed a hand over his jaw and shook his head, clearly frustrated. “Ace, what about your guy in security?”

“He’s compiling some footage,” I answered. “But we’ll need a lot of time and a lot of eyes to wade through all of it.”

Lucian nodded. At this point, we both knew the casino footage would be our best option, but it didn’t mean either of us liked it. The thought of any of these guys watching Birdie now felt wrong. She was mine to protect and mine to look at. But time wasn’t on our side, and I didn’t have a choice. Using the facial recognition software would narrow down the frames of each instance Birdie was captured on camera in the major casinos, but my buddy only had access to a select number, not all of them, so there was no guarantee we’d ever find anyone watching her on film.

Whoever was trying to blackmail her was someone from her past. Someone in California who knew she was in Vegas. But it didn’t mean the mystery asshole was in Vegas too.

“For now, you can start with the photos,” I muttered. “Check them until your eyes bleed. I don’t care how long it takes. Find anything that looks out of place.”

The guys nodded and dived into the pile of photos, which only included the fully dressed versions of Birdie. There was no way in hell they’d see the ones locked in my safe at home.

“Can I have a word with you?” Lucian gestured to the other room, and I followed.

“What is it?” I asked.

“There’s something I keep thinking about.” His unfocused gaze drifted to the window. “The cons, the money... Gypsy believed her sister was trying to follow in her footsteps, but it doesn’t sit right with me. The amount of money Birdie’s stolen, it doesn’t add up. Where’s it going?”

The same thought had crossed my mind, and it bothered me that I didn’t know. She had a closet full of expensive things, but she’d bought all them before I started watching her. She wasn’t shopping. She wasn’t doing drugs. And other than the occasional buck she would flip Trouble’s way, the

money seemed to be disappearing into a black hole. I'd considered she was saving it for a rainy day, but now that Lucian mentioned it, I couldn't shake the thought.

"I thought it was a compulsion," I admitted. "It didn't matter how fucking tired she looked, every day she'd get back out there and do it again. But now I don't know."

"Have you asked her?" he questioned.

I shook my head. "She doesn't know about the video. I thought it was best."

Lucian was quiet for a moment, but I could tell he didn't approve of my decision even before the words left his mouth. "You can't handle her with kid gloves on this, Ace. She needs to explain what she's been doing. Maybe Birdie thinks she can handle this on her own, but she can't. If she's been hiding something, we need to know about it. In the meantime, she's putting all of us at risk."

For the first time since I'd known him, Lucian's words enraged me. He was someone I considered a friend and a brother. He'd saved me. He'd given me a life and guided me along the way. My loyalty to him had never wavered. But right now, all I wanted to do was tell him to shut the fuck up.

"Don't tell me how to treat Birdie," I bit out. "You don't understand the things she's been through."

"I understand plenty." His voice softened. "Do you think my wife hasn't been through those same things?"

"It's different." I turned around and tried to gather my thoughts as I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Birdie is sensitive. She's fragile. She isn't like Gypsy."

"I think they are more alike than any of us would care to admit," Lucian noted. "But regardless, you can't help her unless you know the truth."

I knew he was right, but the truth was, I didn't know if Birdie would ever tell me even if she did know who was blackmailing her. In the time we'd been together, I'd managed to break down some of her barriers, but she hadn't given all of herself to me. Not yet. She was still holding back. Still expecting the worse. I couldn't blame her with her history and my fucked-up way of navigating this thing between us. I was too proud to admit I didn't know what the fuck I was doing, but I wanted her to believe I could save her just as much as I wanted to believe it myself.

She wouldn't be another victim to fate. More than ever, I had to acknowledge the beliefs Ed beat into me were wrong. She wasn't doomed by being with me. There was still time, and I had every intention of proving it.

"Hey, Ace." Kodiak whistled from the other room. "I think we might have something."

Lucian and I both hoofed it back to the table. The guys had several photographs spread out over the mahogany, and all of them were of Birdie. Kodiak was quick to point out what they'd found.

"Check out this asshole in the back here." He pointed at a guy in a cheap suit. "Take a good look at him."

I did, and the first thing I noticed was how he was holding up his cell phone. It looked like he was snapping photos, but from this angle, it was impossible to tell if Birdie was the subject. As I scanned over the photos, a pattern started to emerge. It was obvious I wasn't the only predator tracking her.

"In this one, he's wearing a ball cap and a sport's coat," Kodiak explained. "And this one, a wig and a beard."

"What the fuck?" I leaned closer, inspecting the features. "He has a different hair color in every shot."

Kodiak nodded. "Without seeing what's on his phone, it's hard to say if he was taking photos of her, but it's a big fucking coincidence. And I know how you feel about coincidences."

"Could he be casino security?" Lucian asked.

"Not likely," Kodiak answered. "Considering these were snapped in four different casinos."

Lucian leaned in to study the photos. "There's something about that guy —"

"He looks familiar," I agreed.

I didn't know where I'd seen him before, but it felt like I had.

"You're going to have to ask her," Lucian said. "It's the only way, Ace. Let me come with you. I can help."

I dragged in a breath and shook my head. "No. This is something I need to confront on my own."

My phone vibrated, and I glanced at the screen distractedly, noting it was one of my guys from the shop. I elected not to answer, but when I

dismissed the call and saw it was the sixth time he'd tried to reach me, I called him back.

"Digger," I grunted when he answered. "What is it?"

He cleared his throat, and I knew something wasn't right before he even spoke. "You better get down here, man. Cops are all over the place."

"What the fuck for?" I demanded.

He hesitated for a second before he told me what I didn't want to hear. News that sent me careening back to my past and a time in my life when I had no control.

"Looks like they pulled a body out of the garbage in the back lot, man. I'm sorry, but they want you down here. Now."

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Chapter 29

Birdie

TROUBLE FROWNED AT THE SCREEN of her phone, reading the fifth text that had come through in the last ten minutes. I didn't know what was up with her, but she'd been acting weird all morning. Truthfully, I was too wrapped up in my own shit to give it much thought, but when she looked at me, I had a feeling her problems were about to become my own.

"You need to go pack." She stood and gestured for me to follow. "Quick. I'll help you."

"Why?" I demanded.

The last flame of hope flickered before me, threatening to die. This was it. Ace was getting rid of me. He'd seen the worst of me last night, and he couldn't handle it. This was the thing I'd feared all along, and though I'd tried to prepare for it, I couldn't. I wasn't ready to leave. I would never be ready to leave.

Defiantly, I remained on the couch while my mind flipped through a million ways I could convince him to keep me. But Trouble's next words sealed my fate.

"The cops are on their way out here, Birdie. We need to get the fuck out of here now, and we need to take any evidence you were ever here with us."

What she was saying didn't make any sense. I didn't want to believe it, but how could I not? This morning Ace had disappeared, and now the cops were coming for me. Had he tipped them off?

The room spun as I stood and forced my way down the hall. I didn't even know what I was doing. My body operated on autopilot while we shoved clothes and shoes and toiletries back into the pink suitcases from

which they'd come. The entire process was surprisingly quick, given that I'd never bothered to unpack in the first place. I'd lived my life as a nomad, always on the run. But for once, I wished I hadn't. I wished I'd unpacked and left it all here, so Ace would have to think of me whenever he saw it.

Tears blurred my vision as Trouble ushered me to the door of the only place I'd ever felt at home. The place where I was both a prisoner and a resident. The safety bubble had burst, and my heart squeezed as I looked around one last time.

I was never here. We had erased any evidence that I ever existed. And in my gut, I knew I wouldn't be coming back. This was it for me. The final nail in my coffin.

"Come on," Trouble pleaded. "We need to leave, Birdie. Get in the car."

Her voice was weighted with a level of desperation I'd never heard from her before. It occurred to me as I fell into line and she drove manically toward the exit of the compound why she was so frantic. She was trying to protect Ace. If the police caught me here, it wouldn't just be bad for me. He'd lied to them. He'd covered for me. And Trouble knew it.

I reclined my seat and closed my eyes while Trouble cranked up the radio. I didn't know where we were going, but I didn't even care anymore. All I knew was that if I closed my eyes, I could still see him in my dreams.



"Hey." Trouble shook me awake, and I blinked away my exhaustion as I sat up and looked out the window.

"Where are we?" I asked though the question wasn't necessary. One glance out the window, and I knew exactly where we were. I just didn't know why.

"I wanted you to see this." Trouble gazed down the street in the direction of my own personal hell, a place I'd never planned to return to.

"What the fuck is going on?" I demanded, my fingers inching toward the door handle. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Just watch," she murmured.

“Fuck you,” I snarled, trying unsuccessfully to open the door. I needed to get out of here. Already, my throat felt like it was closing up. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think straight. *Why would she bring me here?*

“Child lock.” Trouble offered me an apologetic glance. “Don’t make this harder than it has to be, Birdie.”

I couldn’t understand her motive for bringing me back to this place. Had Ace told her to do this? Had he decided the best thing for both of us was to dump me back in the hell I’d crawled out of?

“There.” She pointed, and against my better judgment, my gaze followed her finger. What I saw coated my lips with the familiar taste of acid. The hands of time had reached out and pulled me back to the past, and in the reflection of that young girl standing on the rickety porch, I saw myself. She couldn’t have been more than fifteen. Yet she was a professional, welcoming a man in a suit before he quickly ushered her into his car. Her head disappeared while he reclined his seat, and she didn’t come back out for another fifteen minutes.

I hadn’t eaten anything all day, but I wanted to vomit. I begged Trouble to leave, but the car never moved. The girl exited the vehicle up ahead and walked back to the stairs, sitting down to wait for the next guy to come along. And they did. They came one by one in their slick suits and luxury cars. Some slipped inside the house, others preferred the sanctuary of their own vehicles, where they could drive away at a moment’s notice.

I didn’t want to believe it was real. In my mind, this house and everything inside it had imploded the day Gypsy and I ran from here. There was nothing left. It was an empty shell with no discernible heartbeat. A broken slab of wood in a concrete ghetto. But it was evident that time had not changed anything. Even Ricky’s death had not changed a thing. Monsters still lurked on these streets. Young girls still had their innocence ripped away. And everything I had done was for naught.

“It’s still happening,” Trouble said. “Every day, girls like you are still tortured here.”

“Why are you doing this?” My voice was little more than a whisper. “Do you hate me that much?”

“There’s only one way to fix this.” She turned to me, her expression a cocktail of shame and self-preservation. “You can make this all go away. You can still save Ace.”

“Ace?” I blinked through my cloudy eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Joe Crocker was pulled out of a dumpster behind Ace’s shop this morning,” she said. “Does that name sound familiar at all?”

My chest squeezed, and I blurted out a response before I could stop myself. “That’s impossible. I just talked to him last week.”

Jumbled thoughts ping-ponged around my brain as I tried to make sense of what she said. How did she even know who Joe was? And if it was true, how did he end up in a dumpster behind Ace’s shop? None of it seemed plausible. But then the worst of it hit me. The cops. *Would they think Ace had done this?*

Once Trouble saw that I was on the same page as her, she continued. “This looks really fucking bad, Birdie. Ace is an ex-felon with a history of murder that some people still believe he committed. He could go down for this.”

“How the fuck did this happen?” I rocked forward and tried to drag in a breath. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t know,” Trouble answered. “But whoever dumped him there wanted this to come back on Ace. Someone who knows both of you, if I had to guess.”

My throat burned with the truth I was too ashamed to admit. My past was ruining everything, just as I’d always known it would. It was staining my future, pulling Ace into its poisonous grasp.

“What can we do?” I stared down the street at the rickety little shack I used to call home, hopelessness the only void in sight.

Trouble took a breath, her voice marked with regret for the only answer she had to give me. “I think you already know.”

I did know. No matter how many times I’d tried to avoid it, history kept catching up with me. I couldn’t outrun it. And now, I refused to let it ruin Huck’s life too. All I ever wanted to do was protect my sister. But I needed to protect him too. More than I needed air to breathe. There was only one way out of this nightmare, and it was through hellfire.

“I spoke with the detective who’s been looking for you,” Trouble said. “He told me if you turn yourself in for your crimes, you can testify against the men who hurt you when you were younger. You can get this operation shut down and save Ace too.”

What she didn’t say was that I’d also have to claim responsibility for Joe’s death. Her logic made sense. If I confessed to murdering Ricky, I’d be looking at hard time. Possibly the rest of my life. What difference would

one more charge make? If it meant sacrificing myself to protect Ace, I already knew that regardless of how he felt, I would throw myself under the bus a hundred times over to save him. I'd already made up my mind, but Trouble's next statement only cemented the deal.

“They already have Ace in custody.”

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Chapter 30

Birdie

“ARE YOU SURE THIS IS where he told you to meet him?” I glanced around the empty parking lot again.

Trouble didn’t look any less skeeved out than I was, but still, she nodded. “This is exactly the place. Here, see for yourself.”

She showed me the text message from an unknown number, one that it appeared she’d been communicating with for some time.

“How did he find you?” I asked. “How long have you been talking to him?”

“He approached me in the casino after Ace took you to the compound,” she admitted. “I tried to cover for you, but he knew you were with Ace somehow.”

“So why didn’t he just show up there?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Maybe he didn’t know where the compound was? I’m really not sure. It seemed like he was still trying to make a case against you. He never asked me to turn you in. Not until now.”

When I glanced at her across the car, I couldn’t even be angry with her. At that moment, she was the same young, tormented girl I’d first seen in the casino. She had a history, just like me. Maybe someday she’d see fit to share it with me, but I doubted we’d ever get that opportunity.

“I am sorry about this,” she said absently. “Believe it or not, I was rooting for you and Ace. You two were good together. He was never meant to be anyone else’s but yours.”

I swallowed and glanced out the window. “At least for a little while.”

Silence settled over us after that, until a pair of headlights finally glided into the empty lot and flashed us once.

"I guess that's him," she said.

I nodded, but something about this situation didn't feel right. This detective had been chasing me for so long, so I didn't understand the covert operation to bring me in. I was surrendering peacefully. So why not at the police station? Why here?

I gripped the door handle and hesitated, looking at Trouble. "Are you sure this is legitimate?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I asked for his badge. I wouldn't bring you here unless I knew it was real."

I glanced in the direction of the other car, where the detective now stood leaning casually against the side as he waited for us to get out. My instincts were still telling me to run, but the image of Ace in police custody had thrown a spanner into the works. Joe was dead, and someone had to answer for it. That someone had to be me.

With a robotic hand, I opened the door and stepped outside. California still smelled the same, at least in the broken parts. It smelled of desperation and crushed dreams, and I felt that deep in my bones as we walked toward the detective who would take me in.

"Detective Brentwood," Trouble greeted him.

I whipped my head in her direction, confused. Brentwood wasn't a name I was familiar with. The entire time, I'd been running from Taylor, but I realized this must be his partner.

"Guilty as charged." He nodded and turned to me. "And so we finally meet, Miss Birdie Kay Blue. You know, I didn't actually believe your friend here when she said you would hand yourself over. Yet here you are."

The detective had a slight Southern drawl and bad taste in clothing. From the dim street lighting, I could make out a cheap off the rack suit that hung from his body in a way that felt familiar. As my eyes traveled over his face, I understood why.

"You were in the casino," I blurted. The day that Ace took me, I saw him. I talked to him. I was on my way to meet him in his room when Ace intercepted me.

"You got me." Brentwood shrugged and flashed a crooked smile. "I almost had you."

“Jesus.” I shivered as I considered how much differently the past couple of months could have gone. Ace had saved me, even then, and I wondered if somehow, he’d known that. The time we’d spent together almost never happened, and that reality split my heart wide open.

“You best say your goodbyes now.” Brentwood checked the time on his phone. “I’ll take her into the station and get her statement.”

“I want a guarantee in writing,” I declared. “Ace is untouchable. He has nothing to do with this. And you shut down every one of those assholes running the operation out of Ricky’s house. Those girls go free and get the help they need.”

Brentwood’s jaw flexed. “You want a guarantee?”

I looked at Trouble, wondering if she’d noticed the way his voice had changed too. She said this was a done deal, but suddenly, I wasn’t so sure.

“Here’s your guarantee,” Brentwood pulled out his weapon, and my heart dropped.

“What the fuck is going on?” I asked.

Beside me, Trouble froze, her fear radiating around her like a beacon. This wasn’t the plan. At least, not the one she’d agreed to.

“Here’s your fucking guarantee.” Brentwood fired his pistol, and I stumbled backward, too terrified to process what was happening. I thought I’d been shot, but when I looked beside me, I realized with horrifying clarity that wasn’t what happened at all.

Trouble was crumpled onto the ground beside me, her head cracked open like a watermelon. Blood and pieces of her skull littered the pavement, and I couldn’t even make out her face anymore. She was gone. She was fucking dead. Just like that.

I screamed, and Brentwood shook his head as he leaned down and jabbed me in the arm with something. His mouth moved as though he’d spoken, but I couldn’t understand. Everything was slowing down. Fading away. And I was coming apart at the seams.

The last thing I smelled was his cologne, the sickly cloying scent of black licorice.

Chapter 31

Ace

“SO THAT’S IT?” THE DETECTIVE leaned down into my face as he spoke. “You’ve got nothing else to say?”

“Oh, I almost forgot,” I smirked. “How about fuck you.”

“Ace,” Lucian warned from beside me. He’d told me several times already to behave, but I was past the point of playing nice with these motherfuckers.

“He has nothing else to say,” Lucian informed the detective. “Either charge him or send us on our way.”

There was a knock on the door, and the other detective popped his head in, shaking it in disappointment. Obviously, they hadn’t turned up anything at my house. They hadn’t found any evidence to hold me, and more importantly, they hadn’t found Birdie. I felt like I could breathe again as I leaned back in the chair. Trouble had done what she was asked. She’d taken her somewhere safe.

“We’ll be in touch.” The asshole playing bad cop snarled as he opened the door and gestured for me to leave. “In fact, I’d say you can expect some regular visits from us.”

“Looking forward to it,” I muttered as Lucian escorted me out the door. Honestly, I knew I was fucked. Keeping Birdie safe while the hounds of LVPD were breathing down my neck would be next to impossible. But I’d have to figure out a way to make it work. Not being together wasn’t a choice.

Kodiak met us in the parking lot, and none of us said a word. Lucian drove us to the church where he often divulged his own confessions, and

Father Hawk allowed us inside and lent us the privacy of the space while he disappeared.

“What did you find on Joe Crocker?” I asked Kodiak.

His eyes darkened, indicating whatever he’d discovered about the dead man wasn’t good. “He was a sketchy ass motherfucker. Rap sheet a mile long. A lot of stupid shit... drug charges, theft. Got caught up in a few prostitution stings in his younger days.”

“That’s it?” I asked, knowing it couldn’t be the end of it.

Kodiak shifted, his fists curling at his sides. “He was never convicted, but there were accusations. It seems he has a thing for little girls. Conveniently enough, the few potential witnesses either refused to talk or ended up disappearing.”

“Is he from California?” Lucian asked what we were both thinking.

“Yes.” Kodiak nodded in confirmation.

Lucian looked at me. “We need to talk to the girls. They must know who he was.”

I didn’t feel good about breaching that subject with Birdie. She would get defensive and probably just shut down. But Lucian was right. Someone was trying to fuck up all of our lives and take her down. There was no way in hell I would allow that to happen, even if meant prying Birdie’s secrets out of her by force.

“You talk to Gypsy, and I’ll handle Birdie,” I grunted.

Lucian agreed, but Kodiak reached out and grabbed me before I could leave. “There’s just one problem, Ace.”

“What?” I stared at him, trying to decipher the unfamiliar tone of his voice.

“Trouble hasn’t responded to any of my texts or calls for the past three hours.”

Chapter 32

Birdie

“TELL ME!” BRENTWOOD ROARED, SHOVING my head into the bucket of water. His voice was distorted, and I couldn’t make out the rest of what he was saying as I tried to hold my breath and fight the rising panic in my chest.

He’d been going at this for the past twenty minutes. I was fucking exhausted, delirious, and I couldn’t string together a coherent thought. Whatever he’d given me had knocked me on my ass. I had no energy to fight him. I could barely keep my eyes open. And every time I shut them, Trouble’s death played on repeat in my mind like a horror movie.

I was still trying to convince myself it was a dream, but I knew it wasn’t. The blood was still on his shoes, and the truth was written in his eyes. He was a fucking lunatic, and there was no doubt in my mind he was the same man who attacked me outside of the Rio.

He pulled my limp body from the water, and I slumped against the unfinished floor, gasping for breath. I didn’t know how much longer this would go on for. I just wanted it to end. I just wanted Huck.

When I closed my eyes, I saw his face. All I wanted to do was save him, but I’d walked right into a trap, and now we were both fucked. I would probably die in this old warehouse, and he would go to prison for something he didn’t do. Hopelessness sank into my chest like a lead weight, threatening to drown me.

“Answer me!” Brentwood knelt over my body and squeezed my throat until my eyes bulged. “You fucked him, didn’t you?”

It was the same question he'd asked me several times already, but he'd never given me the opportunity to answer. Regardless of his persistence, it was obvious he didn't really want to know. In some warped fantasy in his mind, Brentwood believed he had a claim to me. And I'd finally figured out why.

"I know who you are," I sputtered between breaths as I rolled over onto my back and stared up at him.

His eyes smoldered, and a flicker of hope ignited in his expression as he leaned down and pinched my face in his fingers. "Who am I, Birdie?"

"You're the sick motherfucker who came to my room three nights a week and promised to save me while you fed your twisted perversion."

His grip on my face tightened as his nostrils flared. "I was going to save you, but you ran away. After everything I did for you, you just left."

"Everything you did for me?" I stared at him in disbelief. "You sicken me. I never wanted to look at you or smell you again."

"You don't mean that." He shook his head, completely lost to his delusion. "You waited for me. You never slept with anyone else."

"Didn't I?" I smiled at him through bloody teeth. "I washed you off me and never looked back. And to answer your question, I did fuck Ace. I fucked him every chance I got. He's in me now. He's a part of me like you'll never be—"

He fisted a handful of my hair and slammed my head down into the floor so hard it felt like he'd shattered my entire skull. My face was still vibrating when he left me lying there in a heap, regretting my decision to lash out at him.

"I'm going to make your life a living hell," he snarled. "You filthy fucking whore. You want to fuck around on me? I'll make you wish you were dead."

His phone rang, interrupting his rant, and he answered with a snarl. The conversation was one-sided, but I gathered he was needed elsewhere, which could either be really good or really bad for me. His eyes pierced through me as he seemed to debate his response, and then he answered. "Yeah, I'll be there in thirty."

Before he even hung up, he was unzipping his pants. The audible click of the line going dead sealed my fate as he approached me, his limp dick falling out of his briefs when he tugged them down and grabbed a handful of my hair.

“Suck.”

“I would rather die,” I spat.

He removed his revolver, pressing it beneath my jaw. “That could be arranged.”

“Then fucking do it!” I screamed. “I’ll never take you willingly.”

The disgusting fuck pistol-whipped me and fisted himself, trying to beat off as he watched me writhe in pain. But it wasn’t working. He couldn’t get hard.

“I can’t even look at you,” he sneered.

“Yeah because I’m all grown up now,” I heaved the words from my bloody lips.

He knelt beside me again and brought the gun back to my throat, dragging it up to my jaw.

“You weren’t supposed to grow up. You’ve ruined everything.” I closed my eyes as he forced one of my hands onto the gun and manipulated my finger against the trigger. “You’ll be so much prettier with your brains splattered all over the concrete.”

My breaths came hard and fast, but I refused to beg. That was what he wanted, what he needed, but I wouldn’t validate his power. Until my dying breath, I would only think of the man I loved. With Huck in my heart and my mind, nobody else could ever hurt me. Nobody else could ever touch what we had. Even in death, he would own me.

Brentwood breathed into my face; his words laced with venom. “Are you thinking of him right now?”

I nodded, and he dug the barrel deeper into my skin. “Hope he was worth it.”

He forced the trigger in my hand, and my lips parted in a silent scream as I waited for the pain. But the gun had simply dry fired. And when I opened my eyes, he was there, laughing in my face.

“See how much fun we can still have?”

He was toying with me. Playing Russian Roulette. One of these shots would eventually kill me, but how long until that happened? I tried to fight him. Mentally, I tried to pull away. But my body was sluggish and uncooperative. The gun fired a second time, and a cocktail of rage and panic exploded in my chest.

I was still fighting for air when suddenly, another voice broke through the haze.

“Let her go, Brentwood.”

My eyes lanced through the darkness, but all I could make out in the shadows was a figure of another man. Brentwood was quick on his feet, but it was obvious he was caught off balance.

“Taylor?” he barked. “What the fuck are you doing here? This isn’t even your jurisdiction.”

I recognized that name, and when he stepped out from the shadows, a well of hope sprang up inside me. This was the detective from Nevada. The same detective who’d investigated the fire at Lucian’s house last year. And right now, he had his weapon aimed directly at Brentwood.

“Step away from her, and drop your weapon,” Taylor demanded.

Brentwood choked on his own caustic laughter. “Have you been following me?”

“Something about your interest in this girl just never quite sat right with me,” Taylor answered. “A few phone calls to your department was enough to confirm you weren’t working on any active cases involving the Blue sisters. Care to explain why you asked me to follow up on it?”

Brentwood smiled, and it was downright terrifying how empty his face was at that moment. “Why? Simple. You were the fucking idiot who played right into my hands. I never even had to show my face. You did all the work for me.”

Taylor shifted, tension bleeding into his features. “Drop the fucking weapon and surrender peacefully.”

“Surrender?” Brentwood mocked. “To you?”

Before Taylor could even reply, Brentwood had me propped up in front of him, using my body as a shield.

“Will somebody tell me what the fuck is going on?” I screeched.

Taylor’s eyes darted in my direction, his expression wary. “Brentwood is obsessed with you, in case you haven’t figured that out. He inserted himself into the investigation last year, claiming he was working on a related case to bring you in.”

“And now I have,” Brentwood answered darkly as he aimed his weapon at Taylor. “Is she worth dying for?”

“Please just go,” I pleaded with Taylor. I didn’t want to see anyone else hurt because of me.

Taylor hesitated, clearly vulnerable, but unwilling to leave me. Then slowly, he pulled out his phone and punched in a few numbers. Behind me,

I felt Brentwood's tension as Taylor began to speak, requesting backup and the location.

"I need officer assistance ASAP," he demanded. "I have Detective Eric Brentwood, currently in my—"

The words ended abruptly as an explosive sound ricocheted off the walls and pierced my ears. Brentwood stumbled back, dragging me with him as Taylor crumpled onto the ground. They'd shot each other at the same time.

In shock and unable to move, all I could do was scream as my gaze landed on Taylor. He was bleeding out, and behind me, Brentwood was struggling to apply pressure to his bicep. With a strength that seemed to come from nowhere, I managed to pull away from his grasp and begin crawling across the floor.

"They'll come for you," Taylor sputtered on his own blood when I reached him. "But be careful who you trust."

Long after his eyes grew dim, and he stopped moving, I was still trying to save him. Covered in his blood, I collapsed beside him, finally accepting the painful consequences of reality. He was gone. Trouble was gone. And somehow, all this collateral damage felt like my fault.

I was dazed and disoriented when the onslaught of uniformed officers arrived. Before I could even catch up, Brentwood was spinning his web of lies. Vaguely, I could hear him telling the officers how he'd discovered me running down the street, away from the crime scene, gun in hand.

The first responding officer looked over at me, shaking his head. "Let's take her in."

"Let me do the honors." Brentwood gripped my arm in silent warning as he walked me outside, threatening me with the words he didn't need to say. If I spoke up, there was no telling what he might do. He'd already proved he wasn't above killing someone to get his way. But regardless, he made sure I knew it when he stuffed me into the back of a squad car and leaned down into my face.

"This is far from over," he informed me. "You even think about talking, your beloved biker prick will be next. Do you understand?"

I stared out the window with a blank expression, and all I could do was nod. I did understand. Brentwood wouldn't stop until he got what he wanted. My life was officially over.

Chapter 33

Ace

LUCIAN OPENED THE DOOR OF the truck and hoisted himself inside while I stared at the jail where Birdie was currently housed.

“How is she?”

It was the same question I always had for him, but the answer never changed. I’d stopped asking weeks ago why she wouldn’t see me. Every time we came here, I felt like I couldn’t fucking breathe. The thought of her locked up in a cage was too much. I needed to do something, but my head was too fucked up to figure out what that was.

Two months she’d been gone. The last memory I had was her begging for me to stay. And now, I wished that I had. More than anything, I wished that I’d just fucking stayed with her.

“She’s healed,” Lucian offered. “Her face looks better.”

His words didn’t give me solace, but I knew now that nothing could. Life post-Birdie was worse than any hell I’d ever been through. I was empty without her. She was my light, and now darkness filled all my days.

I still couldn’t wrap my head around what happened. One minute, she was there, and the next, she was sitting in a jail cell with a laundry list of murder charges and a battered face. Something had obviously happened to her, but whatever it was, she wasn’t talking about it. Not to me. Not to anyone. Trouble was dead, and there were no answers, but every second that passed without her felt like my life was slipping away.

“Did she say anything at all?” I asked.

Lucian shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. The only silver lining I can see is that she’s waived the preliminary hearing and her lawyer asked for a

continuance on the trial date. That buys us time, but as it stands, it looks like Birdie has no intention of putting up a fight.”

I couldn’t accept that. “Something happened, Lucian. She has to be protecting someone. That’s the only explanation.”

“Maybe,” he sighed. “But unless she opens up, there’s nothing else I can do for her.”

“Tell Gypsy to come back,” I demanded. “She needs to try again.”

“She’s refused her six times.” He glanced out the window and shook his head. “You have to understand this is hard on Gypsy too. She feels responsible, and Birdie’s rejection isn’t helping matters...”

“I don’t care. We all better get used to being fucking uncomfortable. This is her life on the line. Tell me you wouldn’t do the same if it was Gypsy. Tell me you’d give up on her.”

He turned over the phone in his hands, considering my request. “I’ll ask her to come back and try again. But I can’t promise anything.”

For a second, it felt like there was room to breathe again. I couldn’t let a day go by when we didn’t try something. Anything. This was the only way that made sense. Every person in Birdie’s life had given up on her at some point, but I wouldn’t. I needed her to know that.

“Tomorrow,” I repeated. “We’ll try again tomorrow.”

Chapter 34

Gypsy

“CAN YOU TELL HER LUX West is here to see her today?”

The woman behind the counter glanced at my son, a reluctant smile on her lips. “His name will be on the visitor registry, along with yours.”

I conceded because it was the only option I had at this point. I didn’t know if it would make any difference. Birdie hated me right now, and I couldn’t blame her. I thought I was doing what was best for her, but in the end, nothing I’d done to protect her had made any difference.

After processing, we sat until our names were called, and I held my breath as I waited for the guard to terminate the visit before it even began. It was the same guy who’d delivered the news to me several times already, and even though his face was marred by a permanent scowl, I could tell he felt a little sorry for me.

“You can go on in.” He pointed at the row of booths. “She’s in number six.”

My heart jumped, and I squeezed Lux in my arms as I shuffled in the direction he’d pointed. I was hesitant to accept it until I saw her, but sure enough, there was a halo of blond hair waiting for me on the other side of the glass.

Tears threatened my vision as I sat down and held my hand up to the barrier. “Birdie.”

She offered me a stiff nod before her eyes moved to Lux. Pain flashed in her blue irises as she held her hand up, and he reached toward her and cooed. We both picked up the phone, and before I could even speak, she asked to talk to him.

Lux didn't understand what was happening, but he was happy to listen to her voice through the line for a couple of minutes before he started to fuss. I held him in my lap and brought the phone to my ear, my attention moving over Birdie. She was pale, her eyes shadowed with dark circles, and I'd never seen her so lifeless.

"How are you holding up?" I choked out.

Birdie shrugged a dainty shoulder beneath her prison uniform, which was practically swallowing her whole. "It's not the Ritz," she offered dryly. "But I suppose I should get used to it."

I shook my head in refusal. "Birdie, no. We can help you if you let us. Please. Just tell me what happened."

Her face remained blank, an expression that often haunted me from our childhood. She'd acquired that same lifeless stare when I was shuttled into juvenile detention, and she was left to fend for herself. During that time, she'd been defiled, her innocence stolen, and this place of despondency was the only one she could escape to. After that, her emotions only broke free when something managed to slip through the cracks of her armor and ignite the rage bottled up inside her like lava.

"You sent me away," Birdie whispered. "This is where I deserve to be. Everyone is better off this way. You, Lux, Ace..."

Her voice fractured on the last name, and I knew it was killing her inside. She just couldn't bring herself to admit it.

"We all miss you, B. Ace is going crazy without you. He can't eat; he can't sleep. He hasn't left California since you've been here. Sometimes, he just sits outside in his truck for the entire day because it's the only way he can be close to you."

Birdie trembled as she drew in a breath and tried to compose herself. It was the most heart-wrenching display of emotion I'd ever witnessed from her.

"Tell him he can't do that," she bit out. "He needs to forget me. I don't want him here."

I knew my sister well enough to see through her lies. "What aren't you telling me, B?"

"I saw you." Her voice was so quiet, I almost wasn't sure I heard her correctly. "That night with the video at Ace's house. I saw your face, Gypsy. You were ashamed of me. You were terrified."

Lux looked up at me with a wide-eyed expression when tears began to leak from my eyes. “No, Birdie. You have it all wrong.”

“I don’t,” she argued. “I know you’re all thinking it. I can’t be controlled, and this is the best place for me.”

“Goddammit,” I hissed. “Stop it. That isn’t true. What happened with Ricky was self-defense. If anything, I regret that I let you do it because it should have been me. I was the oldest. I was the one who failed you. If I had the chance to go back and end him myself, I would.”

Birdie fell silent on the other end of the line, but there wasn’t time to let her slip into her thoughts. I needed something from her. Anything. Even if it was just an assurance she’d let me come back for another visit. But everything changed when she bowed her head, and tears began to spill down her cheeks. My sister wasn’t one to cry. I knew something was terribly wrong when she clutched at her stomach and released a mournful sob. That was when I saw it. The tiny bump that had taken shape there. *She was pregnant.*

My entire world shifted at that moment, and a pain unlike any other opened up inside my heart as I considered her future. Birdie seemed to understand my thoughts, and she steered the conversation to a place of such hopelessness and despair I couldn’t even consider it.

“Promise me you’ll make sure Ace takes care of her,” she whispered. “Promise me she’ll always be safe from the horrors of this world.”

“Birdie, no,” I cried. “You’re going to make sure of that yourself. We’ll figure something out. We’ll find a way—”

“There is no other way,” she insisted. “This is what he wanted.”

“Who?”

The phone alerted our thirty-second warning, and Birdie looked at me with eyes so haunted, I would never forget them.

“The licorice man.”

Chapter 35

Ace

KODIAK OFFERED ME THE BLUNT in his fingers, but I shook my head.

“Come on, man,” he prodded. “You need to get some sleep. This hell you’re putting yourself through won’t do either of you any good if you can’t even function.”

Logically, he was right, but it didn’t make any difference. “When she’s home with me, then we can both sleep.”

Kodiak didn’t bother to argue, and even if the conversation was nonexistent, I was grateful to have him by my side. All the guys had been putting in long hours to chase every possible lead we found. Shortly after our arrival in California, we discovered the street Birdie and Gypsy grew up on was still a hotbed of human scum. I’d never forget the look on Gypsy’s face when she took us there and pointed out the decrepit structure with peeling white paint.

“Those are the guys,” she whispered. “They’re still here. They’re still...”

She didn’t have to finish that sentence. It was obvious by the young girls coming and going what was happening there. Ricky Montoya had died, but his friends were still alive and well. With the exception of the piece of shit they pulled out of the dumpster behind my shop, anyway. A crime Birdie had since confessed to. Once she was tried for the murders of Trouble and Detective Taylor in California, she would be brought back to Nevada to stand trial there.

Considering the odds against her was a black hole I didn’t want to fall back into. For weeks, I’d been telling myself I could save her while

everyone around me humored my cause. They didn't have the heart to tell me how foolish they thought I was.

A rap at the door interrupted my thoughts, and Kodiak checked the time before jumping to his feet. "Who the fuck is dropping by at two in the morning?"

I didn't know, but when he opened it, and I saw Gypsy there, I jumped to my feet. "Is Birdie okay?"

Gypsy offered me a watery smile. "She's fine. I just need a word with you. Alone, please."

I glanced at Kodiak, and he disappeared without a fight. Pulling out a chair at the table, I offered Gypsy a seat, but she declined, opting to pace the floor instead. She'd seen her sister today, but she said Birdie still refused to talk. It was another blow in a series of shitty blows this week.

"Lucian doesn't know I'm here," she began.

"Okay." I scratched at my beard. "Is there a reason for that?"

She sat down on the bed and folded her hands together. "He's a good man, Ace. A moral man. He believes that justice can always prevail, but it takes time we don't have, and there are no guarantees. He wants to fight the good fight, do the right thing..."

She looked up at me with eyes like her sister's. "What about you, Ace? Do you want to fight the good fight too?"

I didn't even consider what she was asking. There was no room for consideration. I'd been a criminal. A prisoner. A fucking pariah. And even if I hadn't done the things I'd gone to prison for, those years had changed me. I wasn't a good man. I wasn't even a decent man. But I was a man who knew what he wanted, and a man who would do anything to get her back.

I met Gypsy's eyes, so there could be no doubt to the truth in mine. "If you told me there was a way to save her, there isn't a moral boundary I wouldn't cross to make it happen. She's mine. She was always meant to be mine. And I can't live in a world where that isn't my reality."

She nodded and then wiped away the moisture gathered at the corners of her eyes as her chest heaved. "I think I know who did this to her. I can't believe I didn't see it before, but it makes so much sense now. She's always hated the smell of black licorice."

"Who?" I demanded.

She hesitated like she wasn't quite sure I would believe her. "His name is Eric Brentwood. He was a cop back when half of the force was corrupt.

He was also a frequent visitor at Ricky's house. He used to bring Birdie gifts. Stuffed animals... and they always reeked of his cologne."

"You think it's him?" I asked.

Gypsy squeezed her eyes shut and nodded. "Birdie said this is what the man with all the power wants. The man who smells like black licorice."

⋮

Chapter 36

Birdie

“GET UP.” THE GUARD RAPPED a set of handcuffs on my cell door.

“Why?” I asked. It was late, and I didn’t understand where he’d be taking me. I didn’t trust him. I didn’t trust anybody in here.

He entered my cell and forcefully dragged me to my feet while another guard watched with a bored expression. Terror laced my veins as he hoisted my arms back and secured them with the cuffs.

“What are you doing?” I demanded. “You can’t just take me out of my cell in the middle of the night.”

“You have a visitor.” He smirked. “And in case you haven’t learned yet, I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

My body lurched forward as he dragged me along beside him, forcing me out of my cell and down the hall. I already knew I wasn’t going to like whatever was waiting for me, but this was the hell I’d consigned myself to.

They led me down a secured corridor and toward what appeared to be a cleaning closet. My heels dug into the floor, but it was useless. We were past the point of no return, and I couldn’t put up a fight with a large man on either side of me. They also knew I wouldn’t because in my belly was one thing that mattered more than my own fear.

I’d never considered myself the maternal type, but everything changed the day I saw the test results. Huck’s baby was growing inside me. A baby we’d created together. And even if I wouldn’t ever get to be her mother on the outside, I would protect her as long as I had her.

My resolve didn’t make it any easier to accept whatever was about to happen, but I held my head high as they forced me inside the room. Except

when I saw Brentwood lying in wait for me, my fear only escalated.

"Please don't leave me in here with him." I turned to the guard with the brown eyes, hoping against hope he'd find some shred of humanity in his heart. But Brentwood shooed them away like gnats, and they obeyed, the door slamming behind them as it sealed my fate.

"What do you want?" I snarled.

"What do I want?" His eyes rippled with undiluted hatred as they moved over my belly, and he shoved the chair away as he lunged toward me, grabbing me by the throat. Despite my resolve to be brave, pregnancy had made me softer, and I couldn't hide that when I squeezed my eyes shut.

"This was not the way it was supposed to end." He breathed the words into my face. "I could have got you out of here. I could have given you a nice life. But you chose that filthy biker over me, and now you're carrying his spawn."

"You're fucking delusional." I tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip. "I never wanted you. Don't you get that? I never had a fucking choice. As far as I'm concerned, you're the worst thing that ever happened to me. You and every other man who decided to take what I didn't give you freely."

He slammed me back into the wall, and I crumpled forward, trying desperately to protect my belly as I prepared for more of his violent blows. But they didn't come. What I saw when I looked up at him was worse. It was a man obsessed with me. A man holding onto his sanity by a thread. I barely knew him, but somehow, in his twisted mind, he'd decided we would be together at any cost. And I knew at that moment, I would never truly be free from him. He had pull in here. He would have pull wherever I went. From the day he walked into my life, I was doomed.

"Everything you do, every meal you eat, every goddamn time you go to the bathroom, I know about it, Birdie. Do you think I don't know what you said to your sister when she was here? Her and that sweet little baby?"

"Don't fucking talk about him," I growled. "He's innocent. He has nothing to do with any of this."

"That's what you don't get." Brentwood laughed darkly. "I could make him disappear. I could make any of you disappear. In fact, I might just have a little visit this evening with your sister. Or maybe even that filthy biker you seem so fond of. How does that sound?"

I screamed out my frustration, thrusting my body forward before he grabbed me and forced me onto my knees, pinning my face against the floor.

“Suck my dick, and I’ll consider it an apology.”

Acid churned in my stomach, and I couldn’t even consider it. My disgust must have been obvious because before I could even give him an answer, he released me. I was afraid to look up, but it was too quiet, and I had to know what was going to happen next. I had to prepare for it. Except nothing could have prepared me for his wrath.

“You’re a stupid fucking cunt, you know that, Birdie?” His eyes burned into my face. “I gave you a chance to make it right. You’ve pushed me and pushed me. Now I’m going to show you what happens when I don’t get what I want.”

“Please don’t,” I begged as he moved for the door. “I take it back. I’m sorry.”

“Save your tears for another day,” he sneered. “You’re going to need them when that baby’s carved from your belly.”

Chapter 37

Ace

“WHAT THE—”

A grunt escaped the asshole’s chest as I clocked him in the side of the head, and he went down like a sack of cement. I dragged his ass out the door and loaded him into the back of the van with the other scum bags I’d collected. Five in total, bound, gagged, and lined up in an orderly fashion.

I had wondered if these deeds would weigh heavy on my soul, but as I drove out into the desert, I found that I didn’t feel even the slightest remorse for what I was about to do. As far as I was concerned, every one of these fuckers had a hand in what happened to Birdie as a young girl. It was likely they’d all touched her, but even if they hadn’t, they were aware, and they did nothing. They’d profited off her exploitation along with countless other young girls, some of whom were still sleeping in the houses. Tomorrow morning they’d wake up and find themselves free from their chains. And tonight, I would paint the desert landscape in blood.

Pulling to a stop, I unchained the youngest man first. He was probably in his early thirties. Old enough to know better by any stretch of the imagination. I waved him forward with the pistol I’d taken from his own hand when I’d caught him with his pants around his ankles. He moved along reluctantly, marching forward until I told him to stop.

I tossed him a shovel and pulled up a lawn chair, lighting up a blunt while I gestured to the ground. “Dig.”

As I’d expected, his eyes darted around as he considered his options. But they were few and far between out in this wasteland. There was nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. Just like Birdie’s nightmare.

“C’mon, man,” he pleaded. “I have a fucking family.”

“You got kids?” I feigned interest as I released the smoke from my lungs.

“Yes. Two girls,” he answered.

“Huh,” I muttered. “Are they older than the one you were trying to fuck tonight?”

His lip curled in disgust. “I care about those girls. It’s not like you think. When you say it so crudely—”

“That’s because it is fucking crude.” I leaned forward, my eyes cutting over his face. “You’re a filthy pig who doesn’t deserve to call himself a man or a fucking human at that. Now shut your mouth and dig.”

I flicked the ashes from my hand and watched as he got started. His heart wasn’t in it, and he was sobbing like a goddamn baby after just a few shovelfuls. He was coming to terms with his fate, and I had a feeling he wouldn’t last much longer.

He proved my theory correct when he dropped the shovel and bolted into the fading light of the desert. Without hesitation or thought, I aimed for his back and pulled the trigger. He crumpled to the ground, and just like that, it was all over. And so the process continued as I dragged two more out and forced them to dig a hole wide and deep enough for their final resting place. It took most of the night before the task was complete.

When I lined them up and forced them to kneel, I realized just how much of an animal I was. I felt nothing but vindication when I pulled that trigger. The loss of their lives was no loss at all when I covered them over and left the evidence behind, driving off into the darkness. I didn’t know what that said about me.

I’d seen death. I’d been accused and imprisoned for it. But committing myself to it in the name of the only righteousness I believed in, I was finally free. Fuck what anyone else thought. For Birdie, I’d do it every day of the week and twice on Sundays.



“This is a nice little place you’ve got here.”

Brentwood snapped his attention to me and froze with his hand still on the light switch. He looked like he'd seen a ghost, and I wasn't surprised. This cabin was out in the middle of nowhere, and I doubted he received many visitors.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing in my house?" he demanded.

"It seems we have a common interest," I answered. "But I think you already know that, don't you, you sick fuck? Your shrine is a level of disgusting I don't even know how to touch on."

His face blanched as he glanced toward his bedroom where all his dirty little secrets were exposed. Items he'd stolen from Birdie when she was younger. Her pajamas, her dolls, and even a lock of her hair. But that wasn't the extent of it. He'd been watching her for months, as evidenced by his extensive journal entries detailing every encounter. His perversion was the kind that could only be cured with a bullet.

"I don't know what you're referring to," he muttered as he moved for his weapon, but he shouldn't have bothered.

"I'll take that." Kodiak appeared in the door behind him, cocking his .45 and digging it into Brentwood's scalp.

"Fuck you," Brentwood snarled as Kodiak pried his weapon from its holster. "Do you even realize what the fuck you're getting yourselves into here? Fucking with a cop? You'll go down for life."

"Will we?" I arched a brow at him. "The way I see it... your reputation won't be so shiny once they tear this place apart."

Brentwood's eyes pierced right through me. He wanted to murder me and take what belonged to me. Kodiak didn't trust that I would keep my cool, and he was right to come with me. As it stood, I wanted to destroy Brentwood with my bare hands. I wanted to beat him bloody and cut his dick off and then shove it down his own throat until he choked on it. But that couldn't happen.

"How did you even find this place?" Brentwood asked as Kodiak ushered him inside and shut the door behind them.

"Do you think I wouldn't have someone watching the jail?" I stared at him incredulously. "My guys saw you go in. Want to tell me what the fuck you were doing in there?"

His lips curled into a smile. "What do you think I was doing?"

I lunged for him, but Kodiak was quick to intercept, slamming his hands against my chest and shaking his head. "He's not worth it, brother.

Remember the plan.”

My body vibrated with rage. I wanted to wrap my fingers around his throat and wipe that smirk off his ugly mug, but Kodiak was right. We had a plan. The only way to save Birdie was to follow through with the plan. I closed my eyes and dragged in a breath before I took a step back.

“I’m good.”

“Let’s get him into the bathroom.” Kodiak nodded.

“I’m not going anywhere with you two fucks—”

Brentwood’s tirade came to an abrupt end when I jammed the needle into his neck. For a moment, his eyes widened with fear, and then he collapsed onto his living room floor.

“What do you think it is?” Kodiak asked, eyeballing the syringe we’d pulled from Brentwood’s stash.

“No idea.” I shrugged. “But I guess we’ll find out what it does to him.”

We hauled his limp body into the bathroom and undressed him while he slipped in and out of consciousness. As tempted as I was to throw him around like a sack of potatoes, we had to take care not to leave any bruises.

Kodiak set up the electrodes, securing them to his skin with a grimace. Once he was satisfied with the placement, I filled a cup with cold water from the sink and threw it on Brentwood’s face.

He snapped to attention, his arm flopping around as he tried to reach for his weapon, only to realize he was in his bathtub. I crouched down beside him and tilted my head to the side, examining the delusional fucker who thought he could ruin Birdie’s life.

“In my mind, I’ve already murdered you in a thousand different ways,” I told him. “Fortunately for you, there’s only a small selection of torture that doesn’t leave a mark. But rest assured, I am intimately acquainted with it, and tonight, you will feel my wrath.”

His mouth flopped open like a fish, but I wasn’t interested in what he had to say. I pressed the button on the small remote, activating the TENS unit attached to his ball sack. Almost instantly, his body started to convulse as he fought to curl into himself. But whatever concoction he had in that syringe seemed to paralyze him, at least temporarily. But for someone who couldn’t move, he still had a pair of lungs on him. He screamed and cursed until his voice was raw, and then proceeded to vomit and defecate all over himself.

“Would you believe it doesn’t even leave a mark?” I mused. “We can do this all night long, and nobody will ever know.”

“You... goddamn...motherfucker,” he slurred between jolts. “I will make you suffer for this.”

“Not likely.” I shrugged. “We still have a long night ahead of us.”

“I think he wants a break, Ace.” Kodiak knelt and removed the stopper from the drain before he turned on the cold water. “What do you say? Should we give him one?”

“Sure.” I grabbed the cords attached to the electrodes on his balls and gave them a quick yank, ripping them off with all the delicacy he deserved.

“Motherfuck!” Brentwood roared. “You can’t do this. I’m a fucking cop!”

“Some cop you are.” I grabbed a rag and draped it over his face. “Did that badge mean anything when you were destroying Birdie’s childhood?”

“You don’t know anything.” The cloth puffed with each word he heaved. “You’ll never have what I had with her. I took her first.”

I turned on the shower and yanked the detachable head from the wall. “And I’ll have her last.”

Aiming the spray at his face, I blasted the cloth and watched him squirm as he slowly suffocated. It wasn’t until Kodiak stepped in to remind me of the end goal that I finally relented, allowing him to choke in air for a minute before I started the process all over again.

And so the evening continued. When the waterboarding grew tiresome, we folded Brentwood into a human pretzel and poured drops of capsaicin down his nose and throat. Throughout the night, just for the hell of it, we’d make him kneel and place the cool barrel of the .45 against his head. It was amazing how such a simple threat could break his spirit and renew hope when it never fired.

Whenever he started to regain movement in his limbs, we shot him up with another syringe, which he later admitted was a paralyzing agent he’d used on several women. For sixteen hours, we tortured him until his spirit was so broken, he actually started to beg for death. Being the merciful man I was, I told him I would give it to him, just as soon as he confessed all of his sins on paper. And confess he did. When I wrapped the noose around his neck, his eyes were as empty as his vacant soul. But before he left this earth, I had one last parting gift for him. So between the long sessions of

choking him into unconsciousness and stirring him to life again, I revealed the information I knew would never allow him to rest in peace.

“It seems that Detective Taylor had been doing his own investigation on you.” I slapped him on the cheek until his eyes fluttered open one last time. “In fact, I hear they’ve uncovered a wealth of new evidence from his house in Nevada. What do you suppose they’ll find in there?”

“Fuck you,” he rasped, dangling like a limp noodle from the ceiling as Kodiak and I each supported his weight.

“Birdie will be free.” I leaned into his face so there could be no mistaking my words. “And she will never think of you again.”

With that final blow, Kodiak and I looked at each other, and then let him go, watching him twitch until he stopped moving altogether. He was gone from this earth. And tomorrow morning, the world would know exactly what a sick fuck he was.

Chapter 38

Birdie

“HOW’S THE BABY COMING ALONG?” The woman sitting across from me focused in on my protruding belly.

I wrapped my hands around the bump and glared at her. “Did you just come here to gloat? Isn’t that a little over the top?”

A smile I didn’t expect curved her lips as the district attorney shook her head. “I think I get it now.”

“Get what?” I studied her, trying to figure out what the hell she was smoking or why she was even here. It didn’t make sense for her to pay me a visit. Not when the last I heard she was dead set on crucifying me.

“I can’t even begin to imagine the long, hard road you’ve been down,” she said, her voice unexpectedly empathetic. “How many times you must have felt like the world was out to get you.”

I didn’t even know how to respond to that, but as it turned out, she didn’t expect me to. She reached into her briefcase and pulled out a file, the smile slowly slipping from her face as she spread out an array of photos before me.

I swallowed, and it felt like my heart was lodged in my throat as I examined the contents. The room was unfamiliar, but there was an entire wall covered in photographs... of me. Notes and napkins and hotel keys. Pieces of my clothing... items I’d worn ten years ago. Journal entries of my activities, my cons, and even what I was wearing on certain days.

“What is this?” I asked, unable to hide the horror in my voice.

“You tell me,” DA Carrera answered. “We found this in Eric Brentwood’s home.”

The room spun as I considered her statement. It was obvious he was infatuated with me, but this wasn't just obsession. It was psychosis.

"I'm giving you one chance to tell me the truth," the DA stated. "If you want to save yourself, now's the time to do it, Birdie. Tell me what really happened that night with Trouble."

I bit my lip, wringing my hands together in my lap. Could I trust her? What she was asking required a leap of faith I wasn't entirely certain I was willing to take.

"If it matters, then you should know that Brentwood is dead," Carrera added.

That trap seemed way too easy to fall into. I couldn't suspend my disbelief. "How did he die?"

"Suicide," she answered without emotion. "It looks like he strangled himself over a period of several hours before he finally worked up the courage to take his own life. A little odd, if you ask me, but it is what it is."

But to me, it wasn't. Brentwood would have never killed himself. There was no way.

"I need to see proof before I talk," I stated, preparing for a fight. "How do I know he's really dead?"

"I thought you might say that." Carrera leaned down and retrieved another file from her briefcase, but this time, she hesitated before she handed it over.

"These photos are graphic," she warned.

"My whole life has been graphic," I deadpanned. "Let me see it."

She set the file in front of me and repeated the process, spreading the photos out so I could see them clearly. My heart seemed to stop as I studied the lifeless body of the man in the pictures. It was, without a doubt, Brentwood, but even so, my paranoia made me question it. These could have been doctored. Carrera could be in on this scheme with him for all I knew. I wasn't in the business of trusting people in a position of authority, and it didn't seem feasible that I would start now.

All these thoughts must have been evident because Carrera came prepared. Next, she slapped his death certificate on the table. Police reports. Statements from his neighbors. Things I was certain the public would never see. But she was showing them to me.

"It still seems too good to be true," I admitted, my voice barely a whisper.

“Look, I know this is hard,” she conceded. “But I can’t do anything else to convince you, short of taking you to the morgue to see him firsthand. And given your current circumstances, that’s not going to happen. But let me just ask you this, Birdie. At this point, what have you got to lose?”

I supposed she was right. I was already facing charges that would cost my entire future. Brentwood had made my life hell and threatened everyone I cared about. What else could he do if this was all some big charade? I didn’t know, but I had to think about this baby.

“I need something in writing,” I said. “A guarantee that whatever I tell you right now, you won’t bring any more charges against me.”

Carrera pulled a notarized document on office letterhead from her briefcase. It was already written up, and I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“I was told you don’t trust easily,” she said, “so I came prepared.”

I read over the document, and once I was satisfied, I met her gaze. “Where do you want me to begin?”

“Begin at the part when you came into contact with Brentwood,” she suggested.

“Okay.” I pressed my fingers to my temples while I gathered my thoughts. The truth had been locked up so deep inside me, it didn’t break free easily. I didn’t like to think of the night my whole world had been ripped away. First Ace, then Trouble. I could still see her every time I closed my eyes. Lying there on the concrete, her skull in pieces. I felt responsible for her death. I felt like I should have seen it coming. I never should have gotten out of that car. But I did, and I couldn’t rewind time. I could only tell the story how it happened and hope that by some miracle, Brentwood was really gone.

“Brentwood had been following up on me,” I began. “For quite a while. I don’t know how he knew I was in Vegas, but he’d tracked down my sister and a few other people. He was on my trail for months. I’d always sort of known that it would only be a matter of time before the past caught up with me, so I wasn’t surprised when I heard he was looking for me. There was another man, Joe, who’d found me too.”

“This is the same Joe Crocker they pulled out of the dumpster behind Huck Fallon’s shop?” Carrera asked.

“Yes.” I nodded. “Brentwood wanted to eliminate Huck from my life, so he tried to set him up.”

“When is the first time you came in contact with Brentwood in Vegas?” Carrera asked.

“He saw me at one of the casinos,” I admitted. “When I was looking for a mark. I was supposed to meet him in his room, but something came up, and I ended up bailing instead. I felt like he was familiar, but I couldn’t really understand why until later.”

“Close call.” Carrera raised her brows. “How many times after that did you see him?”

“At one point, I called Joe and asked him to meet me at the Rio. We were supposed to make a deal to exchange the evidence he had against me, but it was a setup. He never showed, and when I left, someone attacked me. I never saw his face, but I’m certain it was Brentwood. He wore the same cologne.”

“You didn’t report it?” Carrera questioned.

“No, but I did go to the hospital. There’s probably a record of that under my assumed name.”

She drummed her fingers against the table, collecting her thoughts before she steered the conversation again. “Tell me how you ended up in California again.”

I fell silent as I thought back on that day. It was the last time I saw Huck. I’d left with a certainty that my actions repulsed him, and my heart hadn’t been right ever since. It still hurt me to think about it. Every time, I wondered what he was doing or if he really missed me the way that Gypsy said. But I couldn’t let those emotions interfere with my story. I just had to tell the truth as I knew it and deal with the fallout later.

“Trouble came to get me,” I said, “because Huck was brought in for questioning after Joe’s body was found. We left Vegas, and I didn’t know where we were going. I fell asleep, and when I woke up, we were here. She’d brought me back because Brentwood had made a deal with her. It was the only way to protect Huck. Neither of us wanted him to go to prison for another crime he didn’t commit, and when Trouble explained the situation, I knew the only choice was to hand myself over and claim responsibility for it. This was my mess, and it wasn’t fair to bring either of them into it.”

Carrera twisted the watch on her wrist, checking the time, and then refocused her attention. “But things didn’t go as planned, I take it?”

“He’d asked us to meet in an empty parking lot. We got out of the car and exchanged a few brief words under the impression he was turning me in. But instead, he shot Trouble and took me.”

Carrera quietly stewed over my version of events, and I didn’t know what would happen next. I tried to brace myself for it, but I couldn’t.

“According to his journal entries, he became enamored with you from a young age. I’m going to take a wild guess this happened when you were at Ricky’s?”

I couldn’t give voice to that affirmation, so I bobbed my head.

Carrera studied me, opting to break the news to me slowly. “Everything you’ve said so far corroborates Brentwood’s suicide note. Not to mention the new evidence that’s come to light.”

“There was a note?” I asked.

“Yes.” Her lips tightened into a thin line. “In addition to the evidence linking him to the murders of Trouble and Joe, there were also several bodies located in his basement.”

My stomach churned. “Whose bodies?”

“Missing teenage girls,” she said. “Horrifically enough, they all appeared to resemble you.”

I felt like I was going to vomit, and Carrera gave me a moment to collect myself before she opted to continue.

“With all this evidence coming to light, the state will not be going forward with the trial.”

“What does that mean?” I blinked, certain I was delirious.

“It means the charges against you in the state of California are being dropped. I’ve also spoken with the prosecutor in Nevada, and she’s prepared to offer you a deal for a few minor charges in relation to the theft.”

“What sort of a deal?” I asked.

“Three months, time served. If you accept, you’ll be free to remain on probation at home in Nevada.”

“But what about Ricky?” I forced out.

“After reviewing the evidence, the state believes it was an act of self-defense. Again, I’m not going forward with those charges.”

It still didn’t seem real. How could it be? Twenty minutes ago, I was resigned to the fact that my life was over. I had lost Ace, and once the baby was born, I would lose her too. I would spend the rest of my days in prison, doomed to think of them but never see them.

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” Carrera said. “And I realize it won’t be real for you until you’re out of here.”

“What about Ricky’s operation?” I pried my tongue from the roof of my mouth. “What’s going to happen to those girls?”

Carrera offered me a sad smile. “The girls have been rescued. They are getting the help they need.”

“And the guys running it?” I pressed.

I could already tell by the expression on her face that I wasn’t going to like what she had to say. “Unfortunately, they disappeared. Somebody must have tipped them off. But we won’t stop looking for them.”

It wasn’t the answer I wanted or needed, but at least, for today, for right now... that group of young girls would be safe.

Carrera collected the files from the table and began packing her briefcase, and I knew she was right. None of this would ever feel real until I was standing outside, free from my cuffs and the crushing weight of my past.

As the district attorney moved toward the door, I felt the urge to say something. Anything. But the words didn’t come easily for me.

“Hey, thank you,” I murmured. “For coming here. For doing this.”

She offered me a tight smile and shook her head. “Don’t thank me, Birdie. It was just the right thing to do.”

Chapter 39

Ace

KODIAK SHIFTED BESIDE ME FOR the sixth time in the past thirty seconds, and I had to stop myself from elbowing him in the side. He was nervous, just like the rest of my brothers beside me. They were anxious on my behalf, and it was a testament to their loyalty. Over the past few months, they'd all put in countless hours to help me. They'd tracked down every lead I'd given them and searched under every rock. And in that time, they'd come to understand Birdie wasn't just a passing phase in my life. She was my whole fucking world, wrapped up in one beautifully damaged package. By default, that meant she wasn't just mine to protect anymore. The Beards of War would look after her as if she were any of their own wives or daughters. But first, I still had to convince her to choose me.

In her absence, I'd had a lot of time to think about our relationship. Birdie and I had never done anything the typical way. I'd taken her by storm, the only way I knew how to handle a woman as wild as she was. I could have come in here with the same attitude today because there was nothing holding us back anymore. It would have been easy to pick her up the moment I saw her and cart her back to my compound in the desert where I could keep her and never let her go. And if I was being fucking honest, if she said no, I still might. But I didn't want it to be that way. I wanted her to choose this life with me. Because Birdie had never had a choice in much of anything life dealt her before. I needed her to use her freedom to sit down at the table with me and say that I was fucked up, and she was fucked up, but together we'd figure out a way to make it work.

The problem was, I didn't know if she would.

I still hadn't heard a word from her. She'd refused all my visits, even after the transfer back to Nevada, and everything was up in the air. That was why Kodiak was all shifty, and I was all shifty, and to my right, Gypsy looked as white as a sheet while we all waited to see what would happen.

I wanted a smoke to calm the pounding organ in my chest, but I held off. Gypsy had told me to bring my truck, just in case Birdie did agree to go home with me. I didn't ask her why; I just did it. I was functioning on autopilot by the time we were finally given a release date. Until she was standing in front of me, absent of her chains, I wouldn't allow myself to believe it was real. Now there was nothing left to do but wait outside the jail, along with the small army of bearded brothers who'd refused to let me do this alone.

The door opened, and the first thing I saw was a halo of golden hair shimmering beneath the afternoon sun. I held my breath and vaguely heard Kodiak murmur something beside me. He sounded surprised, but I couldn't focus. My eyes were locked on her face. On the woman who always managed to appear like some kind of mirage that might slip away at any moment. She was clean faced without a scrap of makeup on, and she looked so goddamn fragile that it felt like a punch to the gut when her eyes locked onto mine.

Moments ago, the crowd was full of chatter, but now I could only hear myself breathing. Everything felt too quiet, too still. Time ceased to exist as we stood there, a silent war raging in our eyes. I waited for her to come to me, but she didn't move. Her eyes darted to her sister, who was quietly sniffing beside me. There was a choice to be made. Birdie very well might decide she wanted to go back to her old life. I wanted her to choose, but even now, I doubted I could let her go.

My body was stiff when I held out my hand in offering. She stared at it for a full minute before she took a step forward. And then another. And another. And I couldn't fucking wait anymore. My feet were moving before my mind could catch up, and before I could stop myself, I had her wrapped up in my arms, her head tilted back as I dragged my lips over hers and breathed her in.

"Birdie," I choked out, drawing ragged breaths between kisses that were definitely not meant for an audience. I couldn't help myself, and she was too stunned to move, but I drank from her lips anyway. She trembled, and then let out the softest, saddest sound I'd ever heard. I swallowed it down

and tugged her even closer, desperate to narrow the distance between us. That was when I felt the roundness of her belly against me.

I froze, and she froze, and my lips fell away as I held her at arm's length to study what my mind was trying to comprehend. But it still wasn't computing. And I hadn't really given any thought to what I was doing when I reached up under her dress, and she screeched.

"Ace, what are you doing?"

I couldn't find my words. It wouldn't be real until I felt it for myself. Manic thoughts flooded my mind as I spun her around and shielded her from the view of everyone else. Despite her protest, she relaxed into me, and then shuddered when I finally slid my palm across her belly. It was warm and firm and dense, and my emotions immediately went to war. I had impregnated her with what would inevitably be a miniature hulk-sized baby that she would have to carry for nine months and then deliver. It was terrifying. But it was also the proudest moment of my life, knowing I'd filled her with my seed and claimed her in this way. I never wanted to be a father. I never thought anything good could ever come from me, but when I felt what we had made together, there was no doubt in my mind. This baby was good. It could only ever be good.

"Mine." The word slipped from my lips as my head dipped into her neck, breathing her in. "Mine, Birdie."

She swallowed and peered up at me with the bluest eyes I'd ever seen. Her face was a mixture of emotions and nerves, and she looked like she was on the verge of crying.

"But the tape," she whispered. "You saw the tape. You saw what I was, and then you left me."

My fingers tightened around her, fearful that she might slip away if I didn't hold onto her. I didn't understand what she meant, but I tried to piece it together in my mind. "The day I left the house?"

"I saw you." She turned her face away and shielded her eyes. "That night you watched the tape in the living room, I saw how horrified you were. And then you came back to bed, and you didn't touch me. You left even though I begged you to stay."

"No, Birdie." I wrapped my arms around her and held her against my chest. "I left to find out who had sent that package. I was intent on destruction, and I wasn't thinking clearly. But I was always coming back for you. That was never even a question."

“But the tape,” she insisted.

“I don’t care what happened on that fucking tape, angel. You were a savage, and I’m goddamn proud of you for what you did to survive. You did the world a favor, and if you hadn’t, I would have.”

She broke down crying, and I turned her in my arms, cupping her head and using my body to shield the evidence of her emotion. Birdie didn’t like to be so exposed, but she could be vulnerable with me, and no matter what, I would protect her. Until my dying breath, I would protect her.

I let her cry it out, and then she wiped her tears and looked up at me. “I thought you were done with me. I thought you didn’t want me anymore.”

“I told you when I took you, Birdie, you belong to me.” I grabbed her hand and moved it over my heart on my chest. “Until this stops beating, you’ll always belong to me. Understand?”

When she nodded, I glanced back at the sea of onlookers. I’d planned to wait, but waiting wasn’t a luxury of the living. If there was anything I’d come to understand about life, it was that if something needed to be said or done, the time for it was now. I wouldn’t waste another second with her.

“I told myself a long time ago I would never kneel before anyone again.” My body dipped as I lowered one knee onto the pavement. “But for you, I’d do it every goddamned day for the rest of my life if it made you happy.”

A beautiful shade of pink crept over her cheeks as she watched me pull the ring from my leather vest. It wasn’t in a box. It wasn’t something commercialized or brand name like the reminders of her past. It was a handmade oxidized silver moonstone ring with a band wrapped in twigs and roses. The only jewelry that seemed fitting for my gypsy woman.

“Come home with me, Birdie,” I pleaded. “And stay because you want to. Stay with me for the rest of your life.”

Maybe it wasn’t the most romantic of proposals, but my head and my heart still roared when she nodded with glassy eyes. “Okay, Huck. Take us home. Claim us for real. And don’t ever fucking let me go again.”

My face was plastered to hers as I heard the celebratory chants of my brothers behind us. But it wasn’t long until Gypsy was at our side, anxious to begin the long-overdue conversation they needed to have. There could never be peace in our lives until Birdie was at peace with her past.

“Birdie.” Gypsy reached out to touch her, trembling with visible emotion. “Before you go, there’s something I need to say.”

Instinctively, I tucked Birdie against my side, prepared to weather whatever storm might come in the next few moments. But she surprised us both when she looked at her sister and shrugged.

"I get why you did it," she said. "I'm not mad anymore."

"You aren't?" Gypsy looked skeptical and hopeful at the same time. All she'd ever wanted for her sister was a better life than they'd been given, and I respected her for that.

"No." Birdie shook her head. "We've all had too many secrets. In trying to protect each other, we failed to do what was most important. We forgot that we're all in this together, and our battles should be fought together. But at the end of the day, I can't regret those choices because it led to the best thing that's ever happened to me."

She looked up at me with misty eyes before Gypsy pulled her away for a hug. They held each other for a long time, both shaking with emotion, before they finally let go. Gypsy wiped her eyes and smiled. "I can't believe how much you've grown up. It's hard for me to imagine you as a fully capable adult because it's always been my job to protect you. But that's exactly what you are, Birdie. You're going to make a great mother."

Birdie's fingers settled into mine, and her other hand came to rest on her belly. "I didn't think I'd ever have the chance to be this baby's mother, but now that I do, I won't ever let anything screw that up. I'm leaving the past behind, Gypsy. I can't think about the men that got away or the things left unfinished. The best thing we can both do is move forward. I'm ready to start my life."

"You don't have to worry about them anymore." Gypsy's eyes moved to me, a secret signal to her sister that I'd taken care of it. "They'll never hurt anyone else, B."

Birdie looked up at me and I squeezed her hand in reassurance. Her eyes flashed with understanding and then appreciation as she came to accept what she knew to be true.

"I feel like I don't want you to go." Gypsy half cried, half laughed before she glanced at me. "But I know you're right where you were meant to be. Take care of her, Ace."

"Nothing could stop me." I leaned down and kissed the top of Birdie's head.

"Please call me," Gypsy pleaded as we walked toward the truck. "Check in with me often, or I'll worry. We can meet for lunch and go baby

shopping once things have settled down. Lucian and I will come visit too.”

“Okay,” Birdie agreed.

Already, I was nervous about letting Birdie out of my sight as they made future plans, but it was something we’d have to work on. We had yet to establish the kind of trust where she would come and go freely. Things would be different this time but not too different. I needed to know she was always safe, and I think she understood that when she squeezed my hand in reassurance.

“That sounds good. Maybe Lucian and Ace can chauffeur us around.”

Gypsy offered an approving smile and hugged her sister one last time. “Okay. Be safe. I’ll see you soon.”

“See you soon,” Birdie echoed.

I helped Birdie up into the passenger seat of the truck and buckled her in, pausing to stroke my palm over the rounded curve of her belly one more time. It would take me a while to get used to seeing her this way. I would need to figure out how to handle her in this fragile state. She must have recognized the concern in my eyes because she trailed her fingers over the worry lines and smoothed them away.

“It’s going to be okay, Huck.”

I nodded and kissed her one last time, which wasn’t nearly enough. We had a long drive back to the compound, and a full escort of bikes who’d be making the trip with us. I was grateful and annoyed at the same time because I couldn’t just pull over on the side of the road. I didn’t need an audience when I finally got inside her again.

My lips grazed along her jaw, and she shivered, an indication she was thinking about it too. “Take me home,” she pleaded. “We need to talk.”

Chapter 40

Birdie

HUCK'S BAND OF BEARDED BRETHREN escorted us all the way back to his house. When I got out of the truck, they each made a point to welcome me home and tell me if there was ever anything I needed, they were just a phone call or short walk away.

Something had shifted in my absence. This was the same group of guys who had watched me wearily when I first entered Ace's life, but now, they all rallied around me like a bunch of scruffy older brothers. My heart was fuller than I ever thought it could be when Huck finally dragged me into the house and offered me everything short of a full buffet. I wasn't hungry or thirsty, but I could see he was nervous as he led me down the hall to his bedroom.

"I didn't know if you'd want to change," he said. "All your clothes were in Trouble's car, so Gypsy helped me shop for some new ones. I got you a new phone too. I'll try not to break this one."

I looked at the phone on the nightstand and the closet full of brand-new clothes next to his, and liquid warmth spread through me. "You did all this?"

He nodded and dragged a hand through his beard before he sat on the bed. "You said you wanted to talk?"

His eyes moved over the ring on my finger as if he was looking for reassurance it was still there. I went to him, stepping between his thighs as my thumbs found the lines of his jaw and tilted his gaze up to mine. "I said we had to talk, but I didn't mean with our mouths."

A possessive growl rumbled from his chest as he pulled me onto his lap and wrapped a solid hand around my face, his lips crushing against mine. It was true we still had a lot to discuss, but right now, this was what we both needed. The reassurance that in this crazy, hellish world, we still had each other. We still had the fire that shined brighter than any other.

I tore at his clothes, fumbling with his belt buckle and unzipping his jeans.

“Birdie,” he mumbled in protest against my lips, but I didn’t stop. I couldn’t stop. Whatever he had to say could wait.

“Birdie,” he called out again as I frantically tried to remove his vest. When I didn’t listen this time, he wrapped his hands around mine, forcing me to stop and look at him. I felt a tremor move through me, and soon, it split me wide open and turned into full body sobs as I shook my head violently.

“No,” I cried out. “I need you. I need you right fucking now.”

Truthfully, I was terrified I was still going to lose him. It wasn’t a fear that would ever go away, but as long as we were under the spell of this magic between us, it couldn’t happen. Fear didn’t exist in that space. There was no room for worst-case scenarios when he was inside me. Because he was my addiction, and I was his. And right now, I just wanted to get high.

“Please, Huck.” I burrowed my face into his neck as he wrapped his arms around me and tried to soothe me.

“It’s okay, angel,” he whispered. “I’ve got you.”

“Then make me yours like you promised.” My fingers curled into the leather of his vest. “Give me what I need.”

“I will,” he rasped. “I want to. I just... I don’t know how to do this with the baby. I’m fucking terrified of hurting you.”

The agony in his voice ripped my attention away from my own selfish desires as I looked up and noticed the fear in his eyes. I touched his face, and his hands fell to my waist as I rocked my body against him. “Just like this. You won’t hurt us, I promise.”

His body was still full of tension when he kissed me, but eventually, he gave in. He tugged my dress over my head and slid my panties down around my ankles so I could kick them off. I stood before him, completely bare as his eyes cut over me with a renewed sense of awe and appreciation that I so desperately craved.

“You are my fucking goddess,” he murmured. “How can this even be real?”

I knew exactly what he meant as I watched him strip off his own clothes, revealing the body of a warrior and my savior. He took my hand in his and led me around the bed. When he sat down first, his erection saluted me from between his thighs. He was so painfully engorged, I wondered if he had pleased himself at all in my absence.

“I’ve been waiting for this,” he murmured as he helped me settle onto his lap, sliding against the hard flesh. His hands came around my waist and then up to cup my breasts, which had grown since he’d seen them last. I was overly sensitive and cried out when he touched me. He froze, unsure of himself when he looked up at me.

“Keep going,” I begged. “Touch me everywhere. Don’t stop.”

His left hand slid down between my thighs, and he began to thumb my clit as I arched forward, and he sucked my nipple into his mouth. It was divine torture, and already, I was quaking, ready to shatter. It had been too long, and I wanted it to last forever. But Huck had learned how to play my body like a well-tuned instrument. He tortured me with his tongue and his teeth, nipping and sucking and licking at me while he brought me to the highest peak of pleasure I could reach.

The rush of blood through my ears when I came was deafening, and I couldn’t see through the haze as I collapsed against his chest. But it wasn’t enough. Even in the aftermath, I was still wiggling against him, desperate to get him inside.

“Please, Huck. I need you.”

His eyes filled with liquid heat as he reached down between us and fisted his cock, holding it upright for me.

“Get on,” he said gruffly. “Now, Birdie.”

I rested my palms on his chest and lifted my hips, positioning myself until I felt the head of his cock pushing against me. I was soaked, and it didn’t take much effort to slide over him and greedily accept him into my body. I wasn’t satisfied until I took him all the way to the root, my ass resting against his hips.

“Fuckkkk,” he hissed, fighting to keep his eyes open. “This is going to be quick the first time. I just need to fill you up.”

A smile curved my lips as I started to rock against him, pivoting my hips and adjusting to the sounds of his tortured groans. He wasn’t lying.

Already, I could feel his body shaking beneath me. His muscles were rigid, his fingers digging into the cheeks of my ass as I rode him. I studied him like a fiend, noting every hitch in his breath and every vein protruding from his neck and arms. Lower yet, his legs moved restlessly as I fucked him into the bed, completely unashamed of my hedonistic desires.

“Fuck yes,” he growled, thrusting up into me from below. He pinned me against his body as his cock pulsed and jerked inside me, filling me full of his come. And just as he’d promised, he didn’t let me go. We stayed there like that, kissing and touching until he was hard inside me again. And then we made love until the sun came up the next day.

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Epilogue

Ace

“SHE’S THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING I’ve ever seen,” Gypsy gushed over my daughter as she rocked her in her arms. “Other than my baby, of course. I mean they are both equally beautiful. God, I’m not even making sense right now.”

“And you didn’t just go through thirty hours of labor,” Birdie murmured sleepily from her hospital bed.

I sat at her bedside, watching my wife as she slipped in and out of sleep. Thirty hours of labor was an understatement. It was more like thirty hours of straight hell. I still hadn’t recovered and still couldn’t relax. I didn’t even want to blink, for fear of missing a heartbeat or a stuttered breath.

“Huck.” Birdie wiggled her hand from my grip and shook it out. “You’re squeezing the life out of me.”

“Sorry,” I grunted. The tension in my body only escalated at the loss of our connection, and it must have been evident.

“What’s going on with you?” she asked.

I didn’t want to tell her that my fears had wrapped their sticky hands around my heart again. It was a lot to take in, and I was supposed to be the solid, steady hand for Birdie. But I was failing miserably.

“You promised no more secrets between us,” she reminded me.

“I know.” I hung my head. “I just didn’t want to freak you out.”

“Are you kidding me?” She laughed. “I’m already freaked out, Huck. We’re parents now. Do you even realize how terrifying that is for me?”

“Really?” I released a breath.

“Yes.” She nodded. “We could totally fuck this up.”

“I know,” I grunted. “I feel like we’re bound to fuck this up.”

“You aren’t going to fuck this up,” Gypsy butted in. “It’s totally normal to feel that way.”

“She’s right.” Birdie glanced over at Ariane. “We aren’t our parents. So we already have that going for us. I think you’re going to be an amazing father, Huck.”

“I can’t do this without you,” I told her.

“You don’t have to.” She looked at me in question. “I’m right here. I’ll be right here for the whole wild ride.”

I nodded, but it didn’t calm the raging tide of emotions in my chest. “I thought I was going to lose you,” I admitted.

Birdie’s eyes softened, and she reached over and took my hand. “What happened with your mom isn’t your fault. We made it through the labor. And we’ll make it through the rest, one minute at a time.”

I leaned over and kissed her just because I could. Every once in a while, pieces of our past would weave their way into the present, trying to ruin what we had. If either of us ever forgot what we were fighting for, the other was quick to remind.

There were no more secrets between us. No more lies. No more bullshit. When we said our vows, we became a family. Neither of us really knew what the hell we were doing, but we figured it out together. Always. And I knew then that Birdie was right. We would figure this out too.

While Gypsy was busy fussing over Ariane, I stole the opportunity to whisper in my wife’s ear the words I never said to anyone else. The same words I told her with unwavering certainty every single day.

“I love you.”

She nuzzled into my neck, dragging her fingers up to stroke my hair. “I love you too, Huck. Always.”

Gypsy offloaded Ariane into Lucian’s arms and looked at her sister with a misty-eyed expression. “I almost forgot, I brought you something, B.”

“What is it?” Birdie eyed the journal Gypsy pulled from her purse.

“It took me a while to look through it,” Gypsy said cautiously. “But when we were in California, I found this at the old house. It was still in our hiding place beneath the porch. Can you believe that?”

The color drained from Birdie’s face as she studied the journal, and I wasn’t quite sure what Gypsy was doing. I was tempted to take it away, but

then Birdie smoothed her fingers over the worn leather, shaking her head in disbelief.

“What is that?” I asked.

“It’s our secret messages.” Birdie laughed. “I can’t believe this thing survived all these years.”

“We used to write to each other in code,” Gypsy explained. “Cutting out pages from magazines and newspaper clippings. We’d find words and use a corresponding number to write notes to each other.”

“I can only imagine what must be in here.” Birdie swallowed.

“Open it,” Gypsy encouraged, her eyes sparkling with something I couldn’t quite identify. “I think you’ll be surprised.”

I held my breath as Birdie skimmed through the pages and studied what looked like a bunch of numbers to me. But when she picked it up, something fell out. An old, folded up section of a newspaper that was dry and brittle. Birdie’s eyebrows scrunched together as she began to unfold it, and the room was dead silent while we all waited to see what it was. I wasn’t prepared for the sound that escaped Birdie’s lips before her eyes darted to me.

“What’s wrong?” I reached out to her.

She gingerly set the clipping down on the table beside her, smoothing it out with her fingers before she slid it toward me. “It’s you.”

My eyes drifted over the article, noting the scrawls of hearts and flowers around the margins of the paper. But it was the photograph in the middle that caught my attention. It was, in fact, me. And beside that photo was a small blip in the paper regarding my release from prison. It was almost too difficult to believe, but it was there.

“I felt you before I ever knew you,” Birdie murmured.

“Read the message.” Gypsy offered her sister a watery smile. “You wrote it.”

Birdie glanced at the corresponding numbers in the journal and looked up at me with an expression I would never forget.

“What does it say?”

She took my hand in hers and squeezed. “Someday, everything will be perfect.”

THE END

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About The Author

A. Zavarelli is a *USA Today* and Amazon bestselling author.

She likes all things chocolate, books that come with warnings, and putting her characters through hell. Her tales have been known to flirt with darkness and sometimes court it unabashedly altogether. Revenge themes and tortured souls are her favorites to write and this gives her an excuse to watch bizarre and twisted documentaries in her spare time.

She currently lives in the Northwest with her lumberjack and an entire brood of fur babies.

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