



OUT OF THE ASHES

THE SONS OF TEMPLAR

ANNE MALCOM



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Out of the Ashes
The Sons of Templar MC #3

By Anne Malcom

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WARNING: This MC novel contains crude language, sex scenes, and graphic violence. Is not suitable for readers under the age of 18. If any of the above offends you, please do not read any further. This is a complete work of fiction and is not a true representation of a motorcycle club. It is for entertainment purposes only. I hope you enjoy.

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Living a life in darkness causes the soul to char to ash. Battling demons by turning himself into a monster is the only way he can survive...the only way he can keep a grip on sanity. That grip is precarious at best, every day is a silent battle with demons that threaten to yank him into the truest form of darkness, the abyss he'll never escape. Then it happens. Light shines through the cracks.

Happiness. Mia Spencer's life is full of it. She has an amazing new job, friends, family, and the light of her life - her daughter Lexie. Running from the demons of the past, escaping a hell that she vowed Lexie would never know about, she worked through hardship and near poverty to create something she was proud of. Buried deep inside, underneath the swell of love she had for her only daughter, were the fractured pieces of her. Pieces that were smashed and battered when she was young and vulnerable.

Then she meets Bull, who seems to hate her on sight. He screams danger, from his huge physique, to his beautiful ink, to the motorcycle club he belongs to. He is silent, his glares threaten to burn her into flames, yet she finds herself falling for him. Finds this broken man slowly fixing the pieces she thought would stay shattered forever.



To my wonderful readers, I hope you all find your very own Happy Ever After. If Bull can, you can.



I just want to say a huge thank you for reading my book, it's very surreal to call myself an author and share my characters with you. If you enjoyed *Out of the Ashes* please leave a review on Goodreads or Amazon. Your review will introduce other people to Mia and Bull and all of the people connected to the Sons of Templar.

You can learn more about what I'm working on, or currently reading, check out my website.

www.annemalcomauthor.com



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PROLOGUE



Bull

“You don’t let me out of here, I’m going to fucking kill you,” Bull uttered quietly. A calm had settled over him. A calm that starkly juxtaposed the unbridled fury he had been unable to control in the last twenty-four hours. The fury that was unleashed when they got word Laurie had been taken. In broad daylight. Twenty-four hours. How long they’d had her. How long the innocent, sweet, fuckin’ ray of sunshine had been poisoned by darkness.

He regarded his best friend with a cool stare. He was never out of control. Never betrayed emotion. Never had bitches apart from club girls, which didn’t count since there was nothing below the surface. Bull hadn’t realized how empty that shit was until he found Laurie. Till he found depth. Something else to live for, despite the club. Something else to die for.

“You’re in here for your own good. Good of the club. For Laurie.” Cade paused as Bull’s entire frame tightened at the mention of her name. “You’re no good to her walking round smashing shit and killing people out of control,” he said quietly.

Bull walked up to him, the steps reverberating in the room they had locked him in. “Look at me, brother,” he said quietly. “I look out of control to you?”

Cade stared at him.

“That’s *my woman* out there. You don’t get it, ‘cause you don’t got that shit. But you keep me in here one second longer I’ll *never* fuckin’ forgive that shit,” he promised.

Cade sighed, stepping aside. Before Bull could move his best friend slapped him on the shoulder. "With you, brother," he uttered quietly.

Bull nodded slightly, the only response he gave. He was too busy walking out the door into the bright light of day. Too eager to get out of the fuckin' room and get to finding her. Then, like serendipity, something happened to cast a shadow over that day and every single one after it. A van, screeching to a stop outside the gates. Bull's heart stopped as he watched a small body be thrown out of it before it sped away, dust flying as it did so. He didn't register the yelling, the flurry of activity. He sprinted toward that small form, everything in him turning to ice. He had a hope, a desperate hope that the cold forbidding feeling that settled in him at the sight of that prone form was wrong. But as he reached the gate, flung the prospect kneeling on the ground aside, that hope was extinguished. In fact, everything in him was extinguished, leaving a gaping hole in the middle of his fucking chest.

In front of him was his beautiful girl. The only way he could recognize her was the golden locks matted and corrupted with dried blood. Everything else was foreign. The face, beaten beyond recognition. The fresh tattoo covering half her cheek. The ripped clothes barely covering her battered body. The body that he had held in his arms not two days ago. The body that held every inch of him. Kneeling down, gentle as anything, he gathered her into his arms. He pressed her to his chest.

"No, baby," he choked out, unable to swallow the horror that felt like it was killing him. He pressed his lips to her head. He wished, no, fucking *prayed* for whatever was out there to save her. To somehow repair the broken body. The broken mind that lay underneath it. Wipe away the horrors a gentle mind had endured. And if that wasn't possible, if she was gone forever, to take him. Wherever it was that you went after. Take him as well so he could escape the pain and the weight of the guilt he felt. So she wouldn't be alone. That *he* wouldn't be alone.

But no mercy was granted to him. She faded away the next day, succumbing to the mindless brutality inflicted on a gentle soul.

She faded away; he endured. He didn't follow her. He was engulfed, strangled, in darkness. Haunted by demons that embedded themselves into his mind and sentenced him to a life without light. Without sunshine.



CHAPTER ONE



Mia

Four Years Later

“Lexie! Have you seen my shoe?” I yelled as I straightened from inspecting under my bed.

“What shoe?” a voice yelled back.

“You know, the cute ones with the ankle strap and patent leather?” I called as I abandoned the shoe search in my room and decided to look downstairs. I needed those shoes today. They were not only the only piece of footwear that went with my current outfit, but they were also my most kick ass heels. Heels that would contribute to a kick ass look, which I needed to help me feel mentally prepared for the day. Because my thoughts were on my dearly departed shoe, they were not on me navigating the mess that was my hall, which meant I tripped over an ill-placed box.

“Great Caesars Ghost!” I exclaimed with irritation as I caught myself from a header.

I really needed to get around to unpacking those boxes. They were a health hazard. Someone - namely yours truly - could break a leg from tripping on those death traps, and crutches were not conducive with my fashion choices. I mentally added *unpack house* to my to do list.

I came face to face with Lexie, who was holding a shoe in one hand and a coffee in the other. I sighed in relief. “I knew there was a reason I keep you around,” I said, taking the coffee and the shoe.

“I thought it was because you gave birth to me,” she replied with a smirk, sipping her own cup. Caffeine addiction was genetically transferred.

I waved my hand while inhaling the liquid needed for me to be a functioning human. “Yeah, that factors in there somewhere, but the fact you are handy at finding things, namely my favorite pair of heels is the frontrunner today,” I told her, trying to hop and not spill my coffee while I put on my other shoe. “Plus you give me coffee,” I added, waving the cup.

I stared at my daughter, turning serious. “You nervous, Dollface?” I asked her quietly.

She shook her head, smile still in place and her blonde ringlets swung with the movement. “No, actually I’m not.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “You’re seriously not anxious at the prospect of starting a new high school where you don’t know anyone?”

Lexie shrugged her shoulders. “I assume the school isn’t filled with Satan worshippers and necromancers. There’s gotta be at least some decent humans in there somewhere. I’m sure I’ll survive.” She linked her arm with mine, directing us toward the stairs. “Plus, I’m too busy being proud of my mom for being in charge of a freaking hotel to be thinking about something as trivial as high school and the possibility of a *Mean Girls* situation,” she declared as we descended the stairs.

I gave her a sideways glance. “Do not so casually joke about such a work of cinematic genius,” I told her with mock seriousness. “The fate of your high school survival depends on this one piece of advice.” I paused for dramatic effect. “On Wednesdays we wear pink.”

“Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll only wear sweats once a week,” she replied just as seriously.

My daughter and I had a lot of conversations spoken purely in movie quotes.

I laughed at the prospect of Lexie actually going to school in sweats. I didn’t think I’d ever seen my daughter leave the house in sweats, apart from when she left for exercise purposes. And even then she wore cute ones that looked better than half the people in regular clothes.

I stopped at the bottom of the stairs and turned to face Lexie, putting my hand on her cheek. “You sure you’re not harboring some secret resentment for me yanking you away from your school, your friends, and you’re not going to make it known one day by declaring you are into the black arts and demanding to be called Moon Shadow?” I asked.

My daughter gave me a look. “No, Mom. I promise I’ll make new friends. And thanks to the wonder that is the Internet and the creation of motorcars, I’m still going to see the old ones. I’ll get used to the new school, and if it does somehow scar me for life, it’ll just give me more material for my memoirs.” She waggled her eyebrows.

“That only means I get a cut of the royalties,” I countered.

She scowled at me. “You wish.”

I turned serious and shook my head with pride. “How’d I get such an awesome kid?”

Her face turned solemn. “I think someone seriously screwed up at the hospital.”

I laughed. But I seriously regarded my daughter. My kid was the freaking shit. I was lucky as hell my sixteen year old was who she was. I was so proud of her some days I thought I’d burst. She was beautiful, not in the “she’s my kid so I’m genetically programmed to think she’s stunning” kind of way. She was just growing into a spectacular young woman. It frightened me slightly. With such looks like the ones she was growing into came boys. I so wasn’t ready for *that* yet. Her blonde hair fell long in ringlets down her back, her skin was yet to realize it was a teenager and was blemish free and flawless apart from a light dusting of freckles. Her blue eyes mirrored mine, as did her heart-shaped face. She was also short like I was, but her muscles were lean thanks to the fact she actually exercised, the weirdo. Me, on the other hand, I was petite and was blessed with a fast metabolism so I was reasonably slim. I had no muscles to speak of. That was due to my fear of any form of torture disguised as exercise.

“Okay, by some miracle of the gods we aren’t actually running late, so how about we start the recon of the breakfast situation in this burg?” I suggested, scouring our half unpacked living room for my purse.

Lexie bent over the sofa and handed it to me. “Sounds great.”

Sometimes I thought she was the one taking care of me, not the other way around.



“Okay, I’m giving the coffee a hundred and twelve and the pancakes a solid nine and a half. I deducted half because I feel like they could be improved by adding chocolate chips to them,” I declared, leaning back in my seat.

Lexie nodded at me. “I’m seconding the coffee, and I’m hugely impressed a town this small has embraced acai bowls. I must say this one is hells good.”

I rolled my eyes. “I fail to believe that any acai bowl could be “hells good.” It’s a crime to breakfast foods everywhere that that can be considered appropriate as a meal. It’s a smoothie poured into a bowl. It’s like cold soup,” I said, my nose curled in distaste.

Lexie folded her arms. “Acai is a super food and it does wonders for your immune system. It’s full of antioxidants and is a much better way to start the day than with processed sugars and bleached flour,” she told me in a scolding tone.

“The *only* way, other than coffee, to start a day is with sugar. That’s the only thing that gets me out of bed in the morning,” I argued. “That and the possibility Jensen Ackles will finally realize he’s in love with me,” I added dreamily.

Lexie sighed. “I don’t know how you’ve stayed this skinny, Mom. You should need a crane to get you out of the house,” she said, scrunching her nose at me while she looked me up and down.

“I don’t know how my daughter learned about acai and freaking quinoa when such things are sacrilege in my mind,” I countered.

“A little thing called the Internet,” she replied.

I frowned at her. “Well, that’s got to stop. No more surfing the net for ridiculous health foods. Strictly porn and gambling from now on,” I ordered.

Somehow my daughter had become a health freak of epic proportions. It wasn’t my doing. For the first thirteen years of her life I didn’t even know if I had bought a broccoli, let alone freaking kale or whatever the fad vegetable was. But suddenly my budding teenager had come home declaring we buy things such as salad and hummus. I had complied, more out of shock than anything else. I had thought it would be a passing fad, like those weird jelly bracelets things I had been obsessed with as a teenager. But this healthy eating thing had stuck in a way tacky jewelry could not.

Lexie’s grin dimmed and her eyes went wide, her jaw slackened slightly as her attention went over my shoulder.

“I know you can’t be satisfied after that bowl of goo, but please do refrain from drooling on the table, Dollface. We’ll get you a muffin to go.” I patted her hand, assuming such a look was at someone else’s breakfast.

Blue eyes darted to me. “Don’t look now, Mom, but some seriously hot guys have just entered the building.”

“Scale rating?” I shot at her. This wasn’t our first rodeo.

She contemplated. “Off the charts.”

I stilled, my coffee to my mouth. “Off the charts? Hotter than that firefighter we saw saving that kitten one time?” I asked in disbelief. That wasn’t possible. You get a hot firefighter, combine that with an adorable furry animal, you get a perfect score on the Lexie and Mia hot guy chart.

“Blows him out of the water,” my daughter declared.

I slowly swiveled my head to get an eyeful of this record breaker. There had never been an “off the chart” before. Lexie and I were very particular with our rating system.

What my eyes fell on told me the record books had been broken. We may as well just set them on fire and be done with it now. No man would ever compare to what we were gazing upon. The three men standing at the counter were hotter than Hades. I didn’t think men like this existed in real life. They were all tall, like *tall*. And built. Not in a gross steroid freak way, but in an “I’ll bench press a car then chop wood with my bare hands” type built. One was joking with the woman at the cash register, an easy smile on his face. He was rocking a freaking amazing man bun and he looked like some kind of badass surfer. Every part of his face was chiseled and perfect, apart from a slightly crooked nose, which made him look more rugged and twelve times hotter. Another one was talking into a cellphone, his inky black hair brushing his collar, a tender look on his handsome and rough face. I totally envied whoever was on the other end of that call who made such a badass look like that.

It was the last one who drew my attention. I didn’t know why but my eyes seemed to be locked on him. They were all big, but he was *big*. Not fat. That guy didn’t look like he had an ounce of body fat on him. Huge, in a way that every woman liked because he exuded power and strength. He also exuded something else. Menace, danger, and something I couldn’t put my finger on. His hair was cut close to his skull and his features were hard and masculine. My eyes rested on his goatee. Now, I would never consider myself a goatee fan, but I sent a little prayer up right then and there to thank

the Creator for them. His face was blank and it looked like he never cracked a smile. Every inch of him looked rough, dangerous and forbidding. He was beautiful. I didn't miss the fact that all of their impressive bodies were covered in ink. This wasn't cheap scribbles; from what I could see it looked awesome. I also didn't miss the leather cuts they were wearing, ones that had insignias on the back. Ones that usually communicated some type of gang.

I hadn't had any contact with gangs or motorcycle club members in my life. My knowledge came from the news, TV shows and the odd romance novel I read with a biker in it. I obviously couldn't rely on fictional depictions to form some kind of opinion; neither could I use what I saw in the news. I was not one to judge anyone without knowing them. My eyes flickered around the café. It was reasonably busy with a breakfast crowd, mostly locals from the way they interacted with the waitresses. A couple of them smiled at the bikers who did chin lifts back. No one was cowering in terror or giving them sideways looks. The surfer guy was joking with Shelly, AKA my new best friend, thanks to her superior coffee making skills. He looked to be friendly and not like he was going to shoot anyone.

On that thought, my body jerked as I made eye contact with him. The dangerous one. The beautiful one. I stilled as something inexplicable passed through me with the weight of his stare. I was locked in place as his dark eyes settled on mine, and for a split second everything else melted away. Intensity I had never felt jolted through me. As quickly as it came it was gone, and the man scowled at me then looked away.

I flinched slightly at such a harsh look from a stranger. A freaking hot stranger. No one liked it when people scowled at them. It double sucked when the person in question was like Adonis. I tried to inspect just what the heck that look was.

A snapping in front of my face made me jump.

"Earth to Mom."

"What?" I snapped at Lexie's amused gaze.

She smirked at me. "As much as I would like to watch the hot guy show this morning, I've got to go and get an education."

I focused on her, tearing my gaze away from the scowling male.

"You don't need an education. You're pretty. Marry rich, you'll be fine," I said, peeking back in his direction. I inwardly flinched when I got a searing scowl as dark eyes locked with mine. I swallowed. "Plus, this is an

education,” I nodded my head at the males at the counter. “You are seeing your first real bad boys. You can look, drool, take a mental picture, but do not touch,” I instructed, wagging my finger. “And under no circumstances do you get on the back of a motorcycle. If you do I’ll post that photo of you with a baby mullet on Facebook for the world to see,” I warned her in my mom voice, although I may have been talking more to myself than my daughter.

I may not judge, but no way in hell was my daughter going anywhere near a motorcycle.

She screwed up her nose. “I’m still mad at you for that. Who let’s their own flesh and blood, a defenseless baby, get a mullet?”

I shrugged my shoulders, peeking a glance at the hot guys over my coffee cup. “It wasn’t my fault. Blame the hairdresser,” I answered on a white lie. I had wanted to see if a baby would look cute with a mullet. I reasoned *my* baby could. I was wrong. I was also eighteen and slightly dumb. What can you do?

Lexie stared at me in what I was sure was disbelief and started to get up. “Come on, I like to eat, therefore I need you to get to work so you can bring home the bacon.”

“Don’t you mean tofu?”

Lexie shriveled up her nose. “You know I don’t eat tofu, Mom.”

I raised my eyebrow. “You’re one step away. Lettuce is a gateway food. Before you know it, you’ll be drinking kale smoothies and having tofu instead of steak. Then I’ll have to disown you.”

I left cash plus a generous tip on the table. This was going to be our new haunt, I couldn’t under tip the people that held my life/morning coffee in their hands. We gathered our things and I gave a warm smile and a wave to Shelly. She smiled back and the gesture made the men she was talking to glance over in our direction. I gulped as three pairs of male eyes settled on my daughter and I. It wasn’t menacing or leering, just curious.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to get you a muffin or some form of solid food to constitute a proper breakfast?” I asked her, deciding to try and ignore the hot guys, even though our current trajectory had us heading straight past them. There was nothing for it; they were right by the exit.

Lexie rolled her eyes at me. “I’m sure, Mother.” She seemed more cool and calm at the prospect of coming so close to such male specimens. I

glared at her for not being more teenagey and awkward. It totally made me look weird.

We walked past the counter where there were various pastries and delicious goods displayed. I held out my hand. "Come on, last chance. Sugary, bleached flour perfection going once, going twice...."

Lexie just stared at me.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Your loss. Although how you are going to sit through classes like math and English Lit without a sugar high is beyond me," I said seriously as we walked out the door, surviving the brush with the world's hottest men. My ovaries didn't explode or anything.

Lexie shook her water bottle, which had pieces of lemon and cucumber floating around in it. "Don't worry, this is vodka," she deadpanned.

I put my hand on chest in mock relief. "Thank goddess. You are my daughter."

I thought I heard a bark of male laughter as we closed the door. I quickly glanced over my shoulder to see all of the hot guys staring at my daughter and me with smirks on their faces. Well, not *all*. The intense, hot one was staring at me with a stiff look on his chiseled face, his eyes glaring like I was responsible for the Beatles breaking up. I quickly glanced back around, slinging my arm around Lexie's shoulder. I had other stuff to worry about, primarily my only child. Hot bikers did not factor into the equation. Well, not until I got my vibrator out later on that night.

"Right, let's get you to your necromancer-infested high school," I declared, shaking such thoughts away.



I glanced into the red brick building. "You sure you don't want me to come in with you?" I asked.

"Mom, I'm sure. I'll be fine," Lexie told me firmly, shuffling things around in her backpack.

I chewed my lip, looking at the various students filtering in the doors. They looked innocent now, but I knew how nasty kids could be. Especially girls. Especially when a new, beautiful, funny, and confident girl like my

daughter came into such a small school. I narrowed my eyes at a crowd of them, hating them on sight.

“I could come in and establish myself as a crazy mom who has connections to the mob, so if anyone messes with you they’ll be sleeping with the fishes,” I suggested in an Italian accent.

Lexie stared at me.

“Or I could let you go in on your own and stop with the crazy mom thing,” I conceded.

“Thank you. Much appreciated. I’m assuming the mob thing will still be on the table if I choose to accept it at a later date?” she deadpanned.

I nodded. “Of course. The mob thing will always be on the table,” I told her reassuringly.

She grinned. I didn’t even know why I was worried. My kid was independent, confident, and comfortable in her own skin. How she was like that at sixteen I didn’t know. She was an old soul. She was content with her own company, whether she was reading a book or playing a guitar. She didn’t have a heap of close friends back in DC, but she didn’t need them. She was unique, an original. She knew her own mind. She had her own style down pat already; she was always decked out somewhere between Stevie Nix and Carrie Bradshaw. Today she was wearing a floral dress, which hit her mid leg. It had huge bell sleeves and nipped in at the waist. She was wearing knee high, tan leather high heeled boots and had multiple necklaces slung around her neck. Her ringlets were piled on her head in a messy bun.

Another thought popped into my mind.

I glanced back at the kids filtering into the building. My eyes zeroed in on a boy apart from the rest, leaning against a motorcycle in the parking lot. He was smoking and had aviators on. He was also a mini hot guy. The teenage version of what those men in the café were to me. In other words, trouble.

“Remember what I said about motorcycles.” I turned my attention back to Lexie. “I’ll do it. I’ll post the photo,” I promised.

Lexie leaned in and kissed my cheek, shaking her head. “Okay, Mom,” she said with sarcasm.

She hadn’t sprouted a proper interest in boys yet, not that I knew of, and she told me everything. I knew it was coming though, the day she

discovered the opposite sex. She pulled back slightly. “Good luck today. You’ll do great. I’m so proud of you.”

I swallowed. “You stole my line, kid,” I said, stroking her face lightly.

Lexie smiled. “See you later.”

She climbed out and I rolled down my window.

“Remember, Lexie, just say no,” I called to her.

“To drugs?” she asked with a slightly scrunched face.

“To boys with motorcycles, things like math club and anything consisting of frog dissection.” I said then paused. “Well, and drugs also.”

She blew me a kiss and joined the steady stream of kids walking through the doors. I narrowed my eyes at the smoking man-boy, whose sunglasses followed Lexie’s journey into the school. Crapballs.



Bull

“You think we should get the women some coffees before we break the news?” Brock asked Cade as they swung off their bikes.

Cade stared at him. “I think we need to give them vodka shots. But considering it’s eight in the morning and my woman is pregnant I’m settling for decaf and pastries.”

Brock shook his head. “I thought Gwen despised decaf. I’m pretty sure she once referred to it as ‘decaffeinated bullshit.’” He finger quoted as they entered the coffee shop.

Cade raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, well, this time around she’s craving coffee something wicked and decaf’s her only option. It’s under protest. I swear she fuckin’ flinches every time she takes a sip. Then glares at me for not lettin’ her have the normal shit.”

Brock laughed. The edges of Bull’s mouth turned up slightly. Gwen was the only bitch who could make him feel like happiness was possible. Not long term; it would never be long term. But he could have small moments of respite from the ash he tasted on his tongue, the poison swirling in his

belly. Those moments were fleeting, brief as fuck. But his best friend's Old Lady managed to make it seem like he could breathe slightly.

"I worry for my safety the moment I have to take cocktails and coffee away from Sparky," Brock muttered as they approached the counter.

Cade chuckled and glanced down at his phone. "Hey, baby, you okay?" he answered softly.

Bull watched his friend. He swore every time he answered the phone he braced. His body relaxed as soon as his wife reassured him she was good. He didn't blame him. Shit he went through with Gwen would make any man vigilant. Worried. That and the fact Gwen was a loose fucking unit. Add Amy and fuckin' Rosie to the equation, and you had a recipe for disaster.

Brock started joking with Shelly while she got their coffees and Bull struggled to still his mind. Maybe struggled was too light a word. He fuckin' *battled*, attacked and quietly combatted the demons which had taken up residence in the barren fuckin' wasteland inside his head. Those demons were relentless. It was a constant war fighting the images, the memories that came with them. Every moment of every day he wasn't on his bike was a moment he was engaged with those demons. It was constant. It was exhausting and it was the fight for his life, because he knew if he let those demons win, it was over.

So that's what he was doing when he saw them. He was fighting those demons, and then all of a sudden he wasn't. He was looking into eyes that stilled the battle. Silenced the screams. Those eyes gave him quiet. Gave him respite. Blue as the ocean. He struggled to move away from those eyes, to see the rest of her. She was beautiful. Fuckin' stunning. His cock jerked in his pants at her heart shaped face. Her rosebud full lips, her long blonde hair curling around her face. Tits. Small but fuckin' perfect. Then he caught himself. Then the demons came back and he scowled at her, the woman who had made him forget his fight.

"Coffee, brother?" Brock jerked him out of his head.

Bull tore his gaze away from those doe eyes. He jerked his head in answer.

Shelly smiled and waved in the direction of the table, which caused Brock to turn his eyes toward the woman. Those eyes. Bull tried. He fuckin' *battled* not to follow Brock's gaze, to meet those eyes again. But it

seemed he was fuckin' useless. He silently fumed at his inability to keep his eyes off her.

"Tourists?" Brock asked Shelly as the woman stood.

Bull's cock hardened fully in his pants at the sight of her. Her tight little body was covered head to toe by a white blouse and tight black slacks, but there was no hiding it. Bull's cock twitched again as she bent to retrieve a handbag, her ass perfectly hugged by the material encasing it. He visualized himself sinking into her from behind as his fingers bit into that ass.

"Nope," Shelly answered as Bull struggled to get his cock under control. "They just moved here. Mia's taking over management of The Cottage."

Fuck. Fuckin' *living here*? Bull would have to know this bitch was in his town, fuckin' strutting that sweet ass around, trying to fuckin' kill him? He clenched his fists.

"No shit?" Brock continued as he glanced at Bull. He felt like his teeth might shatter at the force with which he was clenching his jaw.

They silenced as she approached them. "Come on, last chance. Sugary, bleached flour perfection going once, going twice..." Her voice was soft and teasing as she smiled at the kid beside her. The kid was a fuckin' imprint of the woman. Same golden hair, same doe eyes, 'cept she had a small sprinkling of freckles where the woman had none. Her mother was wearing a fuckin' sex kitten outfit; kid was clad in some hippie, rock star gear. They were the same, but different. Kid was going to be a fuckin' knockout like her mom. He pulled his attention back to the exchange.

She stared at her mother in a way that made Bull think this had happened before. The teasing tone of the woman made him sure of it.

"Your loss. Although how you are going to sit through classes like math and English Lit without a sugar high is beyond me." She shrugged her shoulders and he swore he heard a low chuckle from behind him. Bull struggled against the feeling he normally only felt with Gwen. That little feeling of warmth, of sunshine lighting up the darkness. They were almost out the door and the kid shook some fancy water bottle. "Don't worry, this is vodka," the kid said seriously.

Bull felt himself want to smile. Kid was funny.

He had started his day with the same grim determination that he had every day. To make it through. To fight the demons. Keep the club healthy. Rinse, repeat. He hadn't expected this shit. He hadn't expected to be blown

off his fuckin' feet by some bitch who threatened his entire existence. Some bitch he didn't even know.

“Thank goddess. You are my daughter.” Her playful voice carried as the door shut behind them.

Yeah, he didn't expect some bitch to make his cock twitch, make his demons quiet and make him laugh all at once.



CHAPTER TWO



Mia

I sat in my car staring at the building in front of me. It was a beautiful wooden building, pure white with blue shuttered windows. The arch leading into the hotel was intricate and welcoming. The wrought iron sign that read "The Cottage" was ironic, considering this seaside mansion was a little more than a cottage. This place was a successful, busy and hugely well-known hotel and spa. It was regularly featured in travel magazines and even had the odd celebrity come for a detox or escape from the circus that was Hollywood. And I was in charge of whether it ran successfully or not. Well, I wasn't technically "in charge" yet. I was "in charge" when I got out of my car and walked underneath that arch and into the place. Which was why I was sitting in my car. That and I was trying to banish the dark eyes and haunted scowl that was burned into my memory.

I jumped slightly as my phone rang. I clung to another reason to delay the weight of responsibility that would come when I entered the doors I was staring at.

"Hello, Mia Spencer speaking." I greeted the blocked number professionally, just in case it was like, the president or something. It could happen.

"You're sitting in your car right now too scared to go in, aren't you?" a familiar voice greeted.

I sat up straighter as if he could see me. "No, I am doing nothing of the sort, I'm about to walk in the doors right now," I lied.

“Bullshit,” the voice said. “You’re sitting in the car because you’re scared of walking through those doors. Let me tell you now, there’s nothing to be scared of. You’re going to do great. That place is going to blossom under your management. I know that. I believe in you,” the voice told me firmly.

I sank back into my seat. “You think so?” I asked weakly.

“I know so. I wouldn’t have hired you otherwise. I like money. And I have a feeling you’re going to make me a shit ton of it,” he said lightly.

I smirked. “I should have asked for a bigger salary then.”

“You make me half as much as I think you will, I’ll give it to you and a holiday to the Caribbean,” Steve promised.

“You should know Lexie and I only fly private,” I replied with a fake haughty tone. It was ironic, considering Lexie and I had never left the country. Being a struggling single mom, I couldn’t exactly afford vacations in Europe.

“Of course,” Steve said with a smile in his voice.

I smiled. Steve might be my boss but he was also my best friend, and the closest thing Lexie had to a grandfather. People might think it was weird being friends with your sixty-year-old boss, but whatever. Steve and his wife Ava took a sixteen-year-old girl and gave her a chance. Saved her life, more accurately. They were the reason I could feed, clothe, and house my child. Not only that, I could actually feed Lexie the superfood shit she grew into and fuel my makeup addiction without going broke. They were the closest thing I had to family. So when Steve announced he had bought a prominent beachfront resort and was making me manager, I had been blown away. I also didn’t want to let him down. He had done so much for Lexie and me already, I didn’t want to screw this up. Hence me deciding to take up residence in my car. There was no responsibility in here and I was sure I had a couple of Twinkies under the seat to sustain me.

“Get out of the car, Mia, and go and start your day being the best goddamned manager that place has ever had,” he demanded.

Something in his tone, maybe the faith, had me abandon the idea of living in my car and existing on Twinkies.

So I got out and walked underneath that arch.



“Mom! Come here quickly” I heard my daughter’s anxious command from the window.

“Mommy’s resting, sweetheart. Unless you’re bleeding from the head I’m not going anywhere quickly,” I told her.

I was lying on the sofa with a trashy magazine and a cold beer. It was late on Saturday afternoon and I was recovering from a long and stressful week of work. Steve was right. I could do it. Be the manager of a hotel and spa without running it into the ground. Well, for the first week anyway. Nothing had burned down and no guests had died under my care so I was calling it a win. Plus, the staff were mostly competent and nice and I got on with them all supremely well. I had a feeling that I actually might do well. It was a good feeling. I also had a feeling I might have to start a cocaine habit. That was the only way I could have enough energy to make it through the next week.

It might be rewarding and challenging, but my job was also exhausting. I was there from eight until six every night and running around doing things the entire day. Lexie came after school to help out and to hang out in the small restaurant attached to the hotel to do her homework. She seemed to be settling well into her new school. We hadn’t had much time to explore Amber or to even scope out the takeout situation, but we intended on starting the recon tonight with Chinese food. Plus, tomorrow we were going to check out the retail offerings. I didn’t expect much, but there was a small store next to the coffee shop that had caught my eye.

“Seriously, Mom, get up now and come and look at this,” she demanded sharply, not glancing away from the window.

I groaned and pulled myself up from the sofa, abandoning the tales of the latest Kardashian scandal. I took a tug of my beer and joined my daughter at the window.

“Has President Obama finally decided to take us up on our invitation to come over for a beer?” I asked. “Because that is the only reason I should be getting off the sofa.”

Lexie grabbed my chin between her thumb and forefinger and pointed my face at the house across the street.

“By Zeus’s loins,” I whispered under my breath.

Our house was at the end of a quiet street where the houses were separated by reasonably large yards. We had a little two-story place, with a large front yard and a separate garage. I loved it already. We couldn’t afford any of the beachfront stuff and this was a little older than a lot of the other ones around town, but it had character. Me and Lexie did good with character. We decorated the house in our signature vintage boho theme and felt at home here already. Thanks to its position at the end of the street, we were removed from the rest of our neighbors and our closest was directly across the street. It was a small, one story house with a sad yard and not much personality. I had thought it was empty since we moved in, thanks to its lack of personal touches and not seeing anyone in or around it the past week. It was most certainly *not* empty.

A large shiny black Harley sat on the driveway of the house. I didn’t know much about motorcycles, but it looked nice. The kind of nice that made me question why it was sitting in the driveway of the house. But the motorcycle was not the thing I was currently feasting my eyes on.

“We need popcorn,” Lexie said, her eyes glued to the driveway.

I nodded. “And a recording device. Or binoculars.”

I knew my daughter was giving me a sideways look, but I refused to tear my gaze away. How could I? The shirtless man tinkering with his motorcycle was a sight to behold. His muscled chest was unlike anything I had seen before, and it was covered in tattoos. Obviously I couldn’t make out the tattoos, which was why I needed binoculars. Well, maybe it wasn’t the tattoos I wanted a closer look at; maybe it was the six pack and the little v that was visible thanks to low riding jeans.

“How could we not know *this* was across the street? I know we’ve been busy, but you’d notice this guy if you were trying to solve a quantum physics equation or performing brain surgery,” I remarked, letting my gaze roam over the specimen in front of me.

I probably shouldn’t be condoning my daughter leering at a way older man, but that would mean *I* would have to stop leering at him. That wasn’t going to happen. I needed to drink this sight in. Plus, my daughter was the most well behaved teenager on planet Earth. Having me as a mother I don’t know how this was possible, but she was happy with a book or a record on

a Saturday night, not a party full of meatheads from a football team. She was a teenage unicorn. I had thought such creatures were myths, but she was flesh and blood. And I gave birth to her.

Suddenly, as if he could feel the eyes of a sixteen-year-old unicorn and her voyeuristic mother, the man's eyes darted over to us. Like we had rehearsed it, Lexie and I both dropped to the floor in a coordinated move, hiding under the windowsill.

"Do you think he saw us?" I whispered. I don't know why I was asking; the flutter I felt when furious eyes met mine told me he saw us. I didn't know why I was whispering either, but I felt like he had crazy hot guy powers, which included super hearing.

Lexie glanced at me. "I don't know. Check."

I sank farther into the wall, my eyes widening at such an outrageous suggestion. "I'm not checking. I'm staying in this spot for the remainder of my life. Or at least until he's gone," I declared.

"How are you going to know he's gone if you don't move?"

I rolled my eyes. "Duh, that's what you're for. I don't keep you around 'cause you're pretty to look at," I stated.

Lexie shook her head and smiled. It wasn't her cute little innocent smile, though. It was one evil geniuses got when they were hatching a plan. "Fine. I'll check, but you have to do laundry for the next two weeks."

I glared at her. "You're an evil little person."

She winked at me. "Love you too, Mom."

She slowly rose up from the window, like directly up.

"What are you doing?" I hissed. "Don't stand straight up, slither across the wall! Otherwise it's totally obvious you dropped to the floor after he caught you perving," I whisper-yelled, still unsure as to why I felt the need to quiet my voice.

My frenzied commands were in vain. Lexie had already straightened and was standing in front of the window, casual as anything, like she was birdwatching or something.

I shook my head. "Wipe spy off your list of potential careers," I told her with disappointment.

She ignored me and stepped away from the window, walking to the sofa to pick up my abandoned magazine.

"He's gone?" I asked from my spot on the floor, feeling a tad ridiculous now.

“Yep,” she answered distractedly, reading the magazine.

I let out a breath of relief and stood. I stretched slightly, then glanced back out the window. I let out a little scream as my eyes met mirrored shades. I quickly darted away from the window and snatched the magazine from Lexie, hitting her in the shoulder with it.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you lying gives you ulcers and makes your nose grow?” I snapped.

“Yes, my mother did. But she also told me a little man lived under my bed and he would come and eat me if I ever talked to strangers,” she replied, rubbing her shoulder.

I put my hands on my hips. “That was for your own safety.” Little did she know.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t feel very safe lying in bed at night waiting for a little man to come and eat me,” she shot back.

“Well, you obviously had been talking to strangers, therefore you should have been scared,” I said, plonking down on the sofa next to her. “Now what are we going to do? Our hot neighbor thinks we’re crazy pervs,” I moaned.

Lexie gave me a look. “Not *we*. I’m just an impressionable young teen with a Peeping Tom for a mother,” she teased with a twinkle in her eye.

I slapped her with the magazine again.

She crawled away from me with false pain in her eyes. “Stop! You’ll maim me!” she cried dramatically.

I threw the entire magazine at her and she caught it with a grin.

I shook my head. My daughter was a total nut. I, however, was completely sane.



“Ouch!” I cursed as I tripped over yet another ill-placed box. I again managed to catch myself before I ate carpet luckily, considering a trip to the emergency room would make me later than I already was. Lexie and I almost had the house unpacked but there were a couple of rogue boxes that seemed determined to be a part of my demise.

“Lexie! Get you A into G—we are totally late. If we don’t leave soon you’re going to have to have Pop-Tarts for breakfast,” I threatened as I descended the stairs. “Pop-Tarts full of dangerous and delicious things, such as sugar and added preservatives,” I added, feeling hungry.

“Coming!” I heard her yell from her room.

I made it to the bottom of the stairs and scanned the room for my jacket. I spied it lying across an ottoman and slipped it on.

“Ready, ready.” Lexie came rushing into the room, packing her bag full of books.

“Okay, let’s go,” I said, making my way out the door.

“Mom,” Lexie called.

I turned to see she hadn’t moved. I waved my hand, “Come on, kid, I haven’t had coffee yet and I need some in my veins. Stat.”

The plan was to head to what was now our local breakfast spot for a quick caffeine fix and a muffin before work. I hadn’t had time to make some this morning and Lexie had uncharacteristically slept in, which meant we were both running sans caffeine. The Spencer girls *did not* do well without caffeine.

“You don’t have shoes on,” Lexie informed me.

I glanced down at my bare feet to see I had indeed forgotten footwear. The most important part of an outfit, no less. “I hate Mondays,” I muttered.

“It’s Wednesday,” Lexie pointed out.

I scowled and thrust the keys to the car at her. “Wait in the car. I’ll be down in a second.”

I struggled to think of a pair of shoes that would go with my pencil skirt and floaty blouse. “The blue pointy heeled ones,” Lexie called to me as she walked out the door.

It seriously freaked me out how much of a connection we had sometimes.

With shoes firmly on my feet, I left the house to see Lexie standing in the driveway staring at the car.

“You’re actually meant to get in the car in order to travel places,” I informed her.

She pointed at the back tire. It was flat.

“Drat and damn it all to Hell,” I snapped at the air.

We were silent for a moment, both staring at the flat tire, which I thought was taunting us.

“You know how to change a tire?” I asked Lexie.

“How would I know how to change a tire?” she replied, looking at me with disbelief.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know. You could have decided to take a course, watched an online tutorial.”

She turned to face me. “I don’t think there’s such a thing as tire changing courses. I can’t even drive yet—why would I learn how to change a tire?” Her expression had changed from disbelief to regarding me like I may be slightly crazy.

“You’re old enough to drive, yet you don’t seem to have the driving gene,” I pointed out, referring to the many times Lexie had risked my life when I tried to teach her. We were currently on hiatus. “Plus, you like learning things. You might have a tire passion I don’t know about.” I stared at the tire.

“A tire passion?” Lexie repeated. Now I was getting the full crazy stare.

“I haven’t had coffee,” was my answer.

There was silence.

“Do you think we can call AAA?” I pondered.

“That’s like, roadside assistance. We’re not on the road. We’re at home,” my smart daughter pointed out. “I don’t even think they come for flat tires.”

It worried me slightly she had more knowledge than I did. But, as mentioned, I hadn’t had coffee. Who knew what sort of stuff my caffeinated brain would have been able to come up with? It might even have been able to change that tire. The one that was for sure taunting us.

“We could walk,” Lexie suggested after another long silence.

I stared at her. “Walking would mean changing my shoes. Changing my shoes would mean changing my outfit. We’d be way late and I wouldn’t get coffee.”

“You’ve got coffee at the hotel,” Lexie said.

“Yes, but it’s not the *good coffee*. Shelly makes the *good coffee*. It sets me up for the day. Without it I’d be lost,” I told her, although this was something she already knew. She had experienced the Shelly coffee in all its glory. She had felt its effects.

“You’ve only been drinking it for a week and you survived before then without it.”

I frowned at Lexie. She was starting to tick me off. “What are you, the coffee police?” I searched my handbag. “We’ll get a taxi,” I decided.

“Keys,” a deep voice commanded.

Lexie and I both jumped. We had been so wrapped up in our conversation, we hadn’t noticed another presence. How I couldn’t notice this man earlier was beyond me. But here he was, clad in jeans, motorcycle boots, a tight black tee and a leather vest. He was scowling at me and holding out his hand. A hand attached to a very muscled arm; the veins were pulsing in it and everything.

“Keys,” he repeated, his voice rough and impatient.

“What?” I half whispered, still staring at the arm. It not only had beautiful muscles, but up close his tattoos were amazing. Works of art. Full of color.

“For the car. I need keys.” He spoke with irritation.

“Why do you want the keys to my car?” I asked, moving my thoughts away from his arm.

“To change the tire. You’ve been standing out here for ten minutes staring at it. I’m guessing you don’t know how to.” He spoke a full sentence and the irritation was even more prevalent. So was the hotness of his low and raspy voice.

Lexie and I both shook our heads slowly.

His scowl deepened. “Then give me the keys.” He was speaking to us like we were slightly slow.

“We haven’t had coffee,” I blurted randomly to explain our mental slowness.

The hard look he gave me told me I didn’t do much to help our case for mental competency.

Lexie wordlessly handed him the keys. He didn’t seem to be expecting her to have them, because his face softened a smidgeon at my kid. I mean slightly. So he went from looking like he might shiv us and steal our car, or he might just hogtie us and take it for a joyride. Not that I would mind being hogtied by him.

I shook that thought out of my head.

He didn’t say another word before turning and going to the trunk of the car.

“Mom, the hot but immensely scary biker from next door is changing the tire on our car,” Lexie whispered, not taking her eyes off him.

“I know,” I whispered back, keeping my eyes glued on his muscled body and the patch on the back of it.

There was silence as he got some kind of contraption and started to get to work on our tire.

“Talk to him,” Lexie demanded on a whisper.

“You talk to him,” I snapped back.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Ask him how many miles to the gallon his Harley gets,” I whispered. “Or where the best place to get a tattoo is.”

“So,” Lexie said, narrowing her eyebrows at me. “What’s your name?”

He didn’t look up. “Bull,” he grunted.

Lexie and I looked at each other.

“Bull?” she repeated after a beat.

“Yep,” he bit out, fiddling with the tire. I followed the cords in his arms with my eyes, entranced with the strength in them. That strength would translate well to the bedroom. I struggled to keep my mind out of the gutter. My daughter was right beside me, for crissakes!

“Bull’s a unique name. Is it short for something? I cannot picture a little baby called Bull,” Lexie continued, oblivious to my sexual fantasies, thank God.

There was a pause. “Road name,” he said weirdly.

Another sidelong glance passed between me and Lexie. Did this guy have a problem stringing a complete sentence together?

“What’s a road name?” Lexie asked. You could tell she was getting a bit more confident now that the shock of ‘Bull’s appearance had worn off. She had stepped forward to get a closer look at what Bull was doing and was leaning against the passenger door.

He glanced up at her. “Like a nickname,” he clipped. A look passed over his face at Lexie’s casual stance and friendly demeanor. It quickly left and he turned his attention back to the tire.

Lexie seemed to be chewing something over in her mind. I wanted to know why he was called Bull. Obviously he was freaking huge and intimidating. But I wondered if it had anything to do with his *downstairs* area. I knew bikers had nicknames due to their sexual escapades; maybe this was due to the fact he was hung like a bull.

Luckily, Lexie wasn’t thinking about his nether regions.

“What’s your real name? Please tell me it’s something like Tim or Alan. That would be hilarious if someone who looked like you with the name Bull was actually a Tim.”

“Or a Eugene,” I added, deciding to contribute to some form of communication. It was either that or start drooling over his arms.

Lexie nodded. “Gaylord,” she shot back.

I restrained a snort on that one. “Kevin.” We were so on a roll.

Lexie furrowed her brows. “I like the name Kevin.”

I gaped at her. “When have you ever seen a hot guy named Kevin?”

Lexie pondered for a moment. “Kevin Costner!” she declared, sounding victorious.

“Seriously? Okay, let’s forget that he’s sixty for a moment—even in his prime he wasn’t anything to write home about. You’re grasping at straws,” I said. “And we’re getting you some therapy for your older man fetish,” I added with concern.

Lexie scowled at me. “Saying one supremely talented actor was once a very handsome fellow in his prime does not constitute a fetish,” she argued.

“Supremely talented? We’re definitely getting you therapy,” I told her seriously.

I remembered our current company. The realization came with an uncomfortable sensation of heat, feeling his eyes on me. Sure enough, black eyes were darting between Lexie and I. Bull was standing, and the tire was changed. He was staring at us with a blank expression.

“Done,” he declared, ignoring our debate.

“Have you seen *Dances with Wolves*, Mr. Bull?” Lexie asked him, taking the keys and ignoring the fact he looked like he would rather be in Alcatraz than having this conversation.

“Nope,” he bit out.

“*Field of Dreams*?” she continued, unhindered by his attitude.

He shook his head. I personally thought he was lying. He just didn’t want to hand in his badass card by admitting he watched such a tear jerker. Then again, maybe his hobbies didn’t turn to watching movies. It was more likely he learned how to waterboard for fun, or practiced menacing looks in the mirror. He had that shit *down pat*.

“You’ve missed out on some cinematic gold. You should come over and watch it one night—you know, as a thank you. Mom and I always have movie nights on Saturdays. Well, actually we don’t need a designated movie night, we use any excuse. But Saturdays are when we go all out,” she rambled slightly with a smile.

My eyes nearly popped out of my head. My sweet, slightly antisocial daughter was inviting a biker over for a movie night? Not just that. One that was hotter than any man I had seen in real life or in movies.

“Lexie, what were we talking about just the other day? You know what happens when a little man underneath a bed gets hungry,” I said under my breath.

Bull’s eyes flicked to me and something passed in them I couldn’t catch. It was probably the fact he thought I was insane. I wasn’t exactly at my best. The attraction I felt for this man was consuming. This made it all the more mortifying witnessing the hardening of his eyes as they met mine.

“I think we deduced that man doesn’t exist, *Mom*,” Lexie said firmly. “Plus, Bull’s not a stranger. He’s our neighbor, who did something nice which saved our necks,” she finished triumphantly, winking at him. Actually *winking* at the guy who would chew up and spit out Chuck Norris.

I was at a loss of what to do, so I quickly glanced at my watch. “Frickin’, flippin’, shoot,” I blurted when I realized the time. “We are actually insanely late now. My chances of Shelly’s coffee are seriously low. Your acai bowl is out of the question, unless they pour it into a cup with a straw, which of course turns it back into a regular smoothie,” I teased. “You’re going to have to run into the café while I sit in the car with the motor running,” I declared, my attention on my daughter. My eyes returned to Bull, who had been glowering at me the entire time. I swallowed the terrible taste that came with this look. “Thank you so much for doing that. You really did come to our rescue,” I said sincerely, despite the look.

He stared at me a moment longer. “You need to get a new tire on there soon. Treads shot to shit. It’s not safe,” he clipped.

I stared at him. The scowl I was being treated to was more likely to be accompanied by a death threat than a worry about my safety. I bit my lip in confusion, feeling uncomfortable under such a stare. Uncomfortable because it was vaguely turning me on. Okay, maybe not so vaguely.

“Omigod!” Lexie exclaimed loudly, unaware that Bull and I were in some kind of weird moment. “We didn’t even introduce ourselves. I’m Alexis, but everyone calls me Lexie.” Her perkiness was unusual for strangers, as was the megawatt smile she was giving Bull. It stayed in place even as she elbowed me in the ribs.

“Amelia,” I ground out, rubbing my midsection. I resisted the urge to poke my tongue out at my daughter. This guy already thought we were mad.

No need to add fuel to the fire of crazy we had started. “My friends call me Mia though, and I think that I not only consider you a friend, but an immortal saint for saving me the horror of missing out on my morning latte,” I added, trying to defuse the tension. Unfortunately, my comedic genius was lost on such a broody biker. Maybe if I had offered an arm wrestle....

He was staring between the two of us, his face blank. Silence hung in the air after my half-assed attempt to seem witty. I felt like an awkward teenager around such an intoxicating presence. It didn’t help that my actual teenage daughter seemed to have more charisma than me.

“You going to tell us your real name now?” My charismatic daughter asked lightheartedly, with a small smile. I honestly didn’t know how he could say no to that face; she was too cute. Then again, she was the fruit of my loins so I was biased. A biker was more likely to be persuaded by a biker chick on a stripper pole.

He seemed to be contemplating something while Lexie kept her smile, unfazed by the dangerous emptiness in his face. I think I needed to get her back on the stranger danger classes. Stat. Maybe get myself some to curb the crazy attraction.

“Zane,” he grunted finally.

Lexie beamed. “Zane. Totally suits you. Knew you weren’t a Eugene,” she joked lightly.

He said nothing else, just gave Lexie a small chin lift and me a withering scowl before turning his back. No goodbye, nothing. Obviously bad ass bikers with world class goatees didn’t bother themselves with something as asinine as goodbyes. We were treated to a view of the patch of his leather vest, which read *Sons of Templar MC*. My gaze, however, quickly flickered over the rider brandishing a sword and settled on the amazing ass that filled out the black jeans he was wearing the shit out of.

“He was nice,” Lexie exclaimed, shocking me out of my perusal of a seriously glorious behind.

I gaped at her. “Nice?” I repeated in disbelief.

She nodded.

There were multiple words I would use to describe Zane the ‘Bull’ biker. Nice was not one. Wouldn’t even make the top fifty.

I shook my head. I would address my daughter’s total misuse of the word nice at a later date. “I need coffee,” I declared.



CHAPTER THREE

“Mom, I think the red light flashing on the dash means something’s wrong.”

I glanced over at Lexie in the passenger seat, who was frowning at the dashboard. “I disagree. It has been flashing on and off for days. It’ll go away soon. I only worry when it doesn’t stop flashing,” I declared, my eyes going back to the road.

“As much as I trust your extensive knowledge about the workings of a motor vehicle’s warning systems, I think you should get it looked at,” Lexie said firmly, with only the slightest glimmer of sarcasm.

I nodded. “Yes. At some point in the near to distant future, I will get it looked at. Right now, in the immediate future I am going to perv at Dominic Toretto. Ain’t no metal machine going to mess with that.”

It was true. I would not let an insignificant flashing light mess with my Vin Diesel fix. I was in dire straits. I needed a hot godlike body to help rid my mind of a tall, dark and deadly biker whose withering looks haunted my dreams. Okay, my sexual fantasies. It had been over a week since Zane had changed my tire. I had glimpsed him exactly twice. Once when I was mowing our front lawn and he was pulling out of his driveway, and once when I was arriving home at the same time as him. Both times I got a look that would frighten young children. However, Lexie had been with me the second time and had waved enthusiastically. She got a chin lift back, which I thought counted as enthusiasm from such a creature. Nevertheless, I think I was getting obsessed. Which wasn’t healthy. Daydreaming about a man who obviously loathed me? Not okay. I didn’t know why I had aroused such hatred when he hardly knew me, but it bothered me. A lot. Mostly because I wanted to sleep with him and I was upset that wouldn’t happen. So I needed my *Fast* men.

“Mom, we have time to quickly pop in to see a mechanic before the movie starts,” Lexie pointed out.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. “We do not have time,” I said with impatience. “We time our movie going arrival specifically. We need to allocate enough time to get appropriate snacks and make sure we get good seats.” I frowned as I thought I heard a weird sound from the engine. I decided to ignore it. “This is doubly more important as this is our first visit to this particular theater, therefore we do not know the caliber of the food there. Therefore, we need the time to do recon on movie snacks,” I finished as if Lexie didn’t already know this. Which she did.

There was a pause and I was sure I heard another weird sound that didn’t sound like it belonged, but I couldn’t be sure.

“I agree. New movie theaters do always require extensive research as to the best snack combinations, plus an evaluation of seating options. But I must insist we sacrifice some of this time to make sure we actually make it to the movie,” Lexie demanded, crossing her arms.

I frowned at her, not liking how sensible she was being. “It’s a Saturday—mechanics aren’t even open,” I shot back triumphantly.

Lexie looked defeated and I did an inward fist pump. My happiness was short-lived as we approached a mechanic-like structure that was surrounded by fencing but had an unmistakable *Open* sign outside.

“Hah! We have to go in. It’s like fate,” she declared with a snide grin.

“It’s hardly fate,” I argued, slowing down despite myself.

“It’s fate,” Lexie said firmly.

At this declaration, the car grumbled and jolted slightly.

I looked over at her in disbelief and I relented, pulling into the lot. “Are you a wizard?” I asked seriously.

“Of course not. Girls can’t be wizards,” she replied just as seriously.

I shook my head and chuckled slightly, focusing on maneuvering my way into the parking area of this garage. To my amazement and horror, I noticed a Sons of Templar flag flying above the bays of the garage doors and an emblem over the top of a structure off to the side.

Holy shit.

I didn’t have any choice; I had already pulled up close to the bays where cars were hoisted into the air and a couple of men in coveralls were staring at me. Plus, my car made a final death splutter and turned itself off. Fate was definitely getting her jollies today.

“Bitch,” I muttered under my breath.

I turned to my daughter, who was staring at the same flag in amazement. “Isn’t this the club that Zane’s in? Cool, he might be here. We can say hello,” she suggested brightly.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “This is a biker hangout, Lex, I doubt he’d want to shoot the breeze with us. It’d damage his street cred. He’d have to like, steal a cop car to make up for it. Do you really want to be responsible for Zane getting arrested?” I asked her solemnly. I said that instead of saying there was no way in Hell my sixteen-year-old was going anywhere near the hangout of a motorcycle gang.

“Mom,” she started in that distinct teenage voice that suggested all parents were idiots.

“Nope,” I interrupted her. “We are not going to sit here and debate this. Every second we waste chews into our movie snack selection time. I do not want to be rushed and make a bad snack choice,” I said firmly. “I’m going in. I’ll get someone to look at the car. You stay here while I do so,” I instructed in the best mom voice I could muster.

Lexie conceded with a sigh and yanked a book out of her bag. She opened it and curled up into the seat. I didn’t get much fight out of her; this was yet another prime example of how placid she was. It almost worried me sometimes. No teenager could be that compliant, that well-behaved. I almost wanted her to sneak a beer or go to a party, just to set my mind at ease.

I reluctantly got out of the car. I seriously didn’t want my daughter walking around a biker hangout; I wanted to only slightly less. But I needed my hot guy fix. And by the looks of it, I needed my car fixed in order for that to happen. What were the odds of seeing Zane here anyway? I doubted he would trouble himself fixing cars; he was most likely stealing nuclear launch codes or something.

“Can I help you, darlin’?” a man in coveralls asked me as I approached the garage.

I swallowed as I took him in. Maybe I didn’t need Dom after all; this guy rivaled even Vin Diesel on the hotness scale. He was Hispanic, tall and muscled. His shaven head accentuated his chiseled jaw and sharp cheekbones. A day’s stubble darkened that sharp jaw, while his tattoos peeking out from the collar of his shirt hinted at danger. In fact, it wasn’t his tattoos that spoke danger. It was *him*. I would have been slightly scared if it

wasn't for the easy smile he directed at me, and the soft look in his eyes. I knew what really dangerous men looked like when they smiled at you. What hid behind those smiles. This guy didn't have it. I smiled back at him.

"I hope so. My car just kind of died right here in your parking lot. If you could bring her back to life in time for me to catch a seriously good movie, I'd be eternally grateful," I told him with all seriousness, keeping my smile.

He grinned back and I didn't miss the way his green eyes swept up my body. I felt myself tingle. This guy was at least five years younger than me, and one muscle away from being a sex god. I couldn't help but feel flattered at the manly appreciation in his gaze.

"I'd be glad to help in any way I can, sweetheart, especially for eternal gratification," he flirted.

I was glad I took time on today's outfit. I was wearing tight, distressed jeans that hugged my legs in the perfect way. That was thanks to the fact they were years old and had practically been molded to my body. I also wore strappy wedges, which did wonders for my legs and my height, since I was only five foot six. My flouncy ruffled top had little flowers all over it and cinched in at my waist, showing a modest amount of cleavage. My makeup was natural and I had swept my blonde curls into a messy side braid. Not exactly biker chic, but I wouldn't be scaring children on the street.

"Thanks..." I glanced down at the nametag on his coveralls. "...Lucky," I added.

He tipped an imaginary hat. "My pleasure, darlin'. That it over there?" He pointed to my bright red VW beetle, which currently had a young hot guy lounging against it. I frowned. "Yes, it is," I muttered.

My mind quickly switched from "check out hot younger guy" to momma bear mode.

"Let's go check her out," Lucky said, wiping his hands on a rag and walking toward my car.

I momentarily moved my thoughts of maim and possibly murder. My eyes cut to the attractive Lucky sauntering over to my car.

"What?" I shot at him dangerously.

He looked over his shoulder at me. "Your car? I'll probably need to get a look at her if I can have any hope of fixing her in time for you to make it to your movie," he told me on a grin.

I exhaled slightly and caught up with him. “Well, anything that you can do to make sure I don’t miss the previews is an act which will make me look upon you as a godlike being for the rest of my life,” I told him seriously. I kept my eye on the dark-haired kid leaning onto the passenger side of my car, but focused on maintaining some form of conversation with Lucky. He probably already thought I was weird. On the plus side, I hadn’t seen Zane yet. Always a silver lining.

Lucky looked at me sideways, a hint of a smile tickling the edge of his attractive mouth. “The previews?” he questioned.

“Yeah, they’re like our favorite part. It’s integral to the entire movie-going experience. Watching a movie without the previews would be akin to not having cheese on a pizza. It simply isn’t done,” I informed him sagely.

Lucky didn’t have a hint of a grin anymore; he was flat out smiling, and giving me a look that made me wish I was about five years younger. Or more of a cougar. Maybe I could turn into a cougar.

My cougar thoughts were quickly shattered as we reached my car and the man-boy who had been chatting to my little girl straightened. I rectified my earlier man-boy thought; this was just a straight up *man*. Yes, he was most likely still a teenager, but there was no pimples or gangly legs to be seen. He was tall, taller than most fully grown men, with a shadow on his jaw which made him seem older. His jet black hair was messy and in need of a cut, but it just added to the bad boy vibe he had going. Wearing a leather vest, a black tee and black jeans, he screamed *mother’s worst nightmare*.

I narrowed my eyes at him. I’m not normally one to judge, but he was talking to my little girl. And a kid like that did not “just talk” to a kid as pretty as Lexie. He’d probably impregnate her by giving her a smoldering look, which I’m sure he had down pat.

“Shouldn’t you be polishing hub caps or sweeping out the garage, kid?” Lucky shot at the dangerously attractive youth whom I was feeling slightly murderous thoughts toward. I couldn’t help it. I was a protective momma bear.

He looked up lazily and didn’t seem to be worried at the hint of the warning in Lucky’s tone. Brave kid.

“Smoke break,” was all he said, holding up a nearly finished cigarette.

Well, that was it. Nail in his coffin. Subjecting my girl to not only his raging hormones, but secondhand smoke also? Nuh uh.

Lucky gave him a look, then focused on the passenger seat of my car, squinting. He shook his head knowingly, a shadow of a grin reappearing on his face.

“Well, since you’re here you can help me take a look at the lady’s car. See if we can get her off to her movie,” he declared, moving to the front of my car.

The “kid” didn’t say a word, merely threw his finished cigarette away and sauntered to join Lucky, who glanced at me.

“Pop the hood, would you, darlin’?”

I jerked out of my glare at the “kid” who was now also staring at me, and moved to the driver’s side. I opened the door and popped the hood. I then sat down and stared at my daughter, who was lounging in her seat with her book face down in her lap.

She caught my stare and raised her eyebrows at me innocently. “What?” she asked obliviously.

I raised my eyebrows right back. “Don’t *what* me. You know exactly what,” I told her.

She kept up the act. “No, I don’t, actually.”

“Don’t play dumb. The obscure Russian literature in your lap makes the act fall short,” I informed her flatly.

“Leo Tolstoy is hardly obscure,” she argued defensively. “He is considered to be one of the best novelists of all time.”

“That book is fifteen hundred pages,” I said by explanation.

“So?” she replied tersely.

“So that book could be used to sink a small boating vessel, or as a weapon to knock even the most hardheaded attacker unconscious,” I continued with seriousness.

“I’m using it for its intended purpose,” she replied smartly.

“I doubt its intended purpose is to be sitting in the lap of a teenage girl while a teenage boy puffs smoke in her face,” I shot back just as smartly.

She was robbed of her no doubt brilliant defense when I heard my name shouted from the proximity of the hood.

I pointed at my daughter. “This isn’t over.” I then hauled myself out of the car and directed myself to the front of my car, where I expected to see Lucky and the unnamed corrupter of my daughter’s virtue. To my horror, not only did I see them, but two other equally hot sex gods and Zane. I was momentarily stopped in my tracks at this sight, not because they were hot—

which they were—but because of the hateful glare Zane was directing at me. I hadn't even spoken a word to him. What was this dude's deal?

"Got good news and bad news for you, babe," Lucky told me, not looking up from the hood.

I regained my motor skills and walked a teeny bit closer to the hot guy huddle. Not too close though; with the look Zane was directing at me, I was worried laser beams might come out of his eyes and incinerate me.

I swallowed, trying to ignore it. "I do always like my dessert first," I addressed the bald head still bent in the depths of my car.

A manly chuckle erupted at this statement and I glanced to one of the hot guys who was smiling at me. I struggled not to melt on the spot. I recognized him from the café on the first morning of my job. He had dirty blond hair tied haphazardly into a delicious bun.

Lucky straightened, and I struggled to tear my eyes away from the rugged surfer to focus on news about my car.

"The good news is, we can get you to your movie, but not in this car," he told me, wiping his hands on a dirty rag. I didn't understand how that would clean them, but then again I wasn't a big badass biker mechanic. I was not party to their ways.

"I don't follow," I told him, confused. Confused because male gods had gone in with their attractiveness and muddled up all my thoughts.

"Well, to fix your car it's going to take a touch longer than half an hour. We have to order in the parts, and we have to wait till Monday to do that," he explained.

My face drained. "Fiddlesticks," I muttered under my breath. Of course my day could not just be filled with eating my body weight in movie snacks and perving at outlaw men who drove hot cars. No. It had to deal with man boys who chatted up my daughter, fielding death stares from a hot biker, and having car trouble. I focused to see that all of the men, except Zane of course, were openly grinning at me. Even the dark-haired one, who had also been at the café and didn't look like his manly face grinned much.

"Zane!" An excited voice turned the attention away from me, which I was thankful for. I didn't think a woman could handle that many hot guys staring at her at the same time. Something could happen. Spontaneous combustion, hormone overdose. Something dangerous, anyway. Unfortunately, the excited voice was that of my daughter, someone I definitely didn't want four and a half hot men staring at.

But staring at her they were.

She rounded the car with a grin on her face, oblivious to all of the other attention on her as she approached the biker.

“I so thought you might be here. This is your club, right?” She didn’t give him the time to answer and just kept on talking. “I told Mom that we should come in and say hello,” her eyes cut to me, “but she didn’t want to disturb you. Totally sucks about the car, but at least you’re here and we can thank you again for the other day.” Her blue eyes brightened. “You should come to the movies with us and we can treat you, as a thank you. Don’t worry, we don’t see girly stuff. We love action movies—the more unbelievable, unrealistic explosions and car chases, the better,” she quickly reassured him.

I swallowed a snort. I didn’t think there were enough explosions and car chases in the world to get a man like Zane into a movie theatre to watch one. He was more likely to participate in them in real life than watch them play out on the big screen.

Zane regarded Lexie with a completely different look than the glower I had been treated to just seconds ago. I didn’t think his granite face had the ability to produce a tender look, but his eyes softened slightly.

“Movies aren’t really my scene, Lex,” he told her, his voice gravelly.

My eyes moved to the men, who had lost their easygoing grins and were watching Zane and Lexie in something akin to amazement.

Lucky’s mouth was actually agape. He recovered quickly. “Mom?” he declared weirdly, then looked between Lexie and me. “No fuckin’ way. That’s your daughter?” he asked in amazement.

“That’s what they told me at the hospital,” I replied, moving my eyes from Zane.

“You’re shittin’ me! There’s no way you’re old enough to have a kid,” he told me.

I smiled. “Tell that to the doctors who cut her out of me sixteen years ago,” I retorted without thinking. “I’d like to think I didn’t undergo major surgery for nothing.”

There was a slight chorus of male laughter at this which I was glad of, considering the weird moment that had happened moments before. Plus, my joke had come out on reflex and I didn’t know how staunch and hot bikers would take it. I was pleasantly surprised that I made them laugh. I would have had to have crawled into a hole and died if I heard crickets.

“To formally introduce you, this is the fruit of my loins, otherwise known as Lexie,” I said to the group at large.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t exactly do introductions, considering I didn’t know the names of the sex gods standing in front of me, and I was sure she was already acquainted with the youngest of the crew who was intently staring at her.

She grinned brightly and did a little wave. “Hey,” she addressed the group, not at all shyly. I was slightly envious of my teenage daughter for a multitude of reasons; her wrinkle-free skin and general youthfulness usually some of the top contenders, but right now it was her unwavering confidence. I feared I acted like a fumbling dork.

There were chin lifts all around and the two hotties directed their gazes at me. The dark one spoke first.

“I’m Cade,” he spoke roughly, but his expression was welcoming, which seemed to juxtapose the entire environment we were in.

The blond one jumped in. “And I’m Brock, pleased to meet you both.” He gave Zane a playful grin. “You seem to already know *Zane*.” He emphasized the name for some reason and Zane stiffened.

“Yeah, Zane totally saved our skin the other day when we got a flat. Mom can’t change one,” Lexie said happily.

My mouth dropped open. She did not just tell a bevy of hot guys I was unable to change a tire. They would think I was a fumbling idiot. And certainly not a strong, independent, single woman who did not need a man.

“I can change one,” I said to her tightly.

She kept her smile. “Uh no, Mom, hence your suggestion on calling AAA when we saw it,” she informed me and the group at large. The little witch.

I narrowed my eyes. “I had yet to consume an ounce of caffeine that morning, *doll*,” I said with a tight smile. “I barely had control over fine motor skills, let alone change a tire. I’m sure if the occasion arose again and I was properly caffeinated I could change a tire, no problem.”

Lexie gave me a look. “I’m so sure,” she said smartly.

“Mullet photo,” I threatened out of the corner of my mouth before turning back to the group, who were all regarding us in varying states of amusement. Apart from Zane, of course. I doubt meeting Will Ferrell in person would make this dude crack a smile. “So I’m just going to circle back to the good news portion of this announcement,” I said, directing my

attention at Lucky, deciding to ignore Zane altogether. “You mentioned that we could still manage to catch our movie, despite the dire diagnosis of Betty,” I said.

“Betty?” Brock chimed in with a grin before Lucky could answer.

Didn’t these guys have mechanic type jobs to do? Or could they spread their manly hotness somewhere else?

“Betty’s our car,” Lexie decided to answer for me. The mullet warning obviously didn’t guarantee silence.

Brock’s face turned blank. “You named your car?” he asked in an even tone that suggested he was trying to disguise laughter. I failed to be embarrassed.

“I didn’t name her, Lexie did,” I explained. “She was ten and decided that a car such as this required a name.”

“I didn’t technically name her,” Lexie disagreed, leaning against Betty. “I merely broached the concept of the naming of the car. You were the one who christened her Betty.” she glanced at me.

“Only because all of the names you came up with were utterly ridiculous and didn’t suit the car’s personality,” I shot back.

Brock failed to hide his choked laugh. “A car has personality?” he repeated disbelievingly.

I thrust my hand out towards her. “This particular car does. Some obviously do not. Like a Toyota Corolla or a Volvo, any make. A cherry red VW Beetle on the other hand...” I trailed off, my car really speaking for itself.

I ignored the teeniest twinge of embarrassment that was blossoming inside me at discussing the naming process of our car with four (and a half) sexy, bad ass bikers. “Okay we’re getting way off topic, again.” I glared at my daughter. “The previews are lost to us at this rate, so we need to get back on track.”

Cade shook his head. “I’m guessing there’s no such thing as staying on track in a conversation with you two,” he declared, his deep voice sending tingles down my spine. The wedding ring on his hulking hand made me immensely jealous of a faceless woman.

The rest of the men smiled—apart from Zane, obviously—and thankfully Lucky continued on.

“We’ve got a loaner car that we give customers that need transportation when their cars are getting fixed. Problem is, we have to gas her up first,”

he said and my thoughts dampened at the time this would take. Lucky must have seen this on my face because he gave me a panty-melting grin.

“The bright side is, I’m done for the day and I’d be happy to give you a ride and accompany you to the movie, unlike my brother here.” He jerked his head at Zane, who stiffened, “I thoroughly enjoy any cinematic experience.”

I failed to garner any sense of irritation at the fact this guy was essentially inviting himself to the movies with Lexie and I. This may be because he was kindly offering us a ride. It also may be because he was fixing Betty and giving us something to drive in the meantime. But it was most probably because he was hot. Now, I held no illusions; there was no way I was going to turn cougar, but I was still a red-blooded woman. Still, it wasn’t exactly setting a good example for my daughter to accept rides and movie invitations from random—no matter how friendly—hot, biker strangers. I seem to remember one of my main—there were only a few—rules being: don’t get into cars with strangers. Unoriginal yet relevant.

“Thanks....” I opened my mouth but I didn’t know how I was going to politely decline when I was interrupted.

“I’m taking them,” a tight voice declared, the anger in the tone cutting through the easy atmosphere.

All eyes, including mine, cut to Zane who was no longer glaring at me—yippee! — but at Lucky.

“I don’t mind....” Lucky started but Zane cut him off yet again.

“I’m taking them,” he said slowly, with a hint of warning in his voice.

Lucky grinned, right in the face of the laser beam death stare. “Okay, brother,” he said knowingly and winked at me. “Get Bull to drop you here after the movie. Your loaner will be all gassed up and ready to roll,” he said easily, as if he had not just almost been pummeled by a raging bull. Pun intended.

I smiled back at him weakly. “Thanks, Lucky.”

The others, namely Brock and Cade, were not grinning but staring between Zane and I with blank faces. I didn’t know what to make of them.

Cade threw some keys that Zane caught in his fist. “Take my cage, bro, I don’t need it,” he told him, his voice not as easy as before and he inspected me with a slightly furrowed brow.

Zane didn’t reply, merely nodded tightly. His gaze moved to me. “You wanna make your movie, get your shit,” he said roughly.

I jolted, shocked at the fact he was addressing me directly and more than a little pissed off he was swearing at me. In front of my daughter, no less. I wasn't against swearing. Back in the day I swore like a sailor. Partly because parents who didn't censor themselves surrounded me. Also because I was a confused, angry teenager who did a lot of crap, and swearing came part and parcel with said crap.

But when I had Lexie I vowed I would be nothing like my parents. I would not do things like lock her in the bedroom when I had drug dealer friends over, I would not forget to feed her for a day, and I would not swear in front of her. Hence my slightly eccentric words I used in lieu of curse words.

At this moment, I couldn't really voice my distaste for the words he was using or the manner in which he was addressing me, especially since Lexie's face had lit up when he uttered them. I pursed my lips and nodded, going to the car to get my bag. Lexie did the same, except she practically skipped to the car.

"How cool is this?" she asked me across the front seat, gathering her stuff, including her brick of a book. "Zane's actually coming with us!"

"I doubt he's coming with us to the actual movie, Dollybird. More like he's dropping us off outside. We'll be lucky if he even stops the car," I told her seriously, muttering the last bit of my sentence.

She gave me a perplexed look and shook her head. "He's totally coming with us. Now hurry up. You're going to be the reason we get lumped with unsatisfying snacks," she ordered.



So that's how I found myself in a SUV with Zane and my daughter on the way to the movies. Not a scenario I had ever imagined myself in. It was even worse when I tried to get into the back seat, farther away from getting incinerated from the death stare. Lexie had insisted I sit in the front seat. Zane's jaw had hardened exponentially when I had jostled in, and his face kept straight ahead as he maneuvered out of the lot. I had waved at the men,

who gave me chin lifts and head shakes. I didn't get the head shakes, and didn't exactly have time to ask.

Luckily, bless her heart, Lexie hadn't clocked the downright hostile atmosphere that emanated from Zane and had chattered the entirety of the journey from the garage to the movie theatre. For his part, he answered all of Lexie's questions, limited his profanities and was actually polite in his ultra badass, *I kill puppies in my spare time* kind of way. He didn't spare a glance at me, and when Lexie tried to involve me in the conversation, I barely squeaked an answer. I'm not a squeaker. I had my time when a man battered me down to a shell of myself and I would shrink into a corner. But I recovered. Fought back. Found myself.

I'm loud. Opinionated. And quite funny, if I did say so myself. But for this car ride I retreated back into that little shell. It didn't help that I was also immensely attracted to the person who was radiating hostility. I breathed a sigh of relief when we pulled up at the theatre. It must have been audible because Zane gave me a hard, sideways glance.

I ignored it and clutched the door handle, restraining the urge to throw myself out of the vehicle.

"Thanks for the--" I started to say, but Lexie jumped in.

"You have to come in now, Zane, we're right outside. It would be a crime for you to miss cinematic gold when you're so close," she stated firmly.

Zane didn't turn, but he caught her eyes in the rearview mirror. "Told you, I don't do movies. Sorry, kid." His rough and oh so sexy voice didn't sound very sorry to me.

Lexie widened her eyes into a look I was all too familiar with. It was the wounded puppy look that had gotten her out of multiple situations and gotten her into specific ones. Like ones at movie theaters such as this, where after such a look I found myself sitting in documentaries about global warming.

"Okay, but if you leave us here, we'll have to walk all the way home and the shoes Mom is wearing are not conducive with walking long distances." She shrugged. "I'm sure she'll be fine, though—what's a few blisters?" She feigned nonchalance.

I gave my daughter a silent round of applause for tapping into what I guessed was the only chink in this guy's muscled and impregnable armor.

Helpless women. Not that I was helpless. In these shoes, after walking more than half a mile, maybe.

There was a pause. Zane's jaw got very hard, then his body relaxed slightly. "Jesus fuckin' Christ," he muttered, unbuckling his seatbelt.

"Right on," Lexie exclaimed. "I promise you'll enjoy this."

She jumped out of her seat and out the door so quickly she didn't hear him mutter, "Not fuckin' likely."

I gathered this statement was not due to my enthusiastic and funny daughter, whom I was pretty sure it was impossible to dislike, but because of me. I was surprised to feel more than a little stab at this. I didn't get time to ponder it, as I quickly realized it was just me and Zane in the truck and the air had turned charged. I took a deep breath and turned to face him, inwardly flinching at the red hot glare I encountered.

"You don't have to come in, really. We can catch a cab home, it's no problem. I really appreciate the ride. We're good now. Thanks," I finished lamely.

Zane stared at me, and the glare turned into something else. Something different. Something carnal. Something dangerous. "You want to make it into that movie theatre, babe, you'll get out of the truck. Right. Fucking. Now!" he growled, his voice rough and gravelly.

I stared at him for a split second before ungracefully scrambling out of the truck, my wits and my hormones scattered.

I expected the SUV to skid off in a cloud of smoke, but to my utter and complete amazement Zane stalked out of it and rounded the hood. He didn't even glance at me. I continued to stare as he strode towards a grinning Lexie, his mouth a hard line. I frantically tried to understand what the fucking hell—I think that moment needed an f word—just happened. My brain couldn't catch up. But my ovaries were standing to attention.

"Mom! You actually have to go into the theater in order to see the movie and consume the delicious, delicious snacks," Lexie called to me, jolting me out of my haze.

I turned to see her and Zane waiting at the entrance, her with a smile, him with a look that made me feel like I had just run over his dog. And insulted his mother. And was responsible for world hunger.

Despite this, I hurried to join him and Lexie, ignoring the pulse between my legs.

“Okay, we’ll have three large popcorns, one bag of M&Ms and some Reese’s Pieces, please,” I said to the guy at the snack counter.

By some miracle, we had time for not only the previews but for snacks also.

“You’re not getting Milk Duds?” Lexie asked from beside me.

I looked at her. “Well, I thought Reese’s were a better choice,” I explained.

“Yes, but Reese’s are hugely similar to M&Ms and I’m not suggesting we rule out either of those—I’m simply saying we need more variety, and we need variety in the form of Milk Duds,” she reasoned.

I nodded. “Duly noted.” I turned to the kid at the counter, who was standing patiently—I think—waiting for us to decide. “Add Milk Duds onto that,” I requested.

“And two diet Cokes,” she added quickly.

I slapped my forehead and turned to her in mock seriousness. “How could I forget the liquid, which of course needs to be diet to balance out all of the calories in our snacks?” I asked.

She patted my shoulder affectionately. “I got your back, Mom.” She turned to Zane, “What do you want to drink, Zane?”

He was staring at us with a strange look on his face. It wasn’t the glower he reserved for me, nor was it the slightly softer version of mad murderer that Lexie was treated to. This was different. The edge of his mouth turned up slightly, and if I didn’t know better I would have thought he was...amused?

“I’m good, Lex,” he answered finally.

I also liked, despite myself, how he called my daughter “Lex.” It was familiar and seemed like his way of expressing affection. I didn’t know why I should like the big, bad, biker from next door to be calling my daughter by affectionate nicknames but I did. I also liked the fact I was standing at the snack counter with the big, bad, and friggin’ hot biker from next door. I chose to forget the fact we were practically holding him hostage and manipulating him with Lexie’s puppy dog stare.

She widened her eyes at him. “You have to have a soda when watching a movie. It’s like a rule. Soda and crazy amounts of sugary snacks. It’s all part of the experience,” she told him, like going to the movies was tantamount to climbing Mt Everest.

The side of his mouth ticked up again, and this time I was sure. It was amusement. Amusement, people! The staunch, hugely scary, muscled biker had a sense of humor, deep down underneath all that muscle and menace.

“Don’t drink soda, kid.”

Lexie’s mouth dropped open at this. “I don’t usually drink soda either. With the exception of when I’m at the movies, having a movie night, or at a ballgame. It’s not good for you, but you’ve got to indulge every now and then. It’s good for the soul,” she informed him sagely, as if she was the Yoda of the soda consumption world.

“Dollybird, he doesn’t want soda. Let him be,” I told her, scared the soda pressure might make him explode right here at the snack stand.

She shrugged. “Okay, just get him a bottle of water,” she ordered. I gave her a look. “What? He’ll get thirsty from the popcorn,” she reasoned.

The kid plonked our feast down in front us. I turned back to him. “One more request and I promise, you’ll never have to see us again.” I thought on that. “So you’ll probably be seeing us next week, considering the new Bond movie comes out then.” I paused and thought again. “Actually, we’re pretty regular moviegoers, so you will actually see us again. Probably quite regularly. Just not for a week, at least.” I smiled at him apologetically as he went to get the water.

“And we’ll have the snack situation down pat after a couple of visits,” Lexie added brightly when he returned.

My smile was shocked right off me to see Zane had stepped up, like right in my space. His amused mouth twitch was gone but the furious glare had yet to reappear. He was staring at me with a hard jaw and blank expression. Apart from his eyes; they were blazing, but with what I couldn’t place. And unfortunately, I didn’t have to stare into them for a moment longer, thanks to my new friend the movie theater snack guy.

“That’ll be thirty-eight fifty,” he declared in a bored sounding tone. His eyes didn’t seem so bored as they took in Lexie leaning against the counter, gathering a popcorn and packets of candy bars in her hands.

Her hair was piled atop her head and she was clad in her usual boho chic. She was wearing a chunky sweater that dropped off one shoulder and was cropped. It met with a chiffon floral skirt, which had delicate floral designs and flowed down to her ankles. Slouchy, heeled, tan ankle boots completed the look. She wasn’t your traditional teenage “hot girl,” which was why I had enjoyed the fact that teenage boys were idiots and chased after her

scantly clad counterparts. But as she was growing older and blossoming into an impossibly beautiful young woman, I had caught the looks she got. Not just from teenage boys either. Every time a man or boy cast their eyes over her, I wanted to shout at them *she's just a baby*, and then I got the strong urge to learn how to shoot a gun.

I jumped slightly, as did Lexie when Zane banged cash down on the counter with a force that made me surprised it didn't crack. I even peeked to make sure. Once I was satisfied he didn't damage the fixture, I glanced back up at him.

"Zane, this was our treat, as a thank you. You can't pay. It makes the 'thank you' gesture obsolete," I informed him quietly.

"I'm payin,'" he grunted, not looking at me. His glare was back. And I wasn't on the receiving end. Praise the Lord. The very scared looking snack food attendant was on the receiving end. His eyes were no longer roving my daughter. They were now widely regarding the scary biker in front of him. One who I was loath to argue with.

"Okey dokie," I chimed nervously.

He didn't look at me. "You and Lex grab us some seats. I'll get this shit," he declared, nodding down at the considerable array of things Lexie hadn't grabbed.

"We can help," I told him.

He turned his head to me and his gaze set me on fire. "Go and get us some seats, babe," he ordered.

I swallowed, finding it hard to ignore the womb flutter I got from him calling me "babe" for the second time.

I pointed with my thumbs. "I'll just go and get us some seats." I snatched the tickets and grabbed Lexie's hand. "Come on, Lexie."

As I was dragging Lexie away, we both looked over our shoulders to see Zane having a very intense looking conversation with the snack kid, one who looked like he was about to pee his pants and was nodding furiously.

"What do you think that's about?" Lexie asked curiously.

I smiled lightly, and was happy in that moment about the little glimmer of naïveté Lexie had left. "Probably just telling him off for not putting enough butter on the popcorn," I lied. A warm glow settled in my stomach. I knew exactly what he was doing. Protecting my girl's honor.



I didn't know how Zane was going to find us in the dark theater and carry an amount of snacks that could have fed a basketball team, but I needn't have worried. Apparently, biker bad asses could defy the laws of snack carrying and see in the dark, as he approached the aisle we were sitting in with no apparent trouble. After a huge argument between me and my lovely spawn, Lexie had won and deduced Zane would be sitting in the middle because he had all the snacks, and "it only made sense." She couldn't seem to understand why I was making such a big deal out of it. I couldn't exactly tell her the big rough biker hated me for some unknown reason, while he turned me on beyond any point of coherent thought. So I lost the argument.

"We've decided you're in the middle since you've got the snacks and this makes the best logistical sense," she informed Zane on his arrival, standing.

Zane didn't say a word, and since it was dark I couldn't see his face clearly. I could however, feel the heat of his stare.

He passed me my drink as he sat down. I restrained a gasp when my fingers brushed his and I felt a jolt at our connection. It felt like a mild electric shock went straight to my downstairs. I didn't even know that happened in real life. I could see Zane's entire form stiffen at the contact, so maybe he felt it too. Or maybe he was just repulsed by my touch. Which, by considering how much he seemed to despise me, wasn't a stretch.

"Zane, since you're not partaking in the soda portion of the experience, I must insist you indulge heavily in the snacks," Lexie demanded, opening up the various candy packets. "Now, through a vast amount of trial and error, Mom and I have concocted a perfect chocolate to popcorn ratio," she explained, expertly pouring the various candies into the popcorn. "The combination of sweet chocolate of various textures and the saltiness of the popcorn...perfection."

I imagined her touching her fingers to her lips like an Italian does after a good meal, since she made the accompanying sound. I didn't disagree though; our movie snacks were the shit.

Luckily, the dimming of the lights and the glowing of the screen silenced any further conversation. I expected to finally relax. The darkness of the theater masked any filthy looks directed my way and the need for silence hampered me from saying anything stupid. But as soon as those mother effing lights dimmed, something happened. The air turned charged with so much sexual tension I doubted you could cut it with a chainsaw. I clutched my drink so tightly I worried for a second it might explode everywhere. I tried to move in my seat, but that only seemed to make me more aware of Zane beside me. I could even smell the manly mix of tobacco and his own musky scent. I tried to hold my breath. Not because he smelled bad, but because he smelled so *good*. I then realized I couldn't hold my breath for two hours, so I let it all out on a loud exhale.

For once in my life, I wished, no prayed, Toretto and his crew would get their mission done and dusted in a jiffy, no funny business.



He was having a bad day. Not that any of his days in the past four years could ever have been classified as *good*. In fact, most could be described as fuckin' horrific. Like the days he planned his own death. The days he tried to force himself to work up the courage to eat a bullet. Then the days after that, when his best friend made it his mission to make sure he never had that particular meal. So this day couldn't be classed as the worst, but it was pretty fucking bad. All because of the blonde bitch living across the street from him. The one who haunted his fucking dreams. The one who made his cock get half hard just thinking about her. Listening to her chattering away to her daughter about stupid shit while he changed her tire made him calm. Made his mind silent. His mind was never fuckin' silent. But there it was, listening to them argue about some fucking actor and stupid fucking movies, it was like they were gone. The demons. Until they weren't. That was dangerous. Blonde hair, amazing fuckin' tits, beautiful fuckin' eyes.

Made him forget. He wanted her. But she was good. Innocent. Had a kid. Kid was fuckin' good. Even more, innocent. Nice. Not even afraid of him. Friendly, acted like she thought he was worth talking to. He didn't even know why he did it. Gave them his name. The name only a handful of living people knew. The name only one person had called him. The person who was the light of his life until he got her extinguished. He didn't do good around good people. Nice people. Innocents. Which was why he didn't talk to them. Didn't talk to anyone, really. But that day, and every day after it, his mind was on her. Mia. Which distracted him. Thinking 'bout her. Her tits. Tight little ass. Rosebud mouth that her teeth chewed when she was nervous. Which was when she was around him. He knew it. But she was still funny. Still spoke to him, gazed at him with those ocean blue eyes he couldn't get out of his fuckin' head. Therefore, his head was full of shit it shouldn't be full of.

So his day was fucking bad. Hence why he was sitting in the clubhouse bar, pouring his first whisky and it was barely noon. As he had been for the past week.

"Jesus fucking Christ, would you look at that," Gage, one of his brothers whistled. His head was near pressed to the window, which gave a view of the forecourt. "Sweet as fuck piece just walked in," he paused. "Fuck, Lucky's already pounced, the slimy fuck." He seemed genuinely sad.

Bull inwardly shook his head. Gage was a loose cannon. Days like today he was lighthearted, all about pussy and joking. Then other days, when the occasion called for it, the fucker turned. Something he'd never witnessed. Everything left his eyes; he became cold, ruthless. The joker was gone. A killer remained. He had some serious fuckin' issues. Issues that Bull thought stemmed from the mangled scars that hid underneath his tattooed arms.

Cade and Brock were lounging on the sofa, uncharacteristically without their women. This was because they had church early this morning. Again, unusual. But shit was going down.

"Jesus," Brock muttered on a grin. "The last thing we need is that fucker adding another bitch to his collection. He's juggling too many as it is. Reckon they're gonna find out, then one bitch'll go crazy and shoot the fucker if he's not careful."

Gage kept watching the window. "Doesn't look like she's here for him. Got car trouble by the looks of it." He shook his head. "Hot as fuck piece,

drives a ridiculous girly car like a fuckin' Beetle." He said like this was a crime to humanity.

Bull's head snapped up at this. He knew of only one hot piece driving a Beetle. There was no fucking way he wanted Lucky flirting with her. In a flash, he had slammed his drink down on the bar and headed toward the forecourt. He hadn't even realized Brock and Cade were in stride with him until he reached the car with Lucky inspecting under the hood. He gave them scowls but then was silent.

When he saw her it happened again. His demons fucking silenced. He immediately hated her for it. For making him feel shit he didn't fucking understand. For making him want to beat his brother with a socket wrench for smiling at her and calling her darlin.' And for making him somehow agree to go to the movies with her and the fuckin' kid just so Lucky didn't get his ass within a foot of her.



It was torture. Bull had done torture. Both physical and mental. Gotten the shit beaten out of him, made to bleed. He'd damned near laughed in the faces of the pussies that did it. Then there was the mental. The torture that he went through daily. That haunted him both awake and asleep. Took him years, years of constant suffering to be able to control it. She took away that control. Sitting next to Mia, smelling her hair, feeling her fucking squirm in her seat, almost broke through every ounce of control he had. He wanted to lunge on her, taste her mouth, her pussy. Every inch of her. Her daughter was sitting right next to her, for fuck's sakes. That was the only thing that stopped him.

The kid somehow was breaking through every wall he'd erected to keep him sane. Kept the outside world out. Kept the demons in. Her easy smile, her unguarded chatter. The way she looked at him like he was *someone*. He felt protective of her. Fuck, he fuckin' *liked* the kid. So when he saw the pimply fuck ogling her he barely stopped himself from grabbing him by the collar and shoving him headfirst into the popcorn machine. He didn't. He merely suggested the next time he served Lexie, he keep his eyes on his

fuckin' snacks and nothing else or he'd come to his house and chop his dick off. Too far? Maybe. But like he said...no fucking control.

So that's why he had to steer clear. Way fucking clear. Out of the goddamned state clear. He needed to make sure he didn't encounter either of those bitches again. Which was hard when he lived across the fucking street. But he'd do it. For his sanity. For their safety. There wasn't any way he'd get close to anyone again. He didn't need more innocent blood on his hands.



When he dropped them off at the club after two hours of torture, he decided it was the last time he would ever see them

“See you later, Zane,” Lexie chirped with a bright grin. “You totally liked it, I can tell. So you’ll come next time as well?”

For some reason he didn't want to disappoint the kid. “Maybe, Lex,” he lied.

She beamed even brighter if that was possible. “Saawweet, catch you later,” she called, jumping out of the truck.

“Bye, kid,” he muttered.

He struggled to turn his gaze to Mia, who was dangling half out of the truck, an uncertain look on her beautiful face.

Fuck. She was so fuckin' beautiful he could hardly think straight. Not only that, she was funny. With her daughter, they had an easy relationship, happy. She was a good mom.

“Seriously, thanks,” she said in a small voice. “For paying, and for actually coming. Lexie's very particular about who comes to the movies with us, so you should feel blessed for a second invitation. They are as prestigious as invites to royal weddings,” she joked.

Bull wanted to laugh, to smile. He was focusing on not doing that. Had to. He couldn't let his guard down around her. Not for a moment. That's why he was silent.

Her grin turned shaky. “Anyway,” she continued, eyes darting around the cab, looking anywhere but him. “See you round,” she finished quickly, and

gave him the quickest glimpse of her eyes before she was gone.

Bull actually breathed a sigh of relief when her presence left. He needed to get this shit sorted. He couldn't have a female fucking with him. Not again. He knew how that shit ended. He couldn't think of *her* either. Not without going full dark side. So he had to make sure Mia and Lexie Spencer never entered his life again. How the fuck he was going to make sure of that when he lived across the street from them he had no clue.



CHAPTER FOUR



Mia

“I’m pretty sure I’m going to explode,” Lexie declared, plonking herself down on our sofa.

I sank into the armchair across from her, sprawling my arms and legs out. “Me too,” I agreed. Although I was referring to my libido, which had undergone a serious freaking challenge in the past two hours. Plus, I was grossly full considering I shoveled food into my mouth at twice my normal rate in order to distract myself.

“That was fun, though, I’m glad Zane came. He’s a cool guy,” she said simply, laying her head back.

I gave her a look. “Yeah, he’s real cool. And a chatterbox. God, he hardly shut up the entire time,” I said sarcastically.

She lifted her head. “Okay, so he isn’t the most articulate man on the planet. I find it refreshing. I like him,” she informed me.

“Yes, well, you also seemed to like someone a lot more articulate earlier today.” I decided to change the subject, not only to get my mind off the seriously sexy Zane, but to get the deets on the little troublemaker from the garage.

“What are you talking about?” Lexie asked.

“The kid from today, who was channeling Danny Zuko?” I said casually. I didn’t want to make it a big deal, nor give her an inkling I really didn’t approve of her canoodling with such a character. No matter how well-

behaved my teenager was, a parent's disapproval was the biggest motivator in any situation.

Lexie eyed me. "Oh, that's Killian. We were talking about Tolstoy. He's one of those crazy people that actually *reads*," she said sarcastically.

I ignored the not so subtle stab at my intelligence. "Killian?" I repeated. Oh God, not only did he have a bad ass name and the bad ass physique to go with it, he also liked books? Shit.

She nodded, idly flipping channels on the TV. "Yeah, unusual name. I asked him about it, his family's Irish," she said distractedly.

Irish? This situation had escalated from and *oh shit* to an *oh fuck* moment. It seemed both of the Spencer girls were tied up with men who were not healthy for us. At least Lexie looked like she had a chance with hers. Mine was likely going to make a voodoo doll out of my likeness.



"Mom, I don't get what the big deal is. Go over there, drop off the cake, say thank you and leave," Lexie called to me while I was leaning against the door of her room.

"Why can't you do it?" I whined, "You're the one who baked the cake in question, I feel like it's appropriate that you deliver it."

Lexie emerged from her room, slinging a fringed bag over her shoulder. "Because I am meeting some classmates for my English project," she explained, stuffing a dangerously boring looking textbook into the already overflowing bag. "And," she added, looking up at me, "because you are the adult in this situation, so I think it is only appropriate you deliver the cake and the thank you."

I scowled at her and followed as she walked towards the door. "You don't need to do an English project. You speak the language well enough," I said to her back. She didn't reply, nor did she stop walking toward the door. "Since I'm the adult I think I should come with you—you know, to chaperone and help with the project," I told her desperately.

She stopped walking and gave me a look. "You'll help with a project about Shakespeare and his most influential works?"

I nodded.

“What do you know about Shakespeare?” she asked me with a sly grin.

“I know the dude hated happy endings and that Leo was a great choice for Romeo,” I replied confidently.

Lexie rolled her eyes. “I’ll see you later, Mom. Deliver the cake,” she ordered before she disappeared out the door.

Shit.

It was Wednesday afternoon, and uncharacteristically I was home early. Way early. I still had work to do, but I could do it from the comfort of my couch while wearing sweats and stuffing my face with candy. I had initially been happy about this turn of events. Until I came home to find Lexie icing a cake that she declared was for Zane as a “thank you.” I had been further dismayed when Lexie had announced I would have to deliver the cake, since she had to meet her stupid friends about a stupid Shakespeare project.

I stared at the offending cake. It looked innocent. Delicious, actually. All chocolaty and decadent. I think Lexie might have actually used real sugar. I debated eating the entire thing then telling Lexie I had delivered it. I quickly squashed that idea. Not because I doubted my ability to polish off an entire cake, but because Lexie would probably run into Zane at some point, ask him about the cake, and I would be discovered.

The only option was to deliver the thing. I just hoped my mental shield was strong enough to withstand the death glare I was most likely to get.



It was safe to say my hands were shaking as I walked up the cobbled path that led to Zane’s front door. This did not bode well for the cake I was carrying in those shaking hands. Although, if I dropped the cake then I would have a sufficient excuse as to why it wasn’t delivered. But then I would still face the explanation as to why there was a smooshed chocolate cake on Zane’s front walk. To be fair, even a smooshed chocolate cake would add some personality to the blank and boring exterior of the house. The lawns were mowed, the paint fresh and not chipped. But there was not an inch of personality in this place. I got that a biker wouldn’t be crap hot

on landscaping, but even a muffler lawn sculpture would jazz the place up a bit.

I knocked quietly on his door, hoping, no, praying he wouldn't be home so I could leave this on his front step and run. My chances were actually pretty good on that score, considering we hadn't seen hide nor hair of the handsome biker since Sunday. I deflated a little on that thought. My mind was already mentally back at home, thinking of how much work I could get away with doing before commencing a *Criminal Minds* marathon.

I was preparing myself to place the cake on the ground when the door opened suddenly. I jumped a little, jostling the cake as I locked in on dark brown eyes. He stiffened in surprise as he registered who I was. His eyes seemed to turn black with fury.

Zane wasn't wearing his cut for once. Actually, he wasn't wearing a shirt at all. His huge expanse of chest seemed to take up the entire doorway and my eyes feasted on it. He was buff. Beyond buff. I didn't think a word had been created yet for the amount of muscles on him. That wasn't what transfixed me though—okay, it was for a second. It was the fact that every inch of his chest seemed to be covered in ink. Not black and dark, but vibrant, colorful artwork. I yearned to inspect every square inch, but I realized standing and drooling at someone's chest after knocking on their front door was hardly good manners. Looking back up at his black eyes, I realized how long I had gone without speaking. His expression was hard with fury and he seemed to be holding himself back from saying something.

"Um, hi," I greeted nervously, my eyes darting around. "I just came over to deliver this," I lifted the plate in my hands but his eyes didn't move to it; his glare was locked on mine. I foraged on. "Lexie made it. As a thank you for the tire, and the movies." I spoke quickly. The sooner this was done the sooner I could run away and drown my sorrows in a bottle of Pinot and a box of Oreos. "It's cake," I explained quickly, filling the loaded silence. "I made Lexie swear it doesn't contain beetroot, coconut flour or any other weird substance she consumes on a regular basis," I joked.

Zane's face stayed hard. I gulped.

"Although she did make a beetroot chocolate cake once, and it wasn't half bad. But the whole point of eating chocolate cake is to indulge, so putting beetroot in it kind of defeats the purpose—beetroot is hardly decadent. It's healthy. You don't eat cake to be healthy, you eat it to be naughty," I babbled.

More silence. And the withering glare. If I wasn't mistaken something changed in that glare; I swear if I didn't know better, it was desire. But I did know better and this dude definitely hated me, so I had to blow this popsicle stand. He had given me enough eye candy to take back to my vibrator, sans the glare.

"Well, anyway, I don't want to keep you from—" I glanced down at his chest again. Bad move. I snapped my head back up. "Whatever it is you're doing. I am just here under Lexie's orders to deliver the cake."

I thrust the plate up at him, using it as a sort of glare shield, letting out a breath of relief that I had finished my clumsy and embarrassing explanation. Apparently the embarrassment portion of this exchange was yet to be concluded. Zane did not take the plate; his fists stayed clenched at his sides and his eyes burned into mine. We simmered in the heated silence, me still extending the cake.

"Um, I know you might not like me, for whatever reason but my kid seems to be mighty fond of you. Because of this, if I don't deliver this cake I'll face her wrath, which I'm sure you don't give two shards about. But it will also hurt her feelings, and I'd do anything to avoid that happening, so I'm afraid I can't leave this spot until you take the cake," I declared, pointing with my finger at the ground on which I stood. "So unless you want me to take up residence on your doorstep..." I continued, only to be cut off by Zane snatching the cake out of my hands.

I relaxed. Finally.

"Thanks. Now I'll leave you alone and never darken your door again," I promised, not eager to repeat this experience again, no matter how nice the view was.

I was turning to leave when he snatched my wrist and yanked my body to his, dropping the cake to the ground. I barely noticed it clatter but not smash.

"What...?"

I didn't get past the shocked shriek as I was plastered against his hard naked torso and his mouth latched to mine.

I let him in, thanks to shock more than anything else. Of all the things I expected Zane to do, kiss me was not one. Shoot me, maybe. Running me over with his car also featured on the list in my mind. Playing tonsil hockey appeared nowhere on this list.

So I was shocked at the rough, desperate plundering his tongue did as strong arms locked me in place. I wasn't shocked at the sharp flame of arousal that flew through my stomach and dampened my panties at his touch.

I vaguely heard the door slam shut, but I was mostly focused on keeping upright, staying conscious as he ruthlessly fucked my mouth with his tongue. I kissed him back, matching his frenzied intensity. This wasn't tender, wasn't soft or coaxing. This was brutal, carnal. I didn't have time to think about where this had come from, why a man who pretty much hated me had suddenly pounced. I could barely think at all. Him, his touch, his strong body against mine was what saturated my senses and consumed my mind.

He slammed me against a wall; I moaned into his mouth and circled my leg around his hip, yanking his body closer to mine. One of his hands groped my ass, kneading it, pressing my core against his hard length. The other cupped my breast roughly, tweaking my nipple through the material of my dress.

His mouth was suddenly gone from mine and he pulled my dress down roughly, the cup of my bra going with it. His mouth was on my bare skin, sucking my nipple, grazing it with his teeth.

I cried out, cupping his head with my hands. My clit pulsed and pressure built between my legs. If he kept this up I was going to come purely from his mouth on my nipple.

"Zane," I moaned, needing him inside me.

Cool air tickled my breast as his mouth left it.

Furious black eyes met mine and his stare was animal need mixed with human fury. "Shut the fuck up," he commanded roughly, almost cruelly.

The harsh, cold command did not dampen the white hot arousal coursing through every part of me; it only made me burn hotter, caused my panties to dampen even further.

His mouth latched onto mine with even more fury than before; his callused hands yanked up my dress, ripping at my panties. I barely registered him tearing at the flimsy lace. I was too busy frantically fumbling with his jeans, desperate to yank them off so I could get his hard length inside me. I felt like I was going insane with need. He growled in my mouth as I slipped my hand in, making contact with his pulsing cock. My hands

lost their purchase as he pushed them out of the way so he could free himself fully.

Without warning he was there, inside me, filling me. I gasped at the intrusion, and at the lightning bolt of pleasure that came with his touch. Zane's grip tightened on my ass as he lifted me and slammed me against the wall once more, my legs wrapping around his hips. Another hand moved to circle my neck tightly and his forehead crashed against mine, his mouth inches away.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from his black eyes that were burning with hunger, need, danger. Our gazes stayed locked together as he began to pound into me. I cried out as he brutally fucked me against the wall, loving every second. My nails raked against his bare back, his hiss of pleasure as I broke the skin bringing me closer to the brink.

"Harder," I rasped, feeling out of my mind, needing the rough friction of our coupling to be even more brutal.

His hand tightened on my neck, bordering on pain, but dancing gloriously on the line of pleasure. "No. fucking. talking," he growled in between thrusts.

He ensured my silence by capturing my mouth once more, brutally matching his kiss to the frenzied thrusts slamming me against the wall, and building me up for what I knew would be the most intense orgasm of my life. I bit his lip roughly and dug my nails into his back once more. I felt like a woman possessed.

Suddenly my orgasm overwhelmed me and I failed to restrain my scream as I shattered into a thousand pieces while Zane kept pounding. Every brutal stroke seemed to take me further into oblivion.

My pussy clenched around him as I reached the peak of my climax. He grunted his own release and I felt him empty into me.

I struggled to regain my grasp on reality, breathing heavily. My legs were still locked around Zane's hips, my hands clinging to his back. I was worried he was the only thing stopping me from melting into a sex-induced stupor.

His hand was still firm at my neck, the other biting into my ass in a way that I knew would leave a mark.

I opened my eyes slowly, regaining some sense of equilibrium. Zane was staring at me. No, not staring at me, but *into* me. His gaze seemed to sear my soul, as if he had fucked me bare, right down to the core of me. He

could see everything. His expression was strange. Searching, somehow reverent.

In an instant, as if a switch had flicked, it turned blank. Everything wiped from those eyes and a cold fury returned. He pulled out of me quickly and set me on shaky legs. I felt him seep out of me.

Holy fuck. No condom.

I didn't have time to evaluate all of the issues this presented, since a rough voice cut through my thoughts like a blade.

"Get out," he commanded.

I blinked, trying to right my disheveled clothes.

"What?" I asked weakly. We had just had sex, literally seconds ago. No, it wasn't sex. It was *fucking*. Pure, unadulterated, raw and carnal fucking. But still. He had just been inside me, his cum was literally dripping down my leg. He couldn't possibly be kicking me out. We needed to talk about this. Actually, we needed to have some sort of conversation. I didn't think we'd actually done that since I'd met him. We needed to converse and he needed to emit more than two syllables so I didn't feel like a dirty slut who just had sex with someone who she hadn't even heard utter a full sentence.

He regarded me coldly. "You need to fuckin' leave. Now," he bit out, his voice hard and emotionless.

I flinched slightly at the cruel tone and the equally cruel stare. I felt humiliated. Used. Sullied. I didn't have the strength to conjure up any fury, to yell or argue or call him a misogynistic asshole. I merely just stared at him a second longer and darted out the door. Then I ran, full on *ran* across the street and into my house. I really hoped my neighbors didn't choose now to water their gardens and see the sight, but then again I was too beyond it to care. I just needed to get home.

I slammed the door behind me and sank down to the floor, my head hitting my knees. I didn't cry. I hadn't let a man have my tears in sixteen years; I wasn't about to start now. I also hadn't had a man hurt me in sixteen years, and I was afraid that I had just opened that door. This time it wasn't with fists or kicks. It was with cold stares and cutting dismissals. It hurt just the same.



Bull

Bull paced his living room, his fists clenched tightly to his sides. He was struggling. Battling actually. This time it wasn't against the demons that were hell bent on destroying him. No. This time it was against himself. Against her.

Every fiber of his being was urging him to get out of his fuckin' hallway and follow her, drag her back in here, apologize, then fuck her again. Against the wall. Then he'd take her into his bedroom, taste her pussy, make her come on his mouth, then fuck her for a third time. His dick clenched at the thought of getting her honey on his tongue. Of sliding into her tight heat again. He put his fist through his wall. Out of anger, frustration. But mostly to distract him. The pain didn't do much to move his mind away from her, though. Pain was normal. It was his constant companion. A welcome friend.

What was dangerous was not feeling pain. Of feeling her hot tight body underneath his. Tasting her mouth, feeling her moan as he pounded inside her. Having his dick milked by her orgasm. That was dangerous.

"Fuck!" he roared, shaking his head.

He'd fucked up. Majorly. Christ, he had vowed to himself, after those torturous two hours at the movie theater, he fuckin' swore he would do everything to make sure he was never in her presence again. Never close enough to smell the vanilla scent coming off her hair. To feel that spark when their skin met.

He was seriously considering selling his house. He had already spent three nights at the club, trying to get her out of his mind. He'd fucked the only club bitch he could stomach, the one who knew the deal, knew what to do. That hadn't even helped. He'd only come visualizing Mia. Usually he did everything humanly possible not to think of golden hair while fuckin' a club bitch. That's why Whit was best. Dark hair, dark eyes. Curvy. Complete opposite. He'd fucked her the day of the disaster at the movie

theater. Hadn't touched her since; instead, he sought solace in a whisky bottle.

Then within fuckin' hours of him getting home, the bitch arrived on his doorstep. With fuckin' cake. She was babbling. Nervous. And fuckin' irresistible. He had had to lock himself down from dragging her in the moment he opened the door.

And when he had finally lost the battle, hauling her in, finally tasting her mouth, he had expected her to fight him. To rear away in disgust. Hell, he had fuckin' hoped for it. But instead she had melted against him, clawed at his fuckin' back. The wildcat took every inch of him. Those moments he was inside her, touching her, tasting her. Everything was gone. The memories, the demons. Everything. It was only her.

When they were done he had looked at her. Her eyes had been lazy, a sated dreamy expression on her face. She had been fuckin' beautiful. He actually had to catch himself from laying a soft kiss on her swollen lips. From brushing her golden hair out of her face.

That's what had got him. The hair. Gold. Not the same, nowhere near. But that shimmer had started the battle again. Made those memories rush back in. The pain at the bottom of his gut. So he was cruel. Brutal. He knew it. The moment she flinched, fuckin' flinched from the weight of his words he knew. But it was necessary. Vital. She needed to stay away. For her own safety.



CHAPTER FIVE



Mia

“Mom, I’ve got something to tell you,” Lexie declared, leaning over the front desk of reception, grabbing a mint from our bowl.

I didn’t look up from my computer. “Please don’t tell me you’re pregnant. I’m too young to have a teenage daughter, let alone a granddaughter. They’d put me on the news,” I said distractedly. I looked up with a grim expression. “Is it worse? Have you turned into a,” I paused for dramatic effect, “a *Belieber*?” I finished with horror.

It was Wednesday. A week after what I was now referring in my mind as *the incident*. I had sat on the floor of my front door for exactly an hour, wallowing in self-pity and shame. Then I had pulled myself together, made myself an appointment with a doctor for an STD check and thanked God I was on the pill. Not because of all the action I got. I was a single mom trying to give my daughter a life with a roof over her head and the possibility of a college education. I didn’t have much time for romantic dalliances. Not only that, I didn’t want a parade of men in front of Lexie. And there was the little issue of what her lovely father had done to me before. Thanks to that lovely cocktail of events I was pretty dry on the sexual encounter front. I had them sporadically, and Lexie never knew. But this latest disaster was a great reason why I should stay away from men indefinitely.

“I’m in a band!” she announced excitedly as if I hadn’t spoken at all.

“Some kids at school heard me playing in a study period, we got to chatting and boom!” She made a gesture with her hands. “A band was born.”

I stared dumbly at her a second. “Tell me it’s a TLC cover band,” I pleaded with a straight face.

Lexie scowled at me.

I smiled and patted her hand. “Come on, kid, you’ve had sixteen years of my brand of humor. You’d think by now you could roll with it. That’s fricking awesome—I can’t wait to meet them,” I told her sincerely.

I inwardly let out a breath of relief. Lexie seemed like she had been doing fine at her new school; she hadn’t come home with a major wedgie or any black eyes, so things couldn’t be that bad. But she wasn’t mentioning too many new friends, nor going for sleepovers. However, even at her old school, Lexie wasn’t much for sleepovers. She and her best friend Emma mainly hung out with me watching movies.

“Well,” she said cautiously, “I was hoping that since we’ve got that garage we never use…”

“On account of there being too much stuff in there I’m not mentally or physically prepared to unpack,” I interrupted her.

“Yeah, that. Well, since it actually isn’t being utilized for its intended purpose, I thought we could repurpose it,” she trailed off and gave me a look.

“Repurpose it as what, exactly?” I asked suspiciously, not catching on. It had been hours since my last coffee. And since *the incident* I wasn’t sleeping too great. My mind went back to the conversation at hand. “Please don’t say a Pilates studio. Or a yoga studio. Or any studio type thing that involves exercise.”

“As a place for my band to practice,” she cut me off, seeming to know I was about to rattle off every unpleasant healthy purpose she could possibly have.

I relaxed. “Thank God,” I muttered.

Lexie brightened. “Righteous,” she declared, taking my blasphemy as a yes.

“Someone’s gotta determine whether you guys are destined for superstardom,” I said, my mind catching up somewhat. A light bulb popped over my head. “Hey, I could be your momager! Get you gigs, do your

wardrobe. Ride your coattails all the way to the Grammys.” I was mentally calculating my cut.

“Mom, we’re a high school band who haven’t even properly rehearsed yet. Don’t write the acceptance speech just yet,” she chided.

“Mmhhh,” I said distractedly, thinking of the Porsche I’d buy with my income.

Brad the front desk receptionist wandered past. “Brad!” I called, stopping him. “Lexie’s band is going to be world famous. Want her autograph now so you can sell it on eBay in five years and retire a rich man?” I asked him.

He grinned. “You bet. I’ll also be doing a *TMZ* interview telling all about how I knew her before she was gobbled up by the fame monster,” he responded without missing a beat.

I gave him a thumbs up and turned to Lexie, grinning. She had her head in her hands.

I ignored this. “So, when do I get to meet the band?” I asked, glancing back to my reservation list on the computer. “Let’s have them for dinner,” I said before she could answer. “By have them for dinner I do not mean you cook some gluten free, sugar free, happiness free dish containing sauerkraut,” I told her. “I’m talking we have them over and get pizza delivered to the house. We don’t want to scare them off with your health freak tendencies—it could break up the band before it even begins. Kale could be the Yoko Ono to your Beatles,” I said in all seriousness.

“Whatever, Mom,” Lexie responded in a bored tone.

My eyes widened and I gave her my full attention. “Oh my God,” I exclaimed with a hand dramatically on my chest. “I just got my first sarcastic ‘whatever’ from my teenage daughter! A milestone. One that I never thought I’d get. We need a picture,” I surmised, glancing around for my phone.

Lexie rolled her eyes.

I went back a step. “An eye-roll too? Double whammy of teenage surliness.”

My phone rang from under a stack of papers. I pointed at Lexie as I went to grab it. “Don’t you move, young lady, we are documenting this moment.”

I glanced down at the screen to smile at the name that was flashing.

“Ava!” I answered warmly. “You have called in time to be involved in a milestone. Lexie’s first sarcastic ‘whatever’ and following eye roll,” I told

her, wiping a fake tear for dramatic effect.

“Should I send I cake?” Ava replied seriously.

I pretended to ponder. “Maybe a small batch of brownies would be sufficient. And by small I mean enough to feed both Lexie and I.”

“So two batches then?”

“Bingo.” She knew me so well and luckily was also on board with Lexie’s and my particular sense of humor.

“Hey, Ava!” Lexie called from across the counter.

“Spawn says hi,” I repeated unnecessarily.

“Oh, I’ll have a chat with her in a moment, if she’s not too busy with schoolwork,” Ava replied.

“Oh, she’s not busy. We pulled her out of school, thinking performing on the street would be much more productive,” I deadpanned.

“I approve. School’s a waste of time these days anyway,” she agreed with a smile in her voice. “So,” Ava continued. “How’s it all going? I’m so sorry I haven’t been able to talk sooner—I’ve been thinking of you both,” she said apologetically.

“Don’t worry, we’ve been so busy I’ve barely had time to binge watch *The Walking Dead*,” I said, leaning next to Lexie.

We chatted for a couple of minutes and I was glad to talk to someone who I thought of as a second mother. Actually, considering the woman who birthed me could only be loosely described as a mother, and only in a purely biological sense, she was my only *mom*. Ava was the only grandmother figure Lexie had in her life, although, she did refuse to be called that. She loved Lexie with all of her heart, though.

After I had passed her on to Lexie, who wandered away into the depths of the hotel to talk, I tried to get myself back to work to get my mind off *the incident*. The fact I spent an hour looking at a computer screen without actually doing anything told me I failed.



“Remind me why I agreed to this again?” I asked, blowing a hair out of my face. I kicked a box out of the way as Lexie pulled a rug over the stained

concrete floor of the garage.

“Because you love me?” she answered after she had straightened.

I thought for a moment, rubbing my aching back. “No, can’t be that.”

“Because I’m your only daughter?” she continued.

I paused and shook my head, squinting into the distance. “Oh, I know—it’s ‘cause you’re going to become rich and famous and look after me in my old age,” I said triumphantly.

Lexie stared at me. “That’s yet to be determined. If you don’t play your cards right, as soon as you’re of age I’m putting you in a home.”

I scowled at her. “I can’t believe I’m doing manual labor on my day off,” I whined. “It’s Saturday, the day of rest. We should be either vegged out catching up on *Scandal*, or shopping up a storm at some obscure vintage shop,” I told her while I stretched to place a box on a shelf. I refused to unpack anything that I didn’t need to, hence me shoving them anywhere out of the way.

Lexie was doing the same, though not out of laziness, like me. She was anxious to get her jam space ready. Her band was coming over for pizza tonight, therefore I was recruited as slave labor.

“Sunday is the day of rest, Mom,” she told me in a patronizing tone.

I poked my tongue out at her. She ignored me and went back to shuffle some more boxes around.

I was saved from having to continue my work with the ringing of my cellphone. “Whoever this is, I love you eternally for saving me from breaking my back in the name of music,” I greeted.

A masculine laugh sounded at the end of the line. “Well, babe, that’s twice now you’ve declared your undying love for me and we haven’t even had a first date. Things are looking promising.”

“Oh hey, Lucky,” I responded. One could not forget the sound of a particular hot guy’s voice. Especially when that particular hot guy had your beloved car in his care. And was also connected to the man you fucked against the wall a week ago.

“I’m hoping you’ve got some good news for me,” I continued, shaking my head to rid it of dangerous thoughts.

My car repair had taken longer than expected. Which would have mildly pissed me off, but I had transportation, and Lucky had called me twice this week with an update. My sex life was in the crapper, so my joking calls with the biker hottie were all I had.

“Yes, it’s finally ready. You can have Betty back,” he said, referring to my car by her proper name.

“That’s awesome! Can I come and pick her up now?” I asked hopefully. This would be killing two birds with one stone. Get my car, get out of the remainder of work left in the garage. My glance flickered over to the house across the street. The house that had been empty for over a week. My stomach dropped at the thought of running into Zane.

“Well, since you sound like you’ve got your hands full with whatever you’re doing, how about I come over, drop the car off and see if I can lend a hand?” he offered.

“I couldn’t ask you to do that,” I said in a weak tone. I totally wanted him to do that. Then I could get out of lifting stuff and watch a hot guy lift stuff. Win win.

“You don’t have to ask. I’m offerin.’ And I don’t take no for an answer,” he said firmly with a hint of machoness. “What’s your address?” he asked.

I didn’t even try to argue. He was saving me from not only Zane’s wrath and indifference but also the remainder of my physical labor. I rattled off my address.

There was a pause at the end of the line. “Hello? Lucky, have you changed your mind?” I asked with a hint of sadness.

“No, sorry. Just didn’t realize you lived there, that’s all,” he said in a weird tone. “I’ll be there with Betty soon.”



Bull

To say the week had been shit would be an understatement. The only reason Bull made it through was thanks to morning beer and evening Jack. He stayed at the club. He couldn’t risk it. Going home, seeing her. Fuck, catching a glimpse of her would shatter his resolve. So he needed to keep his distance. Build up his defenses. Remember the reasons to stay the fuck away. Not that he needed to remember. They were there in the back of his

mind. In the front of his dreams. It wasn't the bad ones that were the worst either. Not the images of her battered, broken body. Nor the description of what those maggots had done to her. No. It was the good memories. The ones of her smiling. Laughing. Of her living life. Of them living life together.

It's what haunted him.

His mind snapped back into the present as Lucky walked into the bay, grinning into a cellphone.

"Yes, it's finally ready. You can have Betty back."

Bull pushed away from the car he was working on to stand stiffly as Lucky leaned on it.

There was a pause; obviously he was listening to the other end of the conversation and his grin widened.

"Well, since you sound like you've got your hands full with whatever you're doing, how about I come over, drop the car off and see if I can lend a hand?" His eyes had a glint in them, one Bull knew too well.

His fists clenched to his sides and he felt fury ball up in his belly. He didn't hear what Lucky said next, on account of the fact he was trying his hardest not to rip the phone out of his brother's hand and put his fist through his face.

Lucky's grin was quickly wiped from his face as he made eye contact with Bull. He stared at him for a moment before jerking and speaking into the phone. He took it from his ear and then turned to face Bull.

"That was Mia," he explained.

"Fuckin' gathered that," Bull ground out through gritted teeth. He figured that fact out when they were talking about the stupid fuckin' name she had for her car. Stupid and also cute as fuck. He also gathered his brother was trying to get in there. With her. His jaw twitched at the thought.

Lucky regarded him. "You didn't mention she lived across the street from you," he said slowly.

Bull was silent.

"That got anything to do with the fact you seem to have taken up permanent residence at the clubhouse?" he continued casually.

"That's none of your fuckin' business," Bull snapped.

Lucky nodded. "Fair enough, brother. But Mia? I'm pretty darned intent on making her my business," he started in an easy tone.

Bull didn't think, he just charged. And all of a sudden he had Lucky by the shirt collar and had slammed him up against the car. "You do not fuckin' touch her," he barked at him.

Lucky's eyes bulged, but he made no move to fight back. Which was good. Bull was hangin' on by a fuckin' thread.

"What the fuck's going on here? Bull, Jesus Christ," he heard Cade exclaim from beside him. He felt pressure on his shoulder, Cade trying to pull him off.

Lucky glanced to the side. "No worries, we're cool." His eyes moved back to Bull. "You laying claim to her brother?"

Bull didn't even think before he responded. "She's mine," he declared through gritted teeth.

Silence seemed to hang in the air after this declaration. He abruptly released Lucky and turned to see Asher and Steg staring at him from the edge of the bay. Their faces were blank. He ignored them.

Without a second glance, he strode off, toward his bike.

"Do you think he'll shoot me if I go and deliver her car?" he heard Lucky ask before he was out of earshot.



Mia

I leaned against the frame of the garage door, trying not to burst into tears. This was not because I had ravaged my body with physical exertion. I did have to commence the rest of the box moving without the help of a muscly biker, thanks to him being a no show. No. My thinly restrained waterworks were due to something else entirely.

Lexie and I had done a pretty good job of converting our garage into a band rehearsal stage. The aesthetics part was done, which meant Lexie had to test the acoustics, whatever that meant.

She was currently singing and strumming her guitar, playing Cat Power's "The Greatest." I had heard Lexie sing before. Multiple times. I

knew she was good. Great, in fact. I had no idea where the songbird gene came from, considering I was tone deaf, but man, my girl had pipes.

But this song, this moment, her singing choked me up. Maybe because I was filled to the brim with pride. Her beautiful, vulnerable voice singing a hauntingly beautiful song with such emotional power pierced me deep. It made me think of a time when my ambitions, my hopes for my future were high, when I believed in fairytales and happy ever after's. When I naïvely believed I had found my own. And when that dream had been shattered, along with my jaw. That my life, *our life*, was a precarious house of cards that depended on my ability to disappear.

Her voice trailed off and the soft strum of the guitar slowly faded out.

Lexie stared at me as if she hadn't just made my heart swell with pride and punctured my soul with those words. "Did it sound okay?"

I struggled to find words. I feared I might burst into tears if I said anything just yet.

"That was kick ass, Lexie! You got a great voice, girl," a deep voice declared, sounding impressed.

I jumped slightly. I had been so deep in my own mind I hadn't heard anyone approach. On turning, I saw that I hadn't heard two people approach.

Lucky and Killian were standing in our driveway, leaning on the hood of my borrowed car. A quick glance to the curb showed me that they were delivering Betty.

Lexie obviously hadn't noticed them either, since her face was flaming red. She wasn't shy about much, but I'm guessing it had a lot to do with a mini hot guy whose eyes were currently burning into her with an intensity that spelled danger.

"Sorry we're a bit late. We got held up," Lucky continued, walking toward me. "I brought reinforcements for the heavy lifting." He jerked his head back at Killian, who was still leaning against the car, eyes locked on Lexie. She was fiddling with her guitar, her head down.

"Looks like you don't need our help," he said, his eyes moving around the garage.

"Well no, it seems I'm stronger than I appear," I gave him a grin. Lucky gave me a once over. "I don't doubt it. Here's the keys." He handed me my keychain, which had colorful charms dangling from it.

“Thanks a bunch for coming over and delivering it. I really appreciate it,” I told him sincerely. “I’ll just go and grab the keys for the other car,” I said, although I was reluctant to leave Lexie under the watchful gaze of the baby biker.

I tried to break the land speed record to go into the house and retrieve the keys. Unfortunately, I never placed them in the same place twice, which resulted in me having to conduct a house wide search. There was more than one reason why Betty’s keys had an array of colorful chains.

When I finally made it out of the house, both bikers were inside the garage chatting with Lexie. I wasn’t uneasy at leaving her alone with Lucky, despite his menacing appearance. It was the other guy I was worried about.

“Sorry,” I puffed out as I reached them. “They were hiding from me.” I handed them to Lucky.

“I told you we need a key rack.” Lexie looked over at me.

I narrowed my eyes at how close Killian was standing to her. “We do not need a key rack.”

“Where were said keys then?” she asked blandly.

I glared at her. “They might have been in the freezer,” I murmured.

Lucky chuckled at this announcement.

Lexie raised her eyebrows.

I turned to Lucky, who was still grinning. “Thanks for everything. I assume your company will send me an invoice?” I strove to sound grown up and professional, but I was afraid the whole keys in the freezer thing shot that to shit.

He gave me a weird look. Not a weird look like he was trying to decipher what mental institution I belonged to, but more like he was itching to say something.

The look passed and his eyes softened. “Yeah, babe, will do.” He jerked his head at Killian. “We’re off, Kill.”

“See ya, thanks again.” I waved at them.

Killian gave me a chin lift and Lexie a meaningful look before turning to the car.

“See you Mia, Lexie. I’m sure we’ll be seeing you soon,” Lucky declared before folding himself into the car.

Not likely. I intended to stay far, far away from anything or anyone that could put me close to Zane.



“Thanks for the pizza, Mrs. Spencer,” Sam, Lexie’s bandmate said as he stood up to clear his plate.

There was an echo of thank you’s from the remaining boys around the table. Yes, *boys*. Lexie’s bandmates were all boys.

“I’ll be happy to provide you all with sustenance in the form of fried cheesy goodness on one condition,” I announced to the table at large. “That you don’t call me Mrs. Spencer. Mia is fine.”

They all grinned at me. Lexie had seemed to fall into a good crowd, although they may have looked a bit rough around the edges. Sam was tall and skinny, dressed in all black, with chunky silver rings on his wrists and a black bandanna pushing back his shoulder length hair. Noah was wearing a faded Nirvana tee, ripped jeans and a beanie covering his head. He had seriously good bone structure and was also tall, but had some impressive teenage boy muscles coming out of his Nirvana tee shirt. Wyatt had spiky blond hair, was wearing a white shirt unbuttoned with a tee underneath and faded denim jeans. A couple of leather necklaces hung from his neck.

I didn’t know what I had been expecting from Lexie’s band, but they were not it. They looked like delinquents, even though Noah definitely had a future in the male modeling industry. But I found they were polite and surprisingly articulate for teenage boys. I liked them.

I snatched a plate from Sam as the others moved to help clean up. “I’ll do this—you guys go off and make sweet, sweet music.” I pointed a finger at them. “Though if you suck, I do reserve the right to revoke garage privileges.”

“Mom,” Lexie warned.

I glanced at her. “I’m sure you won’t suck, honey, but I just need to cover my bases,” I told her. “Now go.” I shooed them with my hands.

The boys all grinned at me, and Wyatt met my eyes. “You’re seriously cool, Mia,” he stated.

They disappeared out the door and out into the garage. I busied myself with cleaning up pizza dishes and the like. I heard once they started playing

that they did not suck. Of course, I knew they wouldn't. I was also glad that our closest neighbor was MIA and the sound was not likely to reach the ones on the other side of the house.



CHAPTER SIX

I tossed and turned in bed, sleep eluding me. This was due to a number of reasons. Lexie's soulful rendition of a beautiful song and the memories it dredged up, plus the slight concern I had for her being in a band full of hotties. Not that I didn't trust her. I did. But I was a mom. I worried. It was a job requirement. Plus, I may trust her, but three teenage boys? Not a chance in Hell. I was glad I would be able to keep a watchful eye over them until they gained that trust. The biggest thing that had me yet to meet the sandman was the rumble of Harley pipes I kept hearing. Not outside, but in my head. They had sounded just as I was shutting down the house for the night, and I had peered out my window to see Zane pulling up his driveway. I had quickly darted my head back into the safety of the house so he wouldn't catch me peeping. But I had gone to bed with a sick feeling in my stomach knowing he was across the road.

It had only intensified when I lay down, all of the thoughts I had locked away thundering into my mind once I had turned off the light.

The shame I had felt when he had cruelly kicked me out. The cold glint in his eyes. Then the hot flame I felt with his touch. The sex that was the best I had ever had. That look, right after, before his eyes had shuttered over. That look that could almost be described as tender had it not been on such a hard face. It was something more than simple tenderness; it was tortured tenderness. Something had stirred in his eyes, something that had struck a chord within me because I had demons of my own, residing in the dark corners of my mind. That's why that hurt all the more when he dismissed me, caused me to feel shame.

That shame was quickly replaced by anger. No, by fury. How could he act like I was the reincarnation of Hitler's wife for days, and then out of the

blue, fuck me against the wall of his house? Fuck me with an urgent passion, which made me shiver just thinking about it. Then cast me aside like some...whore.

On that thought I saw red. I threw back the blankets and shoved my arms into an old flannel shirt. I didn't even think about footwear, anger transcending common sense.



My rage did not dissipate as I unlocked the doors and stomped across the street. It did not dull even as my bare feet touched the cobbled stones of his walkway. It stayed with me as I pounded loudly on his front door. I kept pounding until a light was switched on.

The door opened and Zane seemed to jerk in surprise to see me in it. Luckily, he was fully clothed this time. How it was he answered the door fully clothed in the middle of the night and half naked in broad daylight I had no idea. I barely registered that he was holding a gun at his side, which normally would have been a big fucking deal.

“You are a dick,” I spat at him. Manners be gone. Obviously reason was long gone also, considering I was insulting an armed man. “You cannot treat me,” I paused, “no, strike that...you cannot treat any woman the way you treated me,” I hissed. “You don't like me for some unknown reason. Fine. Your loss. But I'll have you know most people like me. I'm *likable*. I'm nice. But you don't think so? Whatever—that's your prerogative.” I pointed at him again. “If you don't like me, send all the death glares you like. I'll learn to get used to them.” Total lie, but I was on a roll. “Speak to me in grunts...actually, don't speak to me at all. I'm not bothered.” Another lie. “But, do not, after doing all of these things, drag me into your house, have sex with me,” I stopped, breathing heavily before continuing, “and treat me like a whore.” I hissed at him again. “Who do you think you are? Do you think some air of menace, the vest you wear and some good bone structure gives you the excuse to--”

I didn't get the chance to finish my rant because of the hand that fastened around my neck and yanked me against a hard body. Before I knew it

Zane's mouth was plastered to mine. And, because he had caught me mid-sentence, his tongue had prime access to mine. He managed to get me inside and slam the door behind me without his mouth leaving mine. With the slam of the door though, came the surging of coherent thought.

I pushed back against him violently, and although I think my strength was nothing to match his, he let me go. I lifted my hand and slapped his cheek, my palm stinging at the impact.

We stared at each other, breathing heavily.

I glanced at my hand like it was some alien part of me. I had never slapped anyone in my life. Not even the person that had treated me to the same violence I had just unleashed. I glanced back up at Zane, whose eyes were locked on me. They seemed to be dancing with something; his entire frame was locked still.

And then, for some insane reason, I pounced. I latched onto his mouth once more, like a junkie looking for a hit. My legs circled his hips and rough hands gripped my ass to lift me against him. I moaned as my nightie rode up, leaving my panties as the only barrier between me and his jean-clad cock.

One hand went to my ass, the other delved into my hair, pressing me to his mouth. I struggled to shrug off the flannel I was wearing as he carried us through the house. I didn't care where we were going as long as we would be horizontal.

We suddenly stopped. Zane grabbed a handful of my hair, yanking my head back. It was rough, but not painful.

He searched my face, his eyes glittering. "You are not a whore. Do not *ever* refer to yourself as one again, or I'll tan your ass," he growled.

I didn't have time to respond because he threw me onto a bed. Yes, threw. Like bodily. It was a soft landing, obviously, and the view was fricking bomb. Zane had pulled his tee off and was unbuckling his jeans. Before I knew it he was standing before me, gloriously naked, the colors of his ink rippling over his muscled body. Unfortunately, I barely had time for a mental snapshot, let alone to commission an oil painting.

His hands pushed my silk nightie up to my waist, his face burying itself between my legs. I felt him tenderly kiss me atop my panties, which was a stark contrast to the ferocious way he had kissed me earlier. His hands moved and yanked my panties down, and suddenly he was *there*. My whole body tightened at the shaft of pleasure that erupted with his mouth on me.

“Even sweeter than I imagined,” he said roughly before his mouth covered me once more.

My hands bunched into the sheets as he ate me like a starving man. It was relentless, brutal, and my climax overtook me with the same intensity. I screamed, and Zane’s mouth covered mine, the taste of me on his lips enough to prolong my ecstasy.

I was barely containing the aftershocks when I felt him at my entrance. His hard body was pressed above mine, although I knew he wasn’t giving me his full weight. His eyes met mine. “You on something?” he asked tightly.

“On?” I repeated dreamily.

“Pill, babe. You on it?” He grunted, sounding like he was holding himself back.

“Yes.”

I barely had the word out of my mouth before he surged into me. I cried out once more as he pounded my sensitive flesh. I circled my legs around him, clenching him closer to me.

“Harder,” I whispered hoarsely.

He grunted and I was lifted as he went to his knees, my legs still circled around him. His hands bit into my ass, the pads of his fingers pressing so hard it bordered on pain. My nails raked his back in response.

“My little wildcat,” he murmured, not stopping his thrusts.

I moaned as I felt myself build again, this angle making him fill me to the brim.

Zane clutched the back of my neck and pressed his forehead to mine. His eyes locked onto mine, his stare never wavering as he pounded into me. “Come again, Wildcat,” he commanded.

As if his words had magical orgasm giving powers, my world shattered for a second time and I saw stars. I vaguely noted his body stiffen as he had his release.

After a beat, he lowered us both down back onto the bed, his body covering mine. He didn’t give me his full weight; I could tell by the way he held himself. One of his hands moved to my face to tenderly brush a wayward strand of hair away. He frowned at the strand as if it had wronged him in some way.

I waited. For the shutters on his eyes to close. For the confusing tenderness to disappear and be replaced by cold indifference, or even

straight up hostility. It didn't come; he merely framed my face, staring at me, not saying a word.

"This is it," he said finally.

"What?" I asked quietly, still bracing for a verbal blow.

His hand moved to span my hip. I marveled at how large it was compared to me. I wasn't what you'd call petite in that area, thanks to the fact I had birthed a child. But those hands made me look positively tiny.

"This." His hand tightened on my hip once more and my eyes moved to meet his. "Is all I can give you, all I am capable of giving you," he continued. "Nothing more."

Realization flooded through me at his grunted sentence. Sex. He was talking about sex. That was all this was. I inwardly flinched. I couldn't say how I felt about the infuriating giant. He was complicated, maddening, and terrifying. I wasn't even sure if I *liked* him. But any guy telling you he only wanted you for sex was bound to cause a sting.

"You mean like, friends with benefits type of situation?" I asked slowly.

He regarded me, his face blank. "We're not friends," he stated simply.

Ouch. Another verbal blow.

"There is no way I could be your friend. No way I could spend an extended amount of time in your presence without ripping all your clothes off and burying myself in your sweet cunt. I couldn't have you around me and not be able to touch you." His hand snaked up to cup my breast. "Taste you," he continued, his head moving to suck on my nipple.

I shivered as he pulsed, still inside me.

His head lifted. "So this is all I can do. When we're together, we fuck. That's it. All we can be. If you want it," he added. The way he said it, the way he was looking at me, it made me think he wanted me to say no. Tell him to shove it. I wished I could. Not for me but for womankind everywhere. But I think womankind might forgive me once they got a look at his body. And his dick.

"Okay," I whispered back to him, meeting his eyes.

If I was honest with myself, I didn't know if I could handle anything more than this. If I could give anything more. I feared I was broken. Pieces of me smashed when I was young and hopeful, wide open to the prospect of love. And I thought those pieces may always lie broken within me, beneath sarcasm and inappropriate humor. I thought the only person I was truly

capable of opening my heart to was my daughter. No man could ever get in there. Not again.

So maybe I could get down with this arrangement.

Zane had been watching me during this moment, his eyes glued to my face. His thumb, feather light, traced down from my temple to my jaw. It was as if in that moment he saw me, saw the broken pieces. And I think it was because he was broken too.

Then his hand circled at my neck, his eyes darkening. “Gonna fuck you even harder this time, Wildcat,” he declared hoarsely, surging into me.

The moment was gone, replaced with our mutual passion, desperation to cling to whatever our broken souls let us have.



“Mom?” a sleepy voice asked in confusion.

I glanced over to see Lexie emerging from the hallway, still half grasped by sleep. She always yanked herself out of bed before she was properly awake, and she would spend the first part of her morning as an adorable sleep-rumpled zombie. When she was younger, I would love it. She would come and cuddle close to me until the last of her dreams left her. She’d also say weird things like “There’s peanuts in the toaster,” which gave me endless hours of amusement. Then she started to grow up and I introduced her to the magical powers of caffeine. So I no longer got my Lexie cuddles. Right now she was looking at me like I was insane.

“Morning, sweetie,” I greeted cheerfully, passing her a cup of coffee.

She sipped it then eyed me cautiously. “Has there been some horrific national disaster?” she asked.

I glanced up from the griddle where I was scrambling eggs, frowning at the strange morning greeting. “Not that I know of,” I answered.

She shuffled to the breakfast bar. “Have any of our friends or family died?”

I gaped at her. “Of course not!” Maybe her weird half sleep phrases were making another appearance.

She sipped her coffee, looking slightly more alert. “Has Hell frozen over?” she continued.

I put my hand on my hip. “I sure hope not. If *Little Nicky* has anything right that would not be a good situation,” I replied. “Now what’s with the twenty, Sherlock?”

“You’re cooking,” she observed.

“I can cook,” I defended myself.

“If held at gunpoint, yes,” Lexie conceded. She paused, looking me up and down. “You’re dressed,” she also pointed out.

I looked down at my pencil skirt and heels. “People look at me weird if I go out in only my underwear,” I answered, sliding eggs onto a plate with toast.

“It’s 7 a.m.,” she said.

“I own a watch,” I told her, passing her the plate.

“Is this—”

“Gluten free? Yes, weirdo, it is. I wouldn’t dare poison my favorite daughter with wheat,” I interrupted her, topping up my own coffee.

“Only daughter,” she countered, taking a bite of her toast.

“That you know of,” I shot back.

“Anyway, as I was saying—” She glared at me accusingly. “It’s 7a.m. Never in my life, apart from that one time you decided we had to get up and watch the Olympics, have you been up dressed and coffee’d before this time,” she said in between bites. “And I can count on one hand the times you’ve cooked me breakfast.”

“Hey! Don’t make me sound like a terrible mother. I’ve cooked you breakfast since you were born,” I said defensively. “Starting with these puppies.” I pointed at my breasts, which she put in danger of ruining for good until I changed to formula.

She gave me a disapproving look before ignoring the breast milk reference. “Toasting Pop Tarts and putting milk in cereal doesn’t count,” she offered.

I leaned against the counter. “I respectfully disagree.”

“I’m not discussing the semantics over our differing definitions of cooking with you,” Lexie said exasperatedly. “I’m asking why, at 7 a.m., are you up, dressed and cooking?”

I stiffened slightly. “I woke up. Was feeling energetic,” I lied.

I had never lied to my daughter, save the one I had told her about her father. Though that one was for her own safety, and I still felt sick over it. I felt no better about this one. I could hardly say I was across the road at Zane's having crazy animal sex all night, had only got home a couple of hours ago, and decided I couldn't sleep so had consumed copious amounts of coffee and decided to cook breakfast.

"You were feeling energetic?" she repeated suspiciously.

"Mmhmm," I said into my coffee mug.

She gazed at me disbelievingly and for a moment, I thought the interrogation would continue. But thankfully she focused on her breakfast and said nothing more on the subject.



Zane and I hadn't exactly fleshed out terms of our sex arrangement. Namely because most of last night was spent discovering each other's bodies and him giving me insane orgasms. I was delightfully sore, and more than a few places on my body had small discolorations from the grip of his hands. It was rough. The sex. He was rough in everything he did. I knew he held back; a man that size had to. But not much. He was rough and I loved it. Before him, I didn't consider myself exactly adventurous in the bedroom. I certainly wouldn't say I liked rough sex. With Lexie's father we had been fumbling teenagers for a start, so it wasn't exactly good. Then he learned and it got better. Then he turned into a monster and his touch repulsed me.

The couple of men I'd had since then weren't anything to write home about. They did the job, but they didn't set my entire body on fire as Zane had. So last night was spent with little to no talking. And in the early hours of the morning, when we had finally finished, we lay in silence for a long while, neither of us sleeping.

"I should go," I had whispered, breaking the spell.

His grip had tightened around my middle.

"Yep." His breath tickled my ear.

He held me for a moment longer, then released me.

I had dressed silently in the dim morning light as he watched me.

“So um,” I said awkwardly, “I’ll see you.”

He was silent. I almost turned to leave, but he knifed up before I could move.

“Need one last taste,” he muttered, gripping my hips as he stood.

His hand clutched my head and he pulled me into a brutal kiss. It seemed the passion of our entire night poured into that kiss.

When he let me go I blinked, momentarily stunned. “Bye,” I said quietly, regaining motor skills.

He did that thing where he ran his thumb from my temple to my jaw. “I’ll see you,” he promised me quietly.



I had wandered home in the dim morning light, luckily unseen by any neighbors. Because of the sheer amount of thoughts racing through my brain, once I was safely in my house I couldn’t sleep. So I cleaned. Did laundry. And cooked my daughter breakfast. Something that was obviously an oddity, thanks to the reaction it got. But I needed to keep busy. Otherwise I would think about what I had just done. Gone back to the bed of a broody, dangerous, menacing man who had treated me like a leper for weeks, then a whore, then with confusing tenderness. I would also think about how I had waltzed over there and hopped back into bed with him after barely giving him a verbal lashing for the way he treated me. Then there was the small fact he was in a motorcycle club. Now I wasn’t one to judge. I had been a single teenage mom. I had my fair share of judgment in my life so I knew how crappy it felt. Therefore, I considered myself pretty open-minded. From what I could see, his “club” was full of scary, seriously hot nice guys. But it wasn’t just me I had to think about.

I eyed the girl who was turning into a woman, munching on gluten free toast and organic eggs. The girl that was my entire world. I would protect her with my last breath. Do anything to keep her safe and happy. And I wasn’t sure having connections with the Sons of Templar would accomplish that.



Bull

Bull pulled up to the clubhouse, and for once it didn't give him that feeling of relief. Of purpose. The sight of the clubhouse, the garage and the club's flag flying in the wind didn't do their job of keeping the demons at bay. That's because something had already done that. Not something. Someone.

Mia.

He could still feel the sweet taste of her cunt on his tongue. Feel her nails raking into his back, drawing blood, making his cock pulse. Christ, he could still smell the vanilla, as if she was right there with him, on his fuckin' bike. He had fucked up. Not only by fucking her in the first place; that was the huge colossal fuck up. Because now he was like an addict who had his first taste. He thought he could withstand her after the first time. But then he heard the fucker Lucky flirting, trying to lay claim on her. She was *his*. The thought of her with his brother made him grip the handles of his bike as he pulled up.

Then she turned up on his doorstep in the middle of the night. Fucking barefoot. Wearing a scrap of lace barely covered with a flannel. The tiny thing was like a goddamned wet dream with her tousled hair and rosy cheeks. Then she started at him. *Yelled* at him. He had a fuckin' gun in his hand, for crissakes, but that didn't stop her, not his Wildcat. She had pounced.

The moment he opened the door to her his cock hardened. But then, seeing her face redden, watching her throw him sass, it barely stayed in his pants. He had no choice but to claim her mouth. And when she fought him, slapped him, it had taken every ounce of his control to wait while she chewed it over in her mind. He was beyond fuckin' glad the moment she launched her little body at him. He shuddered to think of what would have happened had she not.

Then he had tasted every inch of her. Fucked her with abandon. With a fury he had never unleashed. She took it. She fuckin' loved it.

And then he had seen it. In her eyes. He had seen something that threatened his very core. Something he couldn't describe but something that planted deep. Something that had him, right now, sitting on his bike in front of his clubhouse, feeling the closest thing to satisfied he had been in forever. Which made him fuckin' furious. He couldn't have this. Couldn't have her. But he couldn't *not* have her either.

He pushed off his bike and glowered at a prospect who was milling about. "What do you think you're doing, fucktard?" he snapped. "You want to get a patch, you don't fuckin' stand around with your finger up your ass. Make yourself fuckin' useful!" he bellowed, and the prospect paled.

He didn't wait to see what he did; he had church.

He saw, once he made it to the room that had become his place of worship, he was the last to arrive. The look on his brothers' faces communicated that this was a rare occurrence. He ignored this. His glower stayed in place, although he gave a chin lift to Cade.

Cade nodded back. "Brother," he greeted.

Bull took his place at his left. Brock was at his right, Steg beside him. Steg had stepped down as president after being shot; considering the fact he almost died, he was in no state to ride for months. Not being able to ride meant not being able to rule. Cade had stepped up. It had been almost two years since, and Cade had continued to be president even after Steg had recovered. Bull had half expected that to turn sour, considering the bad blood brewing between them before. But for some reason it hadn't. Steg seemed content, and the club was running well under Cade's rule. Running legit.

"Now that we're all here, we need to get straight to business," Cade addressed the room. "We all know that another club over in Hope has been testing our boundaries, looking to extend their patch." He paused, leaning forward to clasp his hands together. "Up until now they've been nothing but a vague annoyance, one that is easily ignored." He stopped again, looking around the table. "Unfortunately, they have upgraded themselves to a pain in my ass. Not only does it seem like they're recruiting solely to gain numbers, which is worrying in itself, it seems the fuckers have been trying to push product within our town," he declared tightly.

Bull's fists clenched. Even though the Sons were legit, or as legit as they could be, that did not mean other clubs could get away with shit. It was known, widely fuckin' known within all MCs, that the Sons did not tolerate

drugs being sold in Amber. It was a policy strictly enforced throughout the years. To do so, especially by another MC, was tantamount to a declaration of war.

“You’re fuckin’ shitting me,” Asher bit out from down the table.

Lucky shook his head. “Got word a couple of hours ago. Their patch was seen doing a deal at the lumber yard.” He flexed his knuckles. “Had a... conversation with the foreman. It seems his workers have been purchasing product for fuckin’ *weeks*.”

There were hisses around the table. This was an ultimate disrespect. The club may not run guns anymore, but they were *not* to be fucked with.

“We’re not letting this shit stand,” Brock said evenly.

“Too fuckin’ right we’re not,” Steg added roughly. “This pissant club is going to regret the day they put on their cuts. You do not fuck with us.”

Nods around the table.

“Steg’s right,” Cade said, his face blank. “Goes without saying we gotta play this smart. ATF may not be up our asses anymore, but we’re still on their Christmas card list. No to mention that fucker Crawford would love to get us locked up over unpaid parking tickets, if he could.” Cade looked around once more, his eyes settling on Bull. “We’re doing this smart,” he repeated. “But we’ll make sure these fuckers get the message.”

With that declaration, they discussed strategies and plans. Once that was done, Cade dismissed his brothers. Bull stood to leave; he would never say it out loud, but he was almost happy this shit was going down. He needed it. Needed to pummel out his anger on these pissants. He needed to focus on something other than a blonde with a sweet cunt.

“Bull,” Cade called before he could leave. “A word,” he requested.

Bull nodded and moved back to his seat as the boys filtered out.

Cade stared at him once the room had emptied. Bull didn’t say anything. Cade was used to it. He didn’t speak when he didn’t have to. Mostly because he was focusing on the shit inside his head. On the demons. Those fuckers were quiet at the moment, but they were still there, waiting.

“You good, brother?” Cade started, watching him.

Bull nodded. “I’ll be better when I get to teach those bastards a lesson,” he said, referring to the mission.

Cade nodded distractedly. “Yeah well, they’ll get taught.” He paused. “I’m talking about you nearly rearranging Lucky’s face yesterday.”

Bull stiffened. He said nothing.

“You want to tell me what that was about?” Cade asked evenly.

“Nothing,” Bull bit out.

Cade regarded him. “So it wasn’t about Mia?”

Bull’s fists clenched. He didn’t need her name spoken here. Not in this room.

“All due respect, Prez, you don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about and I’d appreciate if you don’t say her name again,” he ground out.

Cade’s eyes flared slightly, but otherwise he didn’t react. “Not looking to get my face rearranged either, brother, just looking out for you,” he said carefully. “She’s nice. Her kid too. It’s okay, you know, to move on...”

Bull pushed out of his chair. “This conversation is done,” he grunted, having to hold himself back from grasping his president and his best friend by the collar.

Cade stood too. His normally emotionless face was troubled and he was looking at him in concern.

This bristled Bull that much more. He didn’t need that fuckin’ look. He loathed to see that on Cade’s face. It made him feel weak. He knew what his brother had done for him. What his Old Lady had done. Pulled him back from the brink. When he had been preparing to meet the Devil, to give in to the demons, Cade had yanked him back from the edge. He wasn’t thankful at the time. Sometimes he hated his brother for making him continue the fight, other times, like right now, was angry for another reason. For thinking there might be another reason to continue, other than the club. Her.



CHAPTER SEVEN



Mia

I tapped my pencil down on my desk impatiently. I was in a bad mood. This was unusual. Once I had dragged myself out of my very own living Hell, I made it my mission to be happy. To be positive. Have a sense of humor. It helped I had a beautiful daughter to keep me looking at the glass half full. I was also stubborn. So through money problems, fear and all sorts of other things life threw at me, I managed to look on the bright side and try to make the best of it. I had it pretty good. I had friends, Steve and Ava, and I had Lexie. The dark shadow of our life before would always be with me but I learned to turn a blind eye. Apart from making sure he couldn't find us, *wouldn't* find us, that shadow didn't exist. Apart from in my dreams.

So, sitting at my desk in my little office at the hotel, I found it hard to drag myself out from the black cloud I was currently letting infect my life. Nothing particularly bad had happened. It was an accumulation of things. I slept through my alarm. Ran out of coffee. Poked myself in the eye with a mascara wand. Twice. I then spilled my precious Shelly coffee all over my white pants, hence a detour home to change an outfit. And then another detour to replace the coffee. So I was late to work. Then I had to deal with rude guests and staff shortages.

I had hidden myself in the salon, the place where I felt most at home, at peace. I had started in hotels as a maid while working to support Lexie and I and put myself through beauty school. It was hard, really hard. But I did it, and worked as a therapist for years before Steve had promoted me to

manager. Although I didn't miss the backaches from the exertion of giving massages, I missed the feeling of helping to make women feel beautiful.

So that's how I found myself behind the desk at the salon, sipping a coffee, trying to find my Zen.

"I'm so freaking furious at him!"

I glanced up at hearing the raised voice amongst my Zen music.

"Girl, how you can be furious at a man like that is beyond me. One look at his impressive physique and broody eyes, he's forgiven for an-y-thing," a throaty voice replied to the complaint.

My eyes rested on Gwen—I think that was her name—from the store that was way out of my price range but sometimes existed in my dreams. I remembered how nice she had been to Lexie and I, and her accent was pretty unique. She hadn't properly approached the desk and seemed too into her conversation to notice me.

"Yes, well, trust me—those things have got him away with a lot." She paused and stopped walking. "A lot," she repeated meaningfully. "But not this time," she said firmly.

The woman with her just shook her head knowingly. The woman I did not recognize. And I would have remembered her. She was like a supermodel. Her inky black hair tumbled down her back, shining like she was in a fricking shampoo ad. I wondered if there was a way I could ask her about which products she used without sounding like a weirdo. Her skin was pale and flawless, not needing the expertly applied makeup, though her winged liner that could cut a bitch it was that sharp. She was wearing all black, which would have been harsh on anyone else, but somehow she worked it. Her long, svelte body encased in a tight polo neck dress that finished below her knees, and killer heels with laces creeping up her calves. It made me have a fleeting thought about joining the gym. That didn't last for long.

Gwen was looking like she had walked out of the pages of *Vogue*. I had to stop myself from drooling at her electric blue Manolos. She was dressed all in white; white cropped high-waisted pants tucked into a silk floaty blouse. A slight baby bump poked out from her pants. Not a stain on her. I wanted to hate her on that alone. My white pants didn't last an hour.

These women were enough to give me a complex.

Unfortunately, at that moment she jerked out of her conversation and gave me a warm smile.

“Mia! It’s so nice to see you, I totally forgot you managed this place.” She strutted up to the desk, greeting me warmly.

My plan of hating her for her ability to wear white unstained seemed to be lost.

“I’m not usually here, but after the day I’ve had I had to be in a place of calm.” I spread my hands out, gesturing with my coffee cup. “Coffee plus beauty salon equals calm.”

Gwen laughed and her friend leaned on the desk. “Amen to that, although I think we could replace that coffee with something akin to a martini glass,” she suggested thoughtfully. “I’m Lucy. I’m sure you’ll be seeing me around, considering when I’m not at work, Gwen’s store and here are the places I frequent in Amber.” She held up long, mocha-colored nails. “These are not a result of my own practiced hand,” she declared.

I laughed warmly and genuinely. “I’m Mia, and I applaud you for being able to live with those. It’s my dream to have beautiful nails, but I can’t seem to function without breaking them,” I sighed. “I am destined for a lonely life without a decent manicure.”

Lucy laughed again. “That’s the saddest thing I’ve heard. That mug definitely needs to be replaced with a martini glass,” she surmised.

I sighed again. “Unfortunately, being the boss and all, I have to set a good example. I was late and under-caffeinated today, so drinking on the job may not be the best way to round that off,” I told her sadly.

“Well, us girls are having cocktails at Laura Maye’s bar tonight, and by the sounds of it you are in dire need. You’re coming,” Lucy decided firmly.

I was slightly taken aback. Sure these women were nice, but I didn’t expect an invite to cocktails. Not that I didn’t welcome it; I was in serious need of girlfriends. My ones back home were in contact via the phone, but flesh and blood would be good too.

“Actually, that’s a great idea,” Gwen agreed. “I have been hoping to see you and Lexie again. I know what it’s like to move somewhere new, not knowing anyone,” she continued with a smile.

Seriously. How could women this beautiful and stylish be nice? There had to be some sort of catch.

“Well, obviously Lexie can’t do cocktails,” she added.

I waved my hand. “Yeah, she’s already committed to going to a kegger tonight,” I said almost without a thought. I then realized that not everyone had my sense of humor.

The laughter I got relaxed me slightly.

“Awesome, I’ll go there later and do keg stands with her,” Gwen deadpanned, rubbing her belly.

“She learned from her mother, so I warn you, the Force is strong with her.” I sipped my coffee, relaxing into easy banter with someone who didn’t feel like a complete stranger.

Gwen smiled again. “So, cocktails?”

I thought on it. The whole time Lexie and I had been in Amber I hadn’t had the time to go out on the hunt for new friends. Everyone at work was cool, but I was their boss, so it kind of hindered any banter about underage drinking. I also didn’t think having a “fuck buddies” type relationship with my hot, dangerous, biker neighbor counted as making new friends. And this “fuck buddy” type of relationship with my hot biker neighbor was something that definitely needed the help of girlfriends. I hadn’t told any of mine back home and I wasn’t going to go and blurt it to total strangers just yet, but I wouldn’t mind starting to build some new friendships in our new home.

“That actually sounds more than ideal after the day I’ve had,” I replied, thinking longingly about a Long Island Iced tea. “But I’d better check what Lexie is up to.”

Lucy nodded knowingly. “A teenage girl on a Friday night with a house to herself? Recipe for a party,” she said decidedly.

I laughed at that statement. “Lexie is more likely to spend the night making kale chips if she has the night to herself, or watching some film with subtitles,” I told her.

She raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow.

I shrugged my shoulders. “My kid is like a unicorn of the teenage world. She is yet to sneak out, smoke a cigarette or steal a beer. If I didn’t give birth to her myself I would wonder about her genetic connection to me,” I said with a straight face.

Gwen’s face softened and she rubbed her belly once more. “Let’s hope my rascals do not take after me either—” she shuddered slightly, “if they’re anything like I was as a teenager.” Her face brightened. “I’m so glad to have another mum around. I can rack your brain.” She jerked her head to Lucy. “These ones aren’t exactly full of motherly advice and my own is half a world away, so I’m so excited to have another mum in the group.”

I smiled at her. “I made it all up as I went along and I’m pretty sure it was a fluke that Lexie is a well-adjusted young woman. Probably more well-adjusted than her mom, but I’m happy to help in any way I can.” I truly was. Without Ava I would have been lost, considering I didn’t have parental role models to model my own parenting from. I knew how freaking scary it was to be responsible for another human being.

“Well, I will be glad to be talking shoes and sex with Amy and Rosie while you ladies do diapers and formula,” Lucy declared. “We’ve gotta run. It was so nice to meet you Mia—looking forward to meeting your girl, and having a beer chugging race with her.” She waved her freshly manicured fingers at me.

Gwen did the same. “Seven-thirty tonight at Laura Maye’s. I’ll text you,” she said.

“Nice to meet you, see you tonight,” I replied, then my brain caught up. “You don’t have my phone number,” I called in vain, but they were already gone.



Turns out in small towns you didn’t need to give out your phone number to potential friends. Just one biker. Which was what Gwen was explaining. I was two cocktails deep and fully relaxed. So this might be why I didn’t feel a little more alarmed to hear that Gwen and her equally beautiful, equally glamorous friend Amy were married to the two hotties Cade and Brock. It was hard to imagine the petite, chocolate-haired beauty clad in Gucci being with a rough biker like Cade who looked deadly. Ditto with the curvy, red-headed bombshell who was obviously from a lot of money, considering her jewelry and handbag that cost more than my car.

“I already knew you’d met Lucky, considering he wouldn’t shut up about ‘the hot MILF who named her car Betty,’” she explained, sipping her soda. “So got your number off him—small towns. Once one person, namely a big-mouthed biker’s got your digits, they’re practically public domain,” she informed me. Her face was panicked slightly. “I hope you don’t mind,” she added.

I waved my hand. “Not at all. Lucky seriously called me a MILF? That’s so sweet,” I sang, feeling the effects of two very strong cocktails. I frowned slightly. “And I didn’t name my car, my child did,” I clarified, not wanting my glorious new friends to think I was an idiot that named cars. Plus, I was at least ten years older than them. I felt like I needed to at least give the illusion of maturity.

They all laughed slightly, then Amy leaned forward slightly drunkenly. Woman had had at least two more cocktails than me; I didn’t know how she wasn’t on the floor. “Now, Mia. You’ve gotta tell me, you’ve got a sixteen-year-old kid—totally beautiful by the way.” She gave a head tilt. “Yet you look younger than me.” She moved her head in even closer, moving to a whisper. “What’s the secret? You make a deal with the Devil or somethin’?” Her voice was so serious I couldn’t help but laugh. Like properly laugh, throw my head back and everything.

That’s how the rest of the night went; easy chat with women who were impossible not to like. Women who were fast becoming friends.



“Bye, Gwen!” I called. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime!” she yelled back with a grin.

“Your place next time—you’re making daiquiris,” Amy added from the passenger window, giving me a thumbs up.

I laughed. “Lexie’s got a great recipe,” I called.

They pulled away, sounding the horn and I waved once more.

I may have been a little tipsy. A *smidgeon*. This was not due to the fact I drank a lot. This was due to the fact I was a mother who had a poor constitution for strong cocktails on account of hardly ever consuming them. When most of your time is dedicated to raising a child, cocktails with the girls was not something I got treated to. When you have that child before you are legally allowed to take a drink, that meant I didn’t even have cocktails with the girls prior to that. More like stealing beers from my parent’s fridge.

Needless to say, three of Laura Maye's "specials" had me stumbling slightly down our pathway. Those same cocktails had me pause and turn to squint at the house across the street. Like mine, it was dark and didn't show any signs of life. It wasn't late, and I didn't think bikers were the early to bed type, so I deduced he wasn't home.

I turned back to my own house, deflated. Three cocktails had me feeling not only tipsy, but horny. Though my priorities needed to be in place. Which was why I crept into my house and checked on my most important priority.

Lexie was fast asleep, the dim light from her lamp showing she had once again fallen asleep with a book on her chest. I quietly approached her bed and lifted the book off her. I made sure to mark her page before setting it on her side table and brushed the hair out of her face.

"Did you have fun, Mom?" she asked groggily, slowly opening her eyes.

"Sure did, Dollface," I whispered. "You have a nice night?"

She yawned. "Yeah, and the strippers all left before you got home, which was a plus."

I shook my head. "I hope you got good photos." I kissed her head. "Night sweetie, love you."

She rolled over. "To the moon," she murmured, already falling back asleep.

My heart warmed slightly. When she was little Lexie was fascinated with space and the moon. At five years old, when we were lying on the grass of our backyard watching the stars, she pointed at the full moon. "Is the moon far away, Mommy?" she asked in the way that every five-year-old did. Like their parent had the answer to every question in the universe and trusted whatever answer they got to said question.

I found her little hand and squeezed it. "Yeah, baby, so far away they need a big spaceship to travel there," I told her.

"Farther than Ava and Steve's house?" she asked with wonder.

I giggled slightly. "Yeah, doll."

"Farther than the ocean?" she continued.

I struggled to keep a straight face at her serious tone. "Way farther," I told her somberly.

She was quiet for a long time, this working in her little five-year-old head. Then she turned, resting her head in her chubby little hand, the other one touching my cheek lightly.

“Then Momma, I love you all the way to the moon,” she declared.

I gathered my precious little girl into my chest, one single tear escaping my eye. Everything I had gone through the past five years, everything, was worth my little girl uttering that single sentence. “Me too, baby. To the moon,” I whispered against her blonde head.

I looked at that same blonde head, much bigger now and full of so many mature adult thoughts it scared me slightly. I turned out her lamp and left the room, feeling almost swollen with the love I had for that little human. The one that, no matter how big she got, would always still be the little girl who declared she loved me “all the way to the moon.”

As I slipped into a cami and shorts I got slightly tearful at the realization my little human was turning into a little woman. One that was strong, smart and sensible.

My thoughts were interrupted by a sound that I felt in my belly. That I felt below my belly. Harley pipes.

I peeked out my window to see the lone headlight of a motorcycle pulling into Zane’s driveway. A huge figure got off the bike, disappearing into the house. I swallowed, desire and longing pooling in my stomach at the sight of that figure. I felt like I had been without him for days, not hours. With the help of alcohol lowering my inhibitions, I found myself crossing the street without even a robe on.

I didn’t even pause as I approached his door, one thing on my mind. The door opened before I could even knock, dark eyes locking onto me.

“Babe,” he growled as I made it to him, his jaw hard. “You don’t have anything fuckin’ covering you.” He sounded pissed, and maybe if I had been less inebriated I would have heard the concern underneath.

But alas, cocktails and an inability to hold my liquor gave me a one-track mind. And a crazy amount of confidence apparently, because I pushed his chest, directing him inside.

I knew it wasn’t my mad upper body strength that had us moving into his hallway; it was more like the surprise and desire that flared in his eyes.

I didn’t register much beyond the need to touch him, feel him inside me. My hand reached up to his neck, yanking his mouth to mine.

That’s where my actions stopped. His arm locked around me, clutching my ass firmly while his mouth claimed mine. I moaned as his hard body pressed into me. As much as I would I have gladly liked to kiss him forever, I had something else in mind, which was why I pulled back.

Zane frowned at me, or more accurately, glowered.

I ignored this, directing him so his back was to the wall, lowering myself down onto my knees.

Zane let out a hiss of breath once he realized my intentions, his hands roughly landing on my head.

“Wildcat,” he murmured hoarsely.

I glanced up at him, my hands on his belt. “I want to taste you,” I declared brazenly, freeing him and clutching his beautiful length in my hand.

His face was taut, the muscles in his cheek twitching.

I kept eye contact with him for a beat, then resumed my mission. I licked the tip of him gently, teasing, tasting. His hand tightened at my head and I heard his rough curse. I smiled to myself and took him fully in my mouth, my panties soaked at the erotic control I had. Complete control over a man who, I had learned, liked to control everything with his strong hands. Not this time. Once I had gotten used to his size in my mouth I went for it, sucking licking, using my hands. Feeling more turned on than I thought possible, I used my free hand to touch myself while I continued sucking Zane.

“Fuck, Wildcat,” he bit out darkly.

Whatever control he had was lost as I touched myself. His hands moved to the back of my head and he started to fuck my mouth. He wasn’t gentle. He *fucked* my mouth. I took it. I fucking *loved* it. My hand moved in tandem with his thrusts, working myself to orgasm as I felt him tense. He let out a grunt and emptied himself in my mouth. I came hard as I swallowed him.

Without having time to recover, Zane’s hands were underneath my arms, and he yanked me up his body. He lifted me and carried me into his room, his face taut, hard. He set me down on the floor and I swayed slightly as he steadied me with his hands at my hips. I felt his cool gaze rove over every inch of me. I smiled lazily, my jaw slightly tender, but in a good way.

“You shitfaced?” he clipped, his voice low.

I grinned even more. “I wouldn’t use that term, rather pleasantly buzzed,” I amended.

He shook his head. “You’re shitfaced.”

I shrugged my shoulders, loath to argue. My grin was gone as his eyes turned hooded.

“Take off that shit,” he ordered, nodding to my PJ’s.

I stared at him; his arms had left my hips and were now crossed over his impressive chest.

“Now, Wildcat.” He didn’t sound angry; his voice was flat. His eyes were blazing.

I hurriedly complied.

I stood naked in front of him, while he stood fully clothed. His eyes devoured my body in a way that made me feel no shame. It also made me forget I had just had an orgasm. I wanted another one. Like now.

“Get on the bed, all fours,” he demanded hoarsely.

I felt a delicious tingle between my legs at his rough command. I did as he said, feeling exposed and vulnerable in the position I found myself in, but also hot as hell.

Calloused hands ran over my ass, squeezing roughly. “Gonna take this ass,” he declared in a gravelly tone.

His fingers moved to dance around my opening. I tensed slightly. No one had ever touched me there. It seemed taboo, forbidden. But I found myself wanting it. Wanting him there. His fingers continued their journey until they reached my soaking pussy.

“Not tonight though.” His fingers slipped into me and I moaned.

He yanked me right to the edge of the bed, his finger slipping out of me.

“Gonna fuck you hard, Wildcat,” he told me roughly, hands at my hips.

I whipped my head around to meet his eyes. He was still fully clothed, his jeans unbuttoned.

“Turn the fuck back around,” he ordered, his hand going to my neck.

I felt myself get hotter at his command, and I didn’t have time to think much else after he slammed into me and commenced in fucking my brains out.



Two orgasms and multiple positions later, Zane and I lay in bed, breathing heavily. He was naked now, my head on his muscled chest, his arms clutching me to him. I felt good. Sore. Sated. Safe. In his arms, I felt safe.

No matter how rough he was, no matter how hard he fucked me, he never went too far. Never hurt me. It didn't matter that he barely spoke; the only looks I got from him were either filled with hate or desire. It didn't even matter the cut he wore hinted at a dangerous motorcycle club. Right then, lying with him, I felt safe. Safest I'd felt since...ever.

We were silent. I drew lines on his colorful chest absently. It was dark and the moonlight only gave me a poor vision of his beautiful chest. I would have liked to study it in the daylight. But I feared that I wouldn't get Zane in the daylight. I would only get him under the stars, in the dark, where demons could hide.

"Where were you tonight?" Zane asked, breaking the silence, interrupting my train of thought.

"A bar," I answered simply. Maybe still feeling effects of that bar. Or I could be drunk on sex. Or testosterone.

Zane's arms tightened. "Elaborate," he demanded.

I rested my chin on my hand, looking up at him. His jaw was hard.

"I was at Laura Maye's bar with the girls," I told him.

"Lexie?" he bit out weirdly.

"Is old enough not to burn the house down or eat glue while I'm away," I answered, feeling a slight pang over the fact my daughter was sleeping in an empty house across the street. Was I a terrible mother for going out drinking, then sneaking over to have sex with my hot neighbor? I tried to shelve that thought for when I was safely back in my own bed, inspecting every one of my decisions, including the one that landed me here. For now, I wanted to bask in this moment, prolong the feeling of strong arms around me, of Zane's eyes being unshuttered.

He paused as if he was going to say something else.

I pushed myself up even farther. "Lexie's a good kid. The best, actually," I told him. "I trust her."

"She's sixteen," Zane declared.

"That's what I'm told," I retorted with slight sarcasm.

I felt more than saw the glower. "She's a fuckin' knockout," he continued.

I ignored the stronger pang I felt at this. Not because he was calling my teenage daughter a knockout in a pervy way, but in a protective way.

"Well, of course, she takes after her mother," I told him, my voice now dripping with sarcasm.

Zane's hand went to my jaw.

"Her mother's at a fuckin' bar suckin' cocktails, no doubt catching the eye of every fucktard in the place, 'cause she's more than a fuckin' knockout," he bit out. "And Lexie's at home alone. She could catch the eye of any little fucktard." His arms squeezed. "When she does, that little fucktard will come sniffin' around," he clipped.

My stomach dropped at this. In a good way. He was concerned. Protective. "Lexie's a good kid," I repeated. "I trust her." His eyes told me he was going to have more to say on that particular subject, so I changed it. "You do know I was with Gwen, Amy, Rosie and Lucy?" I asked him.

"Fuckin' gathered those would be the girls," he answered.

"Well then, you know that since I was with such creatures, no one was looking at a mere mortal like myself," I joked.

Zane froze and suddenly he was on top of me, pinning me down with his body. Totally wasn't complaining. "We're together, you don't say shit like that," he clipped, sounding pissed.

"Like what?" I asked, genuinely confused.

"Like shit that suggests you're any fuckin' less than drop dead fuckin' gorgeous, that you shine as bright as a fuckin' supernova, whoever you're with," he said, his rough, cold voice not matching the warm words.

I jolted. I didn't expect his rage at my offhand comment and the fact he thought I was gorgeous. He didn't put a paper bag over my head when we had sex so I knew he didn't think I was ugly, but the ferocity in which he just uttered that statement had me thrown.

He stroked my cheek lightly, his hand moving to play with my hair. "Beautiful," he murmured, almost to himself.

It was like he was some kind of werewolf. But instead of the moonlight turning him into a monster, it made the monster melt away, revealing the man underneath.

Then there it was, the sunlight. Not literally; the moon still shone through the window. But like a switch, something turned the light back on. I knew it. Even through my residual drunkenness. His eyes hardened and he moved off me.

"You need to go now babe," he declared, voice flat.

I lay there, perplexed and more than a little peeved. And the peeved part was to hide the hurt part. "Seriously?" I almost whispered. I was pissed I couldn't inject more anger into the statement. It sounded weak, defeated.

“You know what this is,” Zane said simply, looking at the ceiling.

I let that sink in for a second. I nodded. “Yeah. I know what this is,” I lied, moving from the bed.

I had no fucking clue what this was. I didn’t know what being fucked with a ferocious intensity beyond anything I’d ever imagined was. I didn’t know how a man could be so callous, yet tender in the space of minutes. How he could seem to look into the deepest broken parts of me and make me feel bare and raw? How he could make me feel safe and ashamed at the same time? I didn’t know any of it. What I did know was that I had a shred, *a shred* of self-respect left so I clutched it like I clutched my clothes, making to leave.

“Babe,” he called, and to my surprise, he was close. Like right at my back. Something draped over my shoulders. “Wear this,” he ordered firmly.

“Zane, I don’t think...” I started to protest.

“Don’t fuckin’ argue,” he commanded, shrugging my shoulders into a shirt that smelled of tobacco and man. Of Zane.

I relented. He turned me slightly, putting one hand on my hip, another at my jaw. His face searched mine. Then he did it again. I could barely see, but I could feel it. His eyes looking into the core of me. Our kindred spirits recognized the broken pieces in each other. Just for a moment.

His lips touched mine. “I’ll see you,” he promised

I stood woodenly a moment before walking out the door.

I made it all the way to my house without thinking. I even checked on Lexie once more, then made it to my room. I then sank onto my floor, my head going to the collar of the shirt, inhaling it.

“Fuck,” I muttered out loud.

Fuck was right. I feared I had somehow just jumped right off the deep end. And I was a shitty swimmer.



CHAPTER EIGHT

“It’s taken care of,” a voice told me on the other end of the phone.

“It’s taken care of?” I repeated, my eyes bulging out in disbelief.

I was talking to an unfamiliar voice at the garage of the Sons. This was because I was yet to receive the invoice for Betty. I had called because I didn’t want to delay in finding out how much the sting would be. I knew it would be a mint. Car repairs always were. It would hurt. We weren’t exactly punching food stamps since I was paid well and thrifty when expensive footwear wasn’t on sale. But I had bought this place in Amber, which meant I had a mortgage. I was also saving for Lexie’s college tuition. I wasn’t exactly rolling in it, but we’d manage. We always did.

“Yep,” the bored sounding voice informed me.

I rubbed my slightly aching head. “There must have been some kind of mix up. I haven’t paid, haven’t even received an invoice.”

It had been over two weeks since I got Betty back, and nothing. As much as I would like to ignore that, I couldn’t. I assumed it had got lost in the mail, something. Obviously this wasn’t the case.

“Don’t need to, club took care of it,” the voice informed me. The guy sounded like he didn’t understand why I didn’t get so simple a concept.

I chewed my lip. Lexie and her band were playing in the garage; even with the door closed I could hear the muffled sound. They were good. Way good.

I didn’t have time to think about possible promotional activities for the new band I would be managing, I was too busy trying to figure out why on God’s green earth the club would pay for my car repairs. I wouldn’t find any answers in my head.

“Why on earth would the club take care of my car? I hardly know them,” I repeated my sentiments to the unfamiliar voice.

There was a pause. “Look, lady, don’t know the specifics, I just do what Bull tells me,” he said, sounding like he’d had enough of explaining this.

“Bull?” I repeated, more to myself than him.

“Shit,” he muttered into the phone. This also sounded like it was meant to be to himself and not to me.

“Thanks,” I said into the phone.

“Yeah,” he near groaned.

I had a feeling whoever that was wasn’t meant to disclose the fact that Zane was my car’s benefactor.

I didn’t not what to think about this. I knew what to feel. In the time since the night of the cocktails, I had snuck over to Zane’s almost every other night. It was the same. Mind blowing, intense, brutal sex, sometimes more than once. Most of the time more than once, then an undetermined amount of silence in his arms, then I left. He would always touch my lips lightly, tenderly, right before I left, something working behind his eyes. I never got it, whatever it was. Never had time to inspect it before they shuttered again. I definitely didn’t have time to talk to him. We didn’t do that. Talk. So I had no idea how to process the information I just got. What emotion to clutch onto. Anger was the first thing that popped into my head. So I rolled with that.

With Lexie and her band happily jamming out in my garage, I decided to text her, as not to interrupt her “flow.”

***Me:** Running an errand, doll. Try not to bring the roof down with the power of rock n roll.*

My anger only seemed to increase as I drove like a slight maniac to the garage. After knocking for a good five minutes at Zane’s door, I had gone to the only other place I knew he frequented. I didn’t like my chances of finding him there late on a Saturday afternoon, but anger did not make way for much practical thinking.

I pulled up to the garage with a purpose. If Zane wasn’t there I’d go into the little building off the bays marked *office*. I would *not* go anywhere near the building to the side which multiple bikes were parked in front of. My anger might dim my intelligence slightly, it didn’t make me stupid.

As I got out of the car, I squinted at a figure bent over the hood of a car. I could only see his back, but I knew it was him. His coveralls were tied at the waist, so his black wife beater showed off his arms. His arms, which were corded and sinewy and beautiful with the vibrant artwork decorating it. I failed to let myself stumble on the fact he looked drool worthy, my purpose was not to perv. I lifted my shoulders and strengthened my resolve, pointing myself in his direction. I quickly scanned the other bays; they seemed deserted. My heels clicking on the concrete made him straighten, shifting his focus from the car. Surprise registered on his usually blank face, his eyes moving to my bare legs. Desire flared instantly in those dark eyes.

I ignored that too. Or tried to.

“Here,” I thrust my envelope at his chest, as he had risen to meet me.

His grease-stained hands grasped the white envelope on reflex.

“What’s this?” he grunted—yes, *grunted* at me.

“It’s a check,” I snapped at him. “For my car.”

I had done some Googling on how much the repairs on my car would be. I didn’t exactly know what they did to it, considering I kind of glazed over when Lucky explained it. It was a lot of guesswork. After inwardly flinching at my results, I bit the bullet and wrote the check. It would be a hit, but Lexie would still get her superfood crap and I would have to kiss designer shoes goodbye for a long time. Even second hand.

Zane’s face darkened. He held the envelope back to me. “Not fuckin’ takin’ this, Mia,” he bit out.

I crossed my arms and stepped back. “Um, I think you fuckin’ are, Zane,” I shot back, mimicking his tone. “This,” I gestured between us, “does not constitute payment for a car,” I hissed.

Zane’s figure went solid and he regarded me darkly. Silence descended and I swallowed at the tension in the air. “You did not just say what I think you said,” he said quietly, dangerously.

I refused to back down. “I am not a whore, Zane. Regardless of how things are between us, outside the bedroom you do not treat me like one,” I told him, trying not to yell. And also maybe trying not to cry.

I was mighty glad that no one was around to witness this, but I still felt exposed standing in the garage in view of the parking lot, not just physically, but emotionally.

Then everything passed in a blur. Zane grabbed me, dragging me deeper inside the bay, past the car to a tool bench, pressing my belly to it.

“What are you doing?” I hissed through my desire. “Anyone could just walk in here,” I continued. He may have pulled me out of view of the parking lot, but the doors were still open. Any old biker could just waltz on up.

I felt him move to touch something above his head and the sound of a garage door closing made me jump slightly.

“You think I would let anyone see that face when my cock’s inside you?” His breath tickled the back of my neck.

I started breathing heavily, every inch of me going wired.

We stayed still, me pressed against the bench, Zane’s hard body pressed into me, until the sunlight left with the groan of a garage door. Darkness descended in the garage. That’s the only time we did this. In the shadows.

“Made myself clear on what would happen if you said that shit again, Mia,” Zane growled in my ear.

My legs tingled as I remembered something about “tanning my ass.” I swallowed. I was finding it mighty hard to be mad at him when he was turning me on.

“You need to let me go, Zane,” I choked out, not sounding at all convincing.

I was not into having sex in semi-public places, namely friggin’ commercial premises connected to a biker compound. My libido didn’t seem too worried, though.

“Yeah, Mia, I do,” he murmured, his hand skimming my hips and moving up to lightly circle my neck. “But I’m not going to,” he finished, his voice rough.

The hand at my neck exerted pressure, pushing me down so my cheek landed on the rough wood. I didn’t even fight it.

Zane pushed my denim skirt up to my hips. My breath was now coming in pants, his hand still at my neck. Cool air hit my bare ass as Zane pulled my panties down. I stepped out of them silently, not moving. His hand traveled up my ankle, stopping to cup between my legs.

I heard his sharp intake of breath. “Fuckin’ sopping.”

His hand left me. I let out a little sound of disappointment.

Zane’s hand cupped my ass. “Your pussy doesn’t get any attention just yet. You gotta be punished for calling yourself that ugly shit,” he growled.

Slap!

I wasn't even prepared; he didn't even warn me as he brought his hand down hard on my ass. The sting radiated through my cheek and I half convulsed at the pleasure.

"You gonna say that shit about yourself again, Wildcat?" Zane asked roughly.

I was too distracted to answer straightaway. Too turned on. Never in my life had I thought I'd be getting off on this. But I was. In a big way.

Slap!

His hand came down again and I flinched, my ass feeling hot while I felt myself get wetter.

Any thoughts about our current location whizzed out of my head. The thought of being discovered seemed to make me burn hotter.

"Answer me," he demanded.

"No, Zane," I breathed out, "I won't do it again."

Rough hands moved to my pussy and I almost screamed as they reached my clit.

"Good," he muttered, his finger pushing into me.

I couldn't restrain my moan of pleasure as he moved inside me, the scream that sounded when he brought his hand down once more, finger still working me.

And then it was gone, right when I'd been about to lose it, explode...he left me empty.

"Wha—" I started to plead, but I was cut off when he thrust into me, filling me to the brim.

I saw stars. Okay, that was way better than his finger. His hand went back to my neck, holding me down against the table as he plunged into me. I met him, thrust for thrust, chasing what I knew promised to be an earth-shattering orgasm. My ass stung and the pads of his fingers were digging into me. It starkly contrasted the pleasure I felt with every stroke. It made it better.

Then, without warning, there it was. The earth-shattering orgasm. I was barely able to stay conscious as it rocked over me, Zane not stopping his thrusts as I rode the wave. I lost it, all time and space, my focus going only to the pleasure. Somewhere vaguely I registered Zane's grunt, the feel of him releasing himself into me.

I was slowly lifted up from the table, feeling empty as Zane pulled out of me. He held me against his chest as I stood on shaky feet, his hands moving

to cup my breasts. A feather light kiss landed on my temple.

“Stay there, Wildcat,” he ordered quietly.

Then he was gone. I clutched the table for support, unable to properly stand. I felt him seep out of me, down my legs. I blinked, trying to fathom what had just happened. I had stormed in here with the goal of giving him the check and giving him a piece of my mind and leaving. What I had not planned on was getting spanked, then bent over a tool bench. In the middle of the day. At his place of work. I then realized I was standing and staring at a surprisingly clean and organized tool bench with my skirt up around my waist, no panties on and cum dripping down my leg.

Classy, Mia.

As I was about to yank my skirt down and try to gather up some dignity, large hands grabbed mine.

“No, babe,” a voice tickled my ear.

I expected him to touch me again, fuck me again. My stomach dipped at the thought. I was deliciously tender and wasn't sure if I'd survive another brutal session, but I wouldn't say no. I was surprised—no, shocked—when soft fabric wiped me gently between my legs.

I really hoped that was a clean cloth. What did I know? Maybe he regularly had sex with people here and had some sort of secret stash.

I turned my head to meet Zane's eyes; he watched me while his hands gently cleaned me up. No words were spoken. None were needed and I was afraid that any would corrupt this tender moment. The only one I'd ever had with Zane. One I'd cherish. Like the look in his eye as he branded my soul with his gaze. He cleaned himself from me with a gentleness I could have never imagined from someone as hard as him.

Wordlessly, he pulled down my skirt, his hand caressing my cheek softly.

“You learn your lesson?” he asked, his eyes not leaving mine.

I shook my head. “I think I might need some extra tutoring in the near future. I'm a slow learner,” I whispered.

Then he shocked me. His eyes stayed dark with desire, but his mouth, his beautiful mouth turned up at the corners. It wasn't a smile; it wasn't even a grin. But it was a smidge of emotion peeking out from the hard façade. I'd totally take that.

“You're still taking the check,” I added, upset that I had to wipe the half smile off his face. But I had to stand my ground.

His face returned to the granite expression that I learned was his default.

“I’m not taking the fuckin’ check,” he clipped.

“Yes, you are,” I responded, hoping to sound as strong as him. I feared my upper body strength was lacking, as was my bad ass tone. And goatee.

“It’s sorted. Deal with it,” was his response, and he turned to move towards the car.

He did not just dismiss me and turn his back on me.

“Um, excuse me? The conversation does not end when one broody flipping biker decides it with his usual two syllables,” I declared haughtily, rounding the hood to face him. “The conversation ends when both participants decide. I,” I pointed to myself, “am a participant. Therefore, I declare this *not freaking over*.”

Zane looked up. His glare had returned and he didn’t respond.

“Um, a sexy glare does not a response make,” I shot at him. “Just because God granted you with devilish good looks, a crazy amount of muscles and a serious talent in the bedroom does not mean you get to go around glaring and paying for people’s car repairs,” I half yelled, even though it almost certainly actually did. My stinging ass and sated vagina could testify to that.

“Keep yelling like that, I’ll fuck you again. Till you can’t speak,” he ground out.

I swallowed, totally hating that this turned me on. On that thought, I realized something was missing. Why I didn’t notice this earlier was beyond me. My eyes darted around the floor. “Where are my panties?” I asked on a lower decibel. My mind whirled with the thoughts of someone like Lucky finding them while he was going about his day. I searched more frantically.

Zane’s gaze turned hooded. “They’re mine now.”

I swallowed again. Okay, so I should be a little creeped out over the fact that Zane was keeping my panties. Instead, my bare downstairs tingled at the thought. I was totally glad I wore a lacy yellow Victoria Secret thong today.

“You’re gonna walk around all day in that short little skirt, your pussy tender from my cock and your ass stinging from my hand and remember.” His voice was raw.

My stomach tingled.

“The panties,” he continued, “can count toward your payment for the car.” His attention went back to the car.

“You’re telling me you want me to accept that you think a pair of my panties serves as a payment for my car repairs?” I asked in disbelief.

“Don’t want you to accept it. It’s already done,” he half grunted.

I stared at him awhile, my mouth agape. “I have actually lost the ability to have a sane conversation with you about my car when you’re talking panty payments and ... rude things,” I trailed off, embarrassed.

“Good. You can leave then,” he said, his voice back to flat.

I felt myself deflate. Here was something I was familiar with. Being dismissed after sex. Not that I could complain. I let it happen. But I couldn’t help the twinge that had me feeling on the verge of tears.

My silence seemed to be an answer, because he straightened and walked over to the button hanging from the ceiling, pressing it, all while his eyes burned into me. I flinched at the grating sound of his garage opening. I stared at him a moment longer before turning on my heel and walking on shaky legs toward my car, feeling vulnerable in my lack of underwear, and slightly more like the whore he promised I wasn’t.



Bull

Bull gripped his wrench so hard he was surprised he didn’t snap it. He heard the heels of her shoes as she left the bay and it took every fiber of his being not to lift his head and watch her leave. He wanted to. More than anything. Watch her tight little ass sway in that delicious fuckin’ skirt. Know that her red ass grated against the fabric. Her bare ass. His cock pulsed at the memory of her taking it, taking his hand like she was born for it. She fuckin’ loved it. His Wildcat. Only when he heard her car door slam did he watch the red Beetle hurtle out of the parking lot at high speed.

Lucky was mounting his bike at this moment; he sat on it and watched the car screech out. Then his gaze turned to Bull. They locked eyes for a second, Lucky’s gaze hard. Bull scowled at him and brought his attention back to the car.

Or tried to.

Then there it was, without warning. An attack. The memory of *her*. Of something they didn't have. The sex was good with her. Brilliant, in fact. But she was tiny. So fucking tiny and so fucking sweet, he was terrified he'd break her half the time. So he held back. He'd never shown her what lay deep down. The desires that he had been happy to suppress, for a lifetime with her. He didn't have to do that with Mia. Hold back. He lost complete control when he fucked her, with a brutality he didn't think any woman could handle. But she did. She loved every fuckin' minute of it.

He shook his head, feeling more pissed than ever. He needed to stop thinking that shit. 'Specially needed to stop thinking of *her*. If he didn't he'd be going down a road even darker than the one he was already on. The road they said was paved with good intentions. He definitely needed to scrape Mia off. Bitch was messing with his brain even though he said it was only sex. It was more. He fucking knew it. She was getting under his skin. He needed to stop it. And soon.



Bull finished working for the day, and instead of going to the clubhouse and drowning his sorrows in a bottle of whiskey like he should have, he went home. He started working on his bike, to keep his hands busy, his mind busy. The garage door stayed open out of some sort of self-flagellation. There it was. Her place. Right there. The urge to go over there, to see her again, to fuck her again, to fuckin' apologize was so strong he actually caught himself getting up a couple of times. Christ, he didn't only want to fuck her. He wanted to *talk* to her. He never wanted to talk to anyone. Not even his brothers could hold an extended conversation with him. Even with Gwen he mostly just listened. But with Mia he wanted to talk. The woman was funny. Hilarious even. She never fuckin' shut up. Even when she was spittin' mad she babbled. Fuckin' *panty payments*.

On that thought, the sounds of laughter carried across the street. Male laughter. Bull narrowed his eyes at the now open garage door directly across from him. Lexie was grinning at a couple of guys who were carrying

rucksacks, one with a guitar case. One actually hugged her as she walked out with them to a car at the curb. Bull restrained the urge to go over and rip the little fucker's head off. He watched as the shitheads piled into a car and drove off. Lucky for them.

Lexie's eyes traveled with the car and then settled on him.

"Zane!" she called on a grin and started to run over.

Fuck.

She ran right into his garage, right up to his bike with a grin. No fear, no hesitation, just an easy smile. He wasn't used to that. People approaching him with a smile devoid of fear, devoid of judgment.

"Hey, Zane," she greeted, slightly breathless.

"Lex," he nodded, unable to only give her a nonverbal nod as was his custom.

"I hope the noise didn't disturb you—we tried to put some soundproofing up, you know, as to not brass off the neighbors, but I'm not sure how effective it is," she babbled, chewing her lip. "Mom can still hear us from in the kitchen. I know because she texted me a draft of my Grammy acceptance speech." She gave me a worried look. "As a joke," she quickly added. "We're only a high school band—we aren't even that good yet, but Mom's delusions have us set for stardom."

Bull had trouble taking this all in. "A band?" he ground out.

Lexie nodded enthusiastically, her curls bouncing. She played with the handlebar of his bike. Normally this would get him riled and ready to punch anyone touching his bike. But not her.

"Yeah, you see those guys leaving before?"

Bull nodded tightly.

"That's my band!" She frowned slightly. "We still have to think of a name. It's kind of a sticking point between the guys," she shrugged, "creative minds and all that."

That's who those fuckers were? Bandmates? Jesus. He'd have to have a little talk with the nitwits, make sure they got no fuckin' ideas about inter-band relations.

Lexie had abandoned the perusal of his bike and was now wandering around his garage.

"You should come and listen to us once we get a little better," she added over her shoulder. "Or maybe once we get our first gig." She paused. "Hey!" she called in an excited voice. "I didn't know you played!"

Bull followed her eyes to the guitar resting in the corner of the room, lying half-abandoned in its dusty case.

“Long time ago,” he said quickly, battling with the memories attached to it. The demons.

Lexie gave him a shy smile. “You should come and play with me.” She hesitated. “Maybe you could even teach me some things.” Her hand trailed along the faded case, dust sliding off. “Mom couldn’t afford to get me regular lessons, especially after she bought me my guitar, so I’ve mostly taught myself. YouTube’s great, but it would be so cool to learn off a real life human being,” she finished quietly.

Bull’s stomach clenched. No fuckin’ way. He could barely look at that thing, let alone touch it again. That was the only reason it sat in a forgotten corner of his garage and not a trash pit. He couldn’t physically put his hands on the thing. No fuckin’ way was he getting it out to play fuckin’ teacher to a teenager.

“Yeah, kid, all right. Maybe,” he heard himself saying. He had no clue why he said it. Maybe it was the thought of Mia struggling to give her daughter something she obviously loved. Something she obviously lived for. And then that daughter being smart enough and dedicated enough to teach herself. Maybe he had finally dropped off the fuckin’ deep end. But the light in the grin that lit up Lexie’s face because of him...that’s what settled in his gut, chasing away the poison that usually resided there.

“Really? That is aces, Zane! I’m free, you know, whenever. Well, apart from when I’m obviously at school. But any time after that. Seriously. Whenever suits you,” she chattered, her words almost blending together.

Bull couldn’t do more than nod. He had already dug himself a huge fuckin’ hole.

Lexie seemed to sense his need for silence. She wandered back over to where he was working on his bike. And to his complete surprise, she plonked herself down. Right on the grease-stained concrete floor. Right beside him.

“You mind if I sit here and watch for a while?” she asked, her voice back to shy. “Sometimes I just need a bit of quiet after all the music makes up all the noise in my head,” she explained.

Bull somehow found himself unable to do anything but nod again, turning his attention back to his bike. She sat there quietly watching him for close to half an hour. He didn’t find her gaze or the silence uncomfortable.

He lived in silence. He was used to it. Welcomed it. But he wasn't used to the company. He found himself being comforted by it.

As she got up to leave, he found himself uncharacteristically not wanting to be devoid of company. So that's why he said, "Heard you," he clipped. "The band. You're good."

Her beam and wave goodbye was worth it.



CHAPTER NINE



Mia

I sat in my car, in the parking lot of the Sons compound...clubhouse...hangout...whatever. Shit. I didn't even know what to call this place. My biker vocab was limited to the couple of episodes of biker TV shows I watched. And even then I barely paid attention, merely drooled at the main character. On top of everything else, I hadn't known how to dress for this. I glimpsed down. Black skinny jeans seemed a safe choice. They were Lexie's, since I didn't own black skinny jeans. Well, I technically did, since I paid for them; they merely resided in my daughter's closet. I wore a black long-sleeved blouse made of tight jersey fabric. It looked modest at the front but the drape at the back went way deep, showing a lot of back. I had a chunky silver belt slung over top and my hair was piled into a messy ponytail, showcasing awesome dangling earrings. My makeup was heavy, for me at least, and a vibrant red decorated my lips. It was as biker chic as I was going to get. But thinking of Gwen and Amy, I didn't worry too much about abiding to some sort of dress code that required leather or chaps. I should more likely be worried about whatever mental condition I had that made me think it was a good idea to accept Gwen's invitation to a "club party". Especially to Zane's club. I hadn't seen or talked to him since he had spanked and screwed me in the very spot my eyes were focused on right now. He had somehow made me lose all sense of self preservation and let him screw me in a semi-public place. And I loved it. My belly flipped just thinking about it. Which was why I shouldn't be here. Which was why I had

avoided him for the past week. I certainly hadn't snuck over in the night for some crazy sex, as much as I had wanted to.

I swallowed, then contemplated turning my car back on and driving away. A tapping at the window foiled my plan. I jumped to see Lucky's attractive face grinning at me. Before I knew it he had opened the door and yanked me out.

"Party isn't in the car, sweetheart. Let's get you to the real party," he declared, slinging his arm around my shoulders.

"Hello to you too, Lucky," I half laughed, feeling at ease in his presence. He may be a hulking biker covered in tattoos, but I had a feeling he was a puppy dog under all of those muscles. His calm demeanor and perpetual smile had me feeling safe.

"I don't consider it a proper hello until we both have a beer in our hands," he exclaimed, directing us through a crowd we had just approached.

I struggled not to open my eyes in childlike wonder. I had never seen anything like this. In saying that, it wasn't hard to amaze me, considering I hadn't gone out much in my thirty-three years. I had been too busy raising a child. I liked hanging out on the couch with her, rather than trolling bars and drinking overpriced drinks. I was mighty fine with ten dollar bottles of wine and the occasional night in with a girlfriend.

This party was not as wild as I had expected. The outside area was packed. It was all yellowed grass with picnic tables scattered around and one long table in the middle. Fire barrels were also scattered, unlit due to the fact it was still early. A couple of men with beers in their hands manned a grill. To my right was a big building with a wraparound porch. It stood separate from the garage bays in the distance. I guessed it was the clubhouse. There were men in leather everywhere, ranging from young, muscled and yummy to old, barreled, and decidedly yucky. And everything in between. The women were much the same. Some were what I guessed were "club girls", scantily clad and hanging off multiple men. Others looked to be showing a bit less skin and had some enviable outfits. I exhaled when some were similar to mine. Nothing worse than going to a party and totally fucking up the dress code. Not that I'd been to many parties.

"Here you go, darlin,'" Lucky handed me an unopened beer; then his face blanched. "Shit, you drink beer, don't you? Not like Chardon-fucking-

nay or some shit?” he asked, sounding panicked at my potential wine drinking preference.

I laughed and patted his well-muscled arm before opening my beer. “Yes, I drink beer,” I reassured him. “Chardon-fucking-nay is reserved for when I’m feeling real classy, or when I’m drinking with the Queen,” I teased.

He grinned.

“Mia! You made it! Hell fucking yeah!” an excited voice exclaimed and I turned to almost collide with a sickeningly glamorous Amy. She embraced me. “Thank the fucking Lord you’re here.” She glanced down at my hand. “And drinking!” Her eyes went up to the sky as if to thank the Almighty for my alcohol imbibing ways. She linked an arm with mine, turning us away from Lucky. She winked at him and I gave him a little finger wave. He raised his beer with a grin. I swear he mouthed *good luck*.

“Gwen’s got another goddamned bun in her oven, thanks to her hot husband’s crazy sperm,” she announced with a wrinkled nose. “Rosie’s not here because,” she paused, “because of some reason to do with yet another guy.” She rolled her eyes and gave me a pointed look as she sat us down at an empty table. “Lucy’s having problems with her very own macho hot guy, one she has no chance against.” She gave me another look. “That’s a story to tell after another one of these.” She raised a cocktail glass—yes, I repeat, cocktail glass in the midst of a biker party—with amber liquid in it. “And Ash and Lily are studying,” she scowled. “So my drinking buddy list is sad and depleted, then you come into town! No pregnant belly or macho man trouble to speak of.” Her eyes narrowed. “Or do you have any macho man trouble? I know you haven’t been in this burg long, but trust me, these men are fast.” Her gaze flickered over to Cade, who had his arms around Gwen. Her eyes brightened and she gave me a wave. She looked like she moved to come over, but Cade’s arms stayed around her. She glared up at him.

I couldn’t help but smile. That was until I caught who she was standing beside. Zane stood stiffly, his eyes boring a hole into me. I was tempted to see if my clothes were smoking; it was that hot of a look. Heat mixed with a heck of a lot of anger.

“Holy shit,” Amy breathed. “You totally do have macho man trouble.” Her eyes darted from Zane to me.

I quickly tore my eyes away from his. “I wouldn’t call it trouble...exactly,” I spoke slowly, unsure if I wanted to expose my sexual

escapades with her. Not that I didn't trust her. I instinctively felt this woman was going to become my friend. You know how you just have that feeling with someone? It was what I got with her and all of the women I had encountered thus far. Women that just happened to be connected to the motorcycle club the man I was fucking was in. I didn't want to tangle my web anymore until I knew what the heck was going on. Or until I found the willpower to stop creeping over to his house in the dead of night.

"He doesn't seem to like me for some reason," I continued, making eye contact, hoping my lie wasn't obvious. "I've run into him a few times and I think he finds me...unfavorable."

"Honey, that's Bull. He'd pull his gun on a two-year-old child that dropped an ice cream on his motorcycle boot. But that stare—" Her eyes moved to him again. I chose not to move my gaze. "It's got something else in it," she mused, something working behind her eyes. "He's into you," she said finally in amazement.

I managed a snort. "Not likely," I scoffed. "In order for a man to be 'into you' he must harbor some friendly feelings towards you. That man—" I pointed with my head, still not looking at him. "Does not harbor any friendly feelings towards me," I declared with certainty. Amy sipped her drink, her brows furrowed.

"Wouldn't be so sure, Mia," she said quietly.



Thankfully, the talk moved on after that, though Amy still gave Zane some questionable looks. Gwen managed to extract herself from her scary but totally hot husband to join us, giving me a warm hug like I was an old friend. Before I knew it, our table was buzzing with people. Cade had sauntered over to claim Gwen onto his lap at one point, as did Brock with Amy. They chatted easily with me and were obviously deeply in love with their wives. Men stopped to shoot the shit and introduce themselves. Some were just as intimidating as they looked and others were surprisingly friendly, despite their gruff exteriors. I found myself having a good time and had drunk more beers than I intended. Gwen had told me she'd take me

home, having declared she was the club's sober driver for the next few months with a grin.

I stepped away from the party to call my daughter, feeling like a bad mother. I was at a biker gathering, slightly tipsy on beer. Not responsible parenting. Granted, Lexie had band practice that would most likely go into the night, but still.

"Hey, Momma," she greeted breathlessly after a few rings.

"Why are you out of breath? Are you throwing a raging party without me?" I asked, feigning disapproval. "Please tell me you at least are throwing a good one."

"I would never throw a rager without you Mom," Lexie told me seriously, "Who else would pour the Jell-O shots?"

I laughed at my beautifully naïve teenager. "One does not pour Jell-O shots, Grasshopper. Much to learn, you have."

The fact that my sixteen-year-old didn't know the semantics of a staple party drink had me feeling mighty proud of myself. Prior to getting knocked up with her, I was a Jell-O shot queen. And that was at fifteen. I was so glad she didn't take after me. Only in looks, at least. Kid was beautiful, like her stunning mother, of course.

"I've just finished up band practice—boys are just having dinner. That cool?" she asked.

"We have food?" I asked back, screwing up my nose.

"No, we're ordering pizza," she replied lightly. "We really need to go grocery shopping."

"Yes, one day we shall. You okay if I'm out another hour or so?" I asked hesitantly. "I can totally come home at any moment if you need me. And also to break up any ragers you decide to throw between now and then," I added quickly.

"No, Mom, I don't mind at all," she paused. "I'm happy, actually. You've never gone out, had fun. I'm glad you are," she said quietly. "I'm good. We're going to write some songs after dinner I think, so take your time."

I chewed my lip. I was torn. I actually was having a good time. And despite how ridiculous it sounded, I trusted Lexie and her bandmates. If she said they were eating pizza and writing songs, that's exactly what they were doing. Also, Lexie was a terrible liar. Thank God.

“Okay, Dollface. I won’t be late. Be sure to let me know if you’ve got any number ones brewing. As your Momager, it’s my duty to know,” I told her with mock seriousness.

“Will do, Mom. Love you,” she called.

“Love you to the moon,” I said softly.

I hung up the phone, slipping it in my pocket. I had intended on heading back to the party, realizing I had moved into a dark corner close to the entrance of the clubhouse.

A hand clutched my hip and yanked me into a sweaty body.

“Well, hello there, darlin,’” a voice drawled. “Hanging out in dark corners, dangerous for such a sweet piece like you. Lucky I found you.” The voice reeked of alcohol, his words slightly slurred.

I couldn’t make him out in the dull light, but I could feel his hands running up my sides. Anxiety nipped at me. I wasn’t afraid enough to cry out...yet. I wasn’t even sure if anyone would hear me over the sounds of the music.

I tried to push the groper away. “I was just heading back to the party.” I tried to sound strong but I was unable to extract myself from his fumbling arms.

Suddenly, the sweaty body and the stench was gone. There was an unmistakable sound of flesh hitting flesh, and a body fell to the ground. I flinched slightly when a huge black form stood in front of me. I couldn’t see his face but I knew it was *him*.

“Zane?” I asked in a small voice.

He didn’t answer me. He merely snatched my hand and dragged me up the porch steps and inside. We entered into a sort of lounge and bar area. The music was pumping and bodies moved everywhere. People were dancing while women straddled men in vests who sat on leather couches. I tried not to focus too hard on that. I didn’t really have time as Zane pulled me through it all at an alarming speed. When we reached a hallway the sounds died down slightly and there seemed to be no one. Various doors were closed with unmistakable sounds coming from them.

“Zane,” I tried again.

He stayed silent and his grip tightened when I tried to yank out of it. I wasn’t scared exactly, but he seemed like he was dragging me through a rabbit warren hallway, and I prayed he wasn’t taking me to some torture chamber like his expression suggested.

We turned into yet another hallway, this one utterly deserted, a dead end. The sounds of the party were well and truly distant now and no moaning lay behind the two doors on either side of the hallway.

“Zane, what are we...?”

Zane’s stormy eyes met mine. “Hands on the wall, ass out,” he clipped roughly.

Desire pooled in my stomach at his words. “Wha--”

His hand shot out, covering my mouth. “Didn’t ask you to talk. Told you. Hands on the wall, ass out,” he commanded in a rough tone.

I swallowed. His words were cold, his face blank, but his eyes flared with desire. At that moment, I didn’t care. That we were in a hallway where virtually anyone could walk up. That he was treating me like his whore yet again. I loved it. A deep, sick part of me loved every second of it.

I turned and placed my palms on the wall, ignoring the fact they were shaking slightly.

“Ass out.” His voice was gravelly.

I complied, my knees feeling weak and he hadn’t even touched me.

There was silence, and I felt his breath at the back of my neck. A finger trailed down my exposed spine. His palms moved to the sides of my ribcage, trailing up to cup my bare breasts roughly. I hissed as he tweaked my nipples. Hard.

“No fuckin’ bra,” he grunted furiously. “Strutting around here, ass and legs encased in that tight shit, not wearing a fuckin’ bra,” he growled, fingers tweaking harder. I cried out once more, my panties already soaked.

“You waltz around like that, you’re begging to be claimed,” he whispered in my ear. “Careful what you wish for, Wildcat,” he murmured. Then his mouth was gone, as were his hands.

I felt him yank my ponytail roughly, pulling my head backward to the point of pain. “You fuckin’ move, I’ll tan your ass so hard you won’t sit for a week,” he promised.

I didn’t make a sound, my body pulsating with need.

He yanked harder. “Got me?”

“Got you,” I whimpered.

He didn’t let go. “You come when I say—you say my name when you come,” he continued.

“Okay, Zane,” I whispered hoarsely.

I felt his breath tickle my face a moment, then he was gone. His hands went to my belt and it clattered to the floor. He made quick work of my jeans and they were around my ankles in an instant. I felt the cool breeze against my bare skin. I was standing exposed in the middle of a fucking hallway. I should've been embarrassed, ashamed, not hugely turned on.

Zane didn't touch me, didn't prep me. I didn't need it; I was soaked. Without warning, he thrust into me, filling me. One hand bit into my hip, the other spanned my collarbone. I cried out when he filled me to the hilt, in danger of coming from just that. I felt pressure on my ponytail.

"When I say," he grunted.

I managed a strangled moan in response.

Then he went for it. He took me, relentless, hard to almost the point of pain, but never beyond. I met him thrust for thrust, desperate for release, holding on.

"Zane," I moaned. "I can't..."

His hand tightened at my neck. "You fuckin' can, Wildcat," he grunted, taking me harder.

I thought I was going to die, or at the very least collapse from the sheer amount of pleasure that needed releasing. I was even more petrified of that release, one that was in danger of shattering me. The buildup taking me to heights I had never been to before.

I struggled to stay upright. Then Zane's hands moved. He was no longer roughly biting into the flesh at my hip and neck. His back moved to be plastered to mine, his hands laying atop of mine against the wall. His mouth tickled my neck. This position wasn't the impersonal, erotic, and brutal one like before. This was intimate, decidedly more erotic. "You gonna explode, baby?" he murmured in my ear.

I nodded helplessly.

"Come," he commanded.

He had barely finished the word and my world started exploding around me. I screamed out his name as he continued to pump through my shudders. I lost feeling in my knees and his hand moved to my belly to keep me upright. Through my orgasm fog, I was aware of his body tightening, him shooting his release into me, which caused me to explode all over again. I shook as I came down.

We were silent, both panting. I had no idea what that was. But it was fucking amazing.

Then I felt it, the loss of him as he moved out of me. I felt him trickle down my leg. I screwed my nose up. This was the not so glamorous part of letting someone screw you without a condom in the middle of a party.

He turned me quickly; how I didn't fall over with my jeans around my ankles was a mystery. I was beginning to believe he had alpha man powers where laws of things like gravity and physics shriveled and did his bidding.

He unearthed a bandanna out of his back pocket and commenced cleaning between my legs. His eyes never left mine. My mind raced. Was that bandana for that purpose only? Did he just carry it around for situations such as this? Was this his sperm cleaning bandana? In that case, was it clean?

I didn't know how to articulate my questions so I chose to stay silent. Also, since I had been well and truly fucked I wasn't sure if my vocal chords still worked. So Zane finished in silence, tucked the bandana away and gently pulled my jeans up. He even buttoned them. I stayed silent. He'd rendered me mute from a good screwing.

He looked at me through the dim light in the hallway, his eyes searching mine as if he was going to say something. Then the shutter went down and his face hardened. And with that, he turned and walked away. I stared agape at the man on the motorcycle that decorated the back of his cut. He held no explanation either. Had Zane just seriously saved me from getting groped from a drunk biker, then dragged me into a hallway and brutally fucked me? Yes, yes, he had. And had I loved it? Yes, yes, I did. And had he just walked away without a word, making me slightly confused and feeling tawdry and used? Um, yes, he fucking had.



CHAPTER TEN

“Mia! Oh, thank God,” a breathless voice greeted when I answered the phone.

“Gwen?” I asked, the familiar voice sounding frazzled. “Are you okay?” I asked again, worried. I then heard a screaming child in the background.

“Yes, I’m so sorry to call you with this. There’s just no one else.” She paused and I heard her speak slightly out of the phone. “Shh, baby, please. Mummy knows it hurts.”

“Cade’s away on some biker mission, Mum’s in a different time zone, and all the other people I know are bikers and girlfriends who do not know how to deal with a screaming, teething baby, I’m sorry, I just didn’t know who else to call.” She sounded near tears herself.

“Stop apologizing,” I ordered, knowing how she was feeling far too well. “What’s your address?”

Gwen let out a sigh of relief and rattled off an address.

“Be there in five,” I told her before hanging up.

I grabbed my stuff and poked my head in Lexie’s room. Her entire wardrobe seemed to be scattered around the floor.

“I’ll be back soon, Dollybird. Got to go and take care of something,” I told her back. She was currently facing a nearly empty closet.

Upon my words she whirled, a look of horror on her face. “Mom! You can’t leave. You can’t abandon me. I have to find something to wear. I have *nothing*,” she declared dramatically.

“I think the clothes servicing themselves as carpet might disagree with you there, kiddo,” I told her.

She narrowed her eyes at me. She looked like she might try and tie me to a chair with a scarf at any moment.

“Relax, Medusa. I’ll be home before you know it. In the meantime, how about you go and destroy my closet and then we’ll comb the floor for outfits. Deal?”

I didn’t wait for her to agree, knowing a teenage girl in the midst of an outfit crisis was not someone you could easily deal with. Heck, an adult Mia in an outfit crisis wasn’t easy to deal with either.

Five minutes later, I pulled up to a beautiful cottage on the beach with flowers dotting around edges. A frazzled, stressed-looking Gwen opened the door two seconds after I knocked with a screaming, red-faced toddler in her arms.

She moved aside to let me in. “I’ve tried everything. She’s not hungry, doesn’t need changing. I’ve walked around with her, played her favorite TV show, given her a bottle, teething ring. Nothing’s working. She’s never screamed this much for this long, I was seriously considering calling the doctor,” she babbled over the screaming.

I totally empathized with the look of sheer worry and exhaustion on Gwen’s pretty face.

“I’ve got her.” I opened my arms and gently pulled the little girl out of Gwen’s. “It’s okay,” I cooed, rocking her as the little toddler shoved her hands in her mouth in distress. “I know it hurts, sweetie, you poor little thing.”

I looked to Gwen, who was visibly shaken. “Can you grab me a cold washcloth and then brew some chamomile tea?” I asked her while swaying Belle.

She nodded and went toward what I guessed was the kitchen.

Being held by an unfamiliar person didn’t seem to do much for Belle, but I wandered around the beautifully decorated house with her, staying calm and talking to her in a low voice. My memories of a screaming Lexie and a very freaked out teenage me seemed to fly right back in. Although I wasn’t wandering around a tastefully and expensively decorated beachfront home. I had been pacing a small rundown apartment, fielding bangs on the wall from neighbors, scared out of my wits.

Gwen rushed back in with a washcloth and an expression that mirrored one I wore fifteen years ago.

“Here.” She thrust the washcloth at me. “I’m just waiting for the jug to boil,” she said. “Belle is never like this, that’s why I’m seriously worried. Should we call a doctor?”

I took the washcloth and shook my head. “No, she’s just having a tough time with the last of those teeth coming in, aren’t you, sweetie?” I asked as I gently put the cool washcloth in her mouth.

She struggled at first, then her little mouth registered the cool relief that came with the soft cloth. She started to quiet and sucked on the cloth, her little hands clutching the edges.

Gwen looked at me with wide eyes. “Seriously? A cold washcloth? Why didn’t I think of that? Oh my gosh, I’m a terrible mother,” she groaned with a hand on her head, the other cupping her small bump.

I shifted my grip so I could pat Gwen’s arm. “You are far from a terrible mother. You are a tired, caring and very worried mother,” I told her. I gazed at the beautiful little girl, who seemed a lot more placid.

I moved to a seat, which I nodded toward. “Sit down. Relax,” I instructed, my tone firm. If she didn’t sit she looked like she might collapse. Watching your child scream pretty much drained the life out of you.

She sank into the sofa and her face softened at the way the baby was happily suckling on the washcloth, the pain and screaming forgotten.

“Thank you so much, Mia. I seriously felt like I was at my wit’s end,” she declared laying back.

I smiled in understanding, sitting across from her. “I’m glad I could help.”

We sat there for a while, chatting and generally hanging out. I gave Gwen a couple more little secrets that got me through teething and the terrible twos without checking myself into a mental institution. Like soaking the cold washcloth in the cooled down tea, which made Belle drift off to sleep in my arms. When Belle was safely asleep, Gwen looked at me with a serious glint in her eye. “Can I ask you something?”

I sensed this question was not baby related. “Sure,” I replied easily.

Her question was silenced by a familiar rumble, one which made us both turn our heads the window.

“Well, looks like the menfolk are home, just in time to miss the tears and drama...typical,” Gwen declared on a grin.

I smiled back at the clear love and affection that lay behind that simple grin. The way her whole body had seemed to relax at the sound of those

Harley pipes. I wished I could feel like that. Trust myself to feel like that again. But I was worried that that same love would blind me and a fist to the face would serve as a grim reminder. Or more dangerously, a figurative fist to the heart.

Cade walked into the room, his boots sounding on the floor. He gave me a half grin and his eyes rested on the baby in my arms for a second.

“Mia,” he nodded.

“Hey, Cade,” I greeted brightly, my womanly hormones standing at attention to see such a male specimen up so close.

Said lady hormones did cartwheels at the soft look that crossed the hard biker’s face once he settled on Gwen. He wordlessly made it over to her, clasping her neck and roughly pulling her mouth to touch his.

“Baby,” he murmured into her mouth.

I swear to God I almost blushed at this intimate scene. I’m a woman, of a certain age, with a kid for crissakes, and I almost blushed. Those bikers have super sex powers. I ignored the pang for such an intimate moment with my own biker. Never gonna happen.

Gwen smiled at Cade, her eyes twinkling. “You missed your daughter showcasing her impressive set of pipes and Mia flying in here with her superhero cape to save the day,” she told him seriously. Her eyes flickered to the door. “Hey Bull,” she greeted warmly.

I jumped. Luckily my movement didn’t wake the sleeping baby in my arms. My head spun to see Bull leaning on the doorframe...no, taking up the entire doorframe. His eyes locked on mine. Fury danced underneath them.

“Gwen,” he grunted in response, not taking his eyes off me.

I swallowed. After the night at the club, I couldn’t get enough of him. If it was possible, the sex got even *more* wild. I had been at his place almost every night in the week since the party.

Gwen did not seem to take offense at the monosyllabic greeting, nor at the fact his stare stayed locked on mine. This time I actually did blush and looked at my lap.

“So,” Cade said, his eyes flickering between Bull and I before focusing on his wife. “Mia and her cape?” he asked in a flat tone that hinted amusement.

I was surprised. I didn’t think staunch bikers were capable of such a frivolous emotion.

Gwen shook herself. She too had been inspecting Bull and my wordless exchange. I wondered whether I had some sort of stamp on my forehead saying ‘was fucked senseless by the biker now attempting to murder me with a glare’. There was no way to rub my head self-consciously.

“Yeah, so since you were off on a top secret biker mission and incommunicado, I had to look elsewhere for some mad baby whisperer skills,” she started. “My best friend’s only talent when it comes to babies is accessorizing. I thanked my lucky stars that my marvelous new friend Mia has experience with the critters,” she joked, smiling at me.

“Well, limited experience, considering I was young and stupid when Lexie was this age.” I pointed with my head to the baby.

Gwen leaned into Cade, whose hand had settled around her waist. “Don’t be modest. Belle had been screaming for hours and I was about to have a mental breakdown and she whisks in here and silences her in mere moments. She has the skills,” she stage-whispered to her husband.

He half frowned at Gwen, as if he was considering a thought. “Baby, you know I’ll make myself available for you. You need to call, call,” he said softly.

Gwen merely rolled her eyes.

Cade seemed used to this, as his eyes moved to me and he stood. “Thanks, Mia, I really do appreciate you looking out for my girls,” he said sincerely, moving slowly to take the child out of my hands.

My womb clenched slightly at the sight of such a male cradling his child like it was the answer to every question in the universe.

“No problem,” I answered genuinely. “And if you ever want a night sans rugrats, give me a call. Lexie and I would be happy to babysit.”

Cade gave me a look. “Appreciate it,” he nodded, half smiling.

I had decided to ignore Zane during this exchange and I decided I would continue to do so even though I felt his stare burning into me.

“Speaking of Lexie, I’ve got to run and save her from a potentially disastrous situation,” I said gravely, gathering my things.

At this, I felt the air turned charged. “What the fuck, Mia?” Zane’s clipped tone was close and it seemed he had moved from the door to my side in a millisecond.

I ached to touch him.

Instead, I glanced at him. “She may have a mental breakdown on a pile of clothes. Nothing to worry about,” I told him lightly. “Or she could go

onstage wearing a haphazardly put together outfit and then forever resent me for not saving her from a fashion faux pas.” I paused. “Either way, I have to deal with dire consequences if I do not leave soon.”

Gwen had perked up. “Ooh. Fashion emergency, I can totally help.” Her eyes brightened. “I can even bring stuff. Lexie’s my size. What’s it for?”

I was slightly taken aback at her offer, considering the price tags I knew came with her designer duds. I wouldn’t be offering them up to a teenage girl if I were her. I’d crawl into a cave cradling them and proclaiming them “my precious.”

I jerked myself out of my cave full of imaginary designer purchases. “She’s got a gig. Her first one with her band. It’s at some club in Hope—needless to say she is freaking out,” I told her with a grin. “I personally think it’s because this gig is the beginning of a stellar career, in which she needs to be shod in the right shoes in order to pave her way to superstardom,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

Gwen nodded gravely. But before she could speak an alpha male interrupted.

Zane stepped closer, if that was possible. “A gig? In Hope? What club?” He growled tightly.

I stared at him.

“Babe,” he clipped.

“Sorry, I’m just not used to such an array of questions in such an articulate manner,” I shot sarcastically.

Gwen’s choked laugh had me proud of my statement, regardless of the glower it rewarded me.

“Yes, Zane, Lexie has a gig. It’s at some place called Al’s or Hal’s....” I listed, trying to remember.

“Cal’s?” Cade shot, equally grim.

I pointed at him and nodded. “Cal’s. Googled it. Doesn’t look like much, but it’s a good place for undercover record execs to hang. Plus, I talked to Cal on the phone to make sure everything was legit. Seems like a nice guy.”

Gwen brightened. “Awesome. I’ll get outfit choices, bring them round to your place and me and the girls can come to the gig. I’ll call Amy.” She made to run out of the room but Cade grabbed her hand. I was impressed, considering she had a pace on and he managed to stop her and keep hold of a sleeping baby at the same time. Was there no end to macho man powers?

“You ain’t going anywhere, baby,” he said firmly.

Gwen glowered at him, but I didn't get to see the response to that one considering a staunch biker clutched my arm and dragged me off into a corner.

"Lexie is not fuckin' playing that gig," he told me in a harsh tone.

My eyes widened. "Um, did we have sex sixteen years ago?" I asked.

Zane didn't answer, just clenched his jaw.

I carried on. "Yeah, didn't think I'd forget that. So that means you didn't sire a child by me, therefore, you are not Lexie's father, therefore you do not get to dictate what gigs she does or doesn't do," I whispered angrily.

The grip on my wrist tightened. "She's a fuckin' kid. She isn't playin' at a goddamned club," he bit out, invading my space.

I bristled slightly. "She's not a kid, she's a *teenager*," I enunciated the last word. "So, not only would forbidding her to go make her shimmy down a drainpipe or commence a year-long rebellious streak, it would also be me saying no to her dream. I'm not doing that," I told him firmly.

A muscle in his jaw clenched. "It's a fuckin' club," he repeated.

"I'm aware," I answered.

"Then you'll be aware it's not fuckin' safe for a teenage fuckin' girl to be going to a club." He spoke slowly, as if he had to restrain himself from yelling.

"Which is why I'm not sending her off with a bottle of Jack and letting her go on Metallica's tour bus for a month. I'm chaperoning. Me. An *adult*. Will be there at all times, making sure her innocent teenage soul isn't corrupted at the sight of a cocktail," I told him, having to restrain myself from yelling.

Zane was silent, and I tried to get out of his grip but he held me tightly.

"It's not safe for you either," he bit out.

"I'll be sure to take my rape whistle," I told him sarcastically. "I think I'll be fine in a club in a tiny town." I patted his arm condescendingly. "Now if you'll excuse me." I wrenched my arm out of his grasp with extreme effort. "I've got a fashion emergency to attend to."

Zane's whole body was stiff with fury. I didn't have time to puzzle over why he was having such a strong reaction. He explicitly said that he didn't want more than sex, so then why was he worrying his pretty little head over me and Lexie's safety? I shook my head, glancing over at Gwen and Cade, who looked like they were having a similar conversation. Gwen's pretty

face was scrunched into a frown and Cade was looking at her with a hard stare.

“I’ll see you around, Gwen,” I called to her. “Don’t worry about coming with reinforcements—we’ll be fine. Got sixteen years of practice,” I added, not wanting to be the reason the couple had a domestic quarrel.

Gwen glared at Cade a second and then smiled at me. “No, I’ll be there in fifteen,” she said firmly, ignoring her husband. “And I’ll be there cheering Lexie on,” she added with a tight look at Cade.

I reckoned the grim and scary biker had little to no say when it came to Gwen doing what she wanted. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Okay, see you soon. Bye, Cade,” I said rather sheepishly, feeling like I was going to be cited as a bad influence.

Cade surprised me by giving me a soft look. Well, what such a grim and scary biker could manage as a soft look. “Bye, Mia. Thanks again for your help,” he said.

“Anytime,” I replied, deciding to ignore Zane and the fury emanating off him. I skirted around him and nearly ran to the door.



“Honey, you look amazing. You’ll do great,” I reassured my nervous daughter.

She pulled at her top with uncertainty. “You sure?”

I smiled. “Yes, I’m sure. I’m your mother—do you think I’d let you go out there if you were going to embarrass me?”

We were backstage at the club; it was eleven p.m. and Lexie and her band were just about to go on. I was more than a little excited for my daughter, although I couldn’t help but replay Zane’s judgmental protests in my mind. Was I a bad mother for letting my sixteen year old perform at a club near midnight? I had told her she could be anything she wanted to be. And for as long as I could remember, her life was music and books. To not support her in pursuing a career which involved doing something she loved made me think *that* was bad parenting. But as a single mother, I was always questioning my choices with Lexie, and worried about what judgment

would be thrown my way. I just never thought it would be coming from a six-foot burly biker covered in tattoos. One whom I had complicated feelings for.

“We’re going to rock, Lex, how can we not? We’ve got me as a drummer,” Sam interjected, wrapping his arm around Lexie.

I grinned at him as he gave her a supportive squeeze and winked at me.

“I’ll be right up front with Gwen, Amy, Rosie, and Lucy, who have all promised to pour drinks on anyone who boos,” I joked.

Lexie’s face paled slightly and I shook my head. She had nothing to be nervous about. Plus, she looked the part. She had on Gwen’s strappy studded Valentino heels, black skinny jeans and a drapey metallic top. Skinny scarves were slung around her neck and bracelets covered her arms almost to her elbows. I wasn’t keen on slathering her with too much makeup, so we went for winged eyeliner and teased her hair within an inch of its life. Total rock and roll babe.

I kissed her head lightly. “Break a leg, kid,” I murmured to her.

She nodded, taking a deep breath before Sam grabbed her hand and took her to some sort of band huddle. I watched with a small tear prickling at the edge of my eye. Something told me this moment was important for my daughter. Call it mother’s intuition, but I knew this was going to be a pivotal moment.



“Here.” Amy thrust a drink in my hand as soon as I jostled through the crowd to join them at the front.

I immediately took it and sipped, not asking what it was. I coughed slightly at the strength behind it. “Do I get any soda with my vodka?” I half spluttered.

Gwen laughed. “Sorry, I should have warned you. When Amy buys drinks she doesn’t fuck around.” She gave me a knowing and sympathetic look.

“Well, since I’m a mom who hardly gets out much, I think if I finish this drink you may have to carry me out of here,” I half yelled. “I don’t think

that would set the best example for my rock star daughter.”

Amy didn't miss a beat. “If you're going to have a rock star daughter, you definitely need to learn how to handle your alcohol.”

I shuddered at the thought of the grim reality behind what I was letting my very young daughter open the door to. “I'm also going to have to get rid of having stalkers it seems.” I decided to change the subject, gesturing with my head to the two leather clad men at the bar. I didn't recognize them, and they had *Prospect* patches on their vests. When Gwen had turned up at our house with what seemed like her entire wardrobe, she also had Amy in tow. Not to mention the two men who had sat on their bikes outside while we chose outfits, had dinner and hosted Lexie's band. They had trailed behind our cars and followed us into the club.

Amy followed my eyes. “Welcome to the life of having crazy hot, crazy, overprotective biker men getting all alpha,” she said with a slight scowl. “I swear if I didn't love my husband I'd go insane with the protectiveness. I almost single-handedly escaped a kidnapping without his help. I think I can manage going to a gig at a bar in Nowheresville.”

Gwen gave her a look and I near choked on my drink. Did she just say *kidnapped*? “You have to admit the overprotective husband played a part in the kidnapping escape,” Gwen countered.

Amy screwed up her nose. “A small part,” She held her thumb and finger millimeters away from each other.

My eyes popped out of my head. Yes, these women were calmly talking about a kidnapping like it was a trip to the grocery store.

Before I had the chance to get them to elaborate, Gwen beat me to it. “Plus, if you're going to be getting involved with one of your own macho bikers you might need to get used to a Harley as a shadow,” she said with a sly look and a teasing tone.

“We so need the lowdown on what exactly is going on with you and Bull,” Amy demanded, perking up.

“Seconded,” Rosie piped in.

I sighed. “I honestly couldn't tell you. It's...complicated,” I said simply.

Gwen's eyes turned understanding, and slightly sad. “Nothing with these men is ever simple.” She patted my hand. “But Bull, he's been through more than most. Beneath all that silence and menace is a good guy. He just has to get over his guilt and his loss. Be patient. It'll be worth it. Trust me.”

I opened my mouth to ask what in the hell she meant about loss and guilt, but the strumming of a guitar silenced me. As much as I wanted the complete explanation to a puzzling man, supporting my daughter would always trump my own desires. So I plastered a smile on my face and turned to the stage.



“Holy shit! Lexie is freakin’ amazing,” Gwen half squealed as the band walked off the stage.

“Beyond amazing. It’s like Amy Winehouse and Adele had some sort of lovechild and Lexie’s voice was created,” Amy yelled over her drink and the cheers from the audience.

I couldn’t disagree. My heart was bursting with pride. Even though this was a small venue and wasn’t exactly Madison Square Garden, Lexie and the boys had blown the roof off. It was like they had been playing together for years, not months. I had hardly believed that that was my daughter up there. It was a bittersweet feeling, considering it meant that she was on the fast track to growing up. I was not ready for that, let alone having her jam out in clubs when she was six years away from even being allowed to drink in one.

“I’m going to go and whisk the kids out of here,” I addressed the group. “Even though Wyatt knows the owner who is, ‘totally dope,’” I finger quoted, “they were still only allowed to play on the proviso I was here and escorted off the premises as soon as their set was done,” I explained. “Anyone need a ride home?” I asked, as I had only sipped the rocket fuel Amy declared a drink while the others, apart from Gwen, had partaken heavily. I was impressed they were still standing.

Amy shook her red hair then pointed to the bar. “We have almost exceeded our curfews also and we each have a badass biker who may or may not drag us out of here over their shoulders, depending on how much we want to stay.” She gave me a mischievous grin. “I’m totally for the over the shoulder exit myself.”

I followed her eyes and jolted slightly to see the prospects had been joined by more leather-clad hunks. Cade was leaning against the bar with his arms crossed, his hard stare directed at Gwen who grinned and gave him a finger wave. Brock was much the same, although he had a beer in his hand and his posture was slightly less tense. He shook his head and smiled when Amy blew him a kiss.

My eyes landed on Zane, who was not looking relaxed and was definitely not grinning. His eyes were locked on me and were blank. He had his arms crossed and I couldn't be sure from this distance, but I thought a muscle in his jaw ticked. I resisted the urge to poke my tongue out at him. I felt such an act may be slightly juvenile, since I was a mother and thirty-three years old.

Before my inner child got the best of me I said my goodbyes to the women, who all made me promise to get Lexie's autograph on a bar napkin and to have a cocktail night again soon. As I pushed through the crowd, I could still feel a stare at my back. I did my best to ignore it.



“Mom!” Lexie shouted as soon as I made it to the little room backstage.

She hopped up off the sofa she and the boys were lounging on and bounded over to me.

I hugged her and barely held her for a second before she pulled out of my arms with excitement.

“That was awesome!” she declared loudly. “We totally rocked this place.”

“Hell yeah, we did,” Wyatt interjected from the sofa, where he was lounging casually, looking every inch the rock star wearing all black and almost as much silver as Lexie. How a teenage boy could pull that off I had no idea, but Wyatt did.

“I think I carried your asses. It’ll definitely be me on the cover of *Rolling Stone*—I’m the best looking,” Sam said with a joking grin.

Lexie poked her tongue out at him. She could totally pull it off, being a teenager and cute and all.

Noah sat quietly with his bottle of water and grinned at his bandmates. Although he was the most reserved off the stage, I think I liked him the most.

“You guys were certainly the best band I’ve ever seen live,” I told them, deciding to omit the fact they were the only band I’d seen live.

“Thanks, Mrs. S,” Sam said, beaming. “We totally appreciate you bringing us here and not getting all *parental* about the venue and the time. We just gotta rock—you know, no rules,” he said sincerely.

On that note, Clay, the owner opened the door and gave me a look. “Babe,” he muttered quietly.

“Okay, guys, the only reason I’m not getting all ‘parental’ is because we’re blowing this joint in t minus two on the account of the fact your delicate teenage sensibilities are yet to be corrupted by what’s in this bar, and I’m afraid long term exposure could mean danger for your music career and Clay’s reputation. Get your stuff,” I told the group.

Luckily, there were no groans of protest, only a couple of “dopes” and lazy grins. They started to pack up their gear with a speed I didn’t know was possible from teenage boys.

I was slightly surprised to see Clay had moved close to my side.

“Thanks for letting them play. You’ve pretty much made my daughter’s life,” I said with a grin.

He regarded me. “You can thank me by letting me take you to dinner,” he said with his grey eyes dancing.

He wasn’t bad-looking. One would even call him hot. He was slightly taller than me in my heels, and although he wasn’t as built as some of the bikers I knew, the muscles bulging out of his black dress shirt were nothing to sneeze at. Nor was his broad chest. Or his face, which was chiseled, although his nose was slightly crooked. His eyes were light and kind, and he was a bit older; I’d say early forties, if the slight bit of salt in his jet black hair was anything to go by. He wore his age well. Really well.

I chewed my lip. “I’m not sure I should go on a date with the only man in a hundred-mile radius allowing my daughter’s band to play in his club,” I replied. “I mean, it could be a conflict of interest, and who knows if I was only saying yes in order to grease you up to let them play again.” I continued watching the kids pack up.

I felt his heat as he stepped in front of me, obscuring my vision. “Darlin,’ I couldn’t give two shits about your motivations in going out with

me. As long as you do.” He gave me a smoldering look. “And trust me, once we got to the dessert portion of the evening, you’d forget all about the ulterior motives,” he said softly. Somehow he managed to utter that statement without sounding like a complete sleazeball.

I swallowed. And despite myself, I felt a sizzle of attraction between us.

“Plus,” he added, glancing over his shoulder. “I’d let them come back, despite your answer—they’re talented kids. Your daughter especially. I’ve seen a lot of bands come in and out of here. I know when they’ve got something.” His eyes sparkled. “I’ve got a friend who’s in the record business. I could get him to come and see them play sometime,” he offered.

I raised my eyebrow suspiciously. “Is this just a ploy to get me to go out with you? Are you bribing me with the future of my daughter’s music career?” I said with mock disgust.

To my surprise, he laughed. It was throaty and easy and great to listen to. It was nice to actually see an attractive man laugh with ease. I had spent weeks trying to make a particular man crack a smile, but nothing. A small part of me wanted to say yes to someone who laughed easy, smiled easy, who easily expressed interest in me.

“Babe, promise you, regardless of whether you go out with me or not, the offer’s still on the table,” he told me, still smiling.

“She’s not fuckin’ going anywhere with you,” a voice growled from behind me. Right behind me. I knew without even having to turn who the owner of that voice was. I could feel his hard torso brushing my back. Any other time I would like to have been in a hot guy sandwich. But not under the watchful eyes of five teenagers.



Bull

He was fucked off he even cared. He even felt the rage swirling in his belly at the prospect of Lexie playing in a club, a fuckin’ *club*. In Hope, no less. Shit swirling with the Lost Knights meant Hope was not a safe place for

anyone connected to the Sons. And without even fucking realizing it, he had connected not only Mia, but Lexie to the club. Had he not learned his fucking lesson? Putting someone innocent, someone who deserved a fuck of a lot better, in the line of fire once more? Apparently not. Because if his life depended on it, he couldn't cut them out of his world. It would have been easier to slice off a limb. His nights with Mia were what he lived for. Spent the whole fuckin' day actually looking forward to getting inside her tight little body, hearing her throaty voice moan his name. Joke, on the rare times they exchanged words.

Then there was Lexie. Didn't see the kid often, but he saw her. She had wandered over to his garage, couple of times after school when her mom wasn't home. She'd chat 'bout stupid shit, sometimes just watch him. She didn't press about the guitar shit, seemed to sense he needed time. The fuckin' sixteen-year-old seemed to understand. Bull found himself looking forward to those visits too. When Lexie would bathe his dim garage in sunshine. When her mom would do the same in his pitch black bedroom. To his pitch black soul. Bull knew what this meant. It meant shit. Big shit.

So that was why he had almost lost his shit when Mia had declared she was letting Lexie play at the club. He had almost taken her over his shoulder when she argued with him. Yanked herself out of his grasp and walked out without a backward glance. Cade had faced a similar argument with his wife. One he had also lost. Which meant Bull was not the only fucker pissed off to be standing in a bar in the middle of enemy territory watching a teenage band play at a club. He was ramped up to furious when Mia had emerged from backstage looking like a fuckin' sex kitten. Her hair was pulled off her face, tendrils hanging down. She wore a skintight black dress with a low neck, showing off her amazing tits. It went down to past her knees, but hugged every inch of her tight body. The fact she wasn't showing a ton of leg made her even sexier. As did the high knee-length boots that encased her legs.

Bull clenched his fists as she waded through the crowd, not noticing him as he skulked in the shadows. He nearly pushed off the wall to pummel every fucker that checked out her ass as she walked by. Luckily no one stopped her; if they did, he would have been there in an instant.

"How the fuck do you handle this shit?" he bit out to his brother, who was standing beside him.

Cade raised his eyebrows slightly, not expecting a question. “With great fuckin’ difficulty, brother. Helps knowing that I’ve got a gun in my cut,” he said with full seriousness. “You claiming her?” He nodded to Mia, who was sipping a drink with her nose screwed up.

His girl didn’t drink. She couldn’t hold her alcohol worth a damn. Bull found this adorable as fuck. Thirty-three and she couldn’t hold her drink.

“Yep,” he said without thinking. The sight of her amongst all of that, without knowing she was completely his was enough to drive him crazy. He knew it was the lesser of two evils, considering he was still battling the demons that screamed at him to let her go. To get on his bike and roar away to let her and Lexie live a normal life. A safe life. Marry some stockbroker who wouldn’t get them killed. But something stopped him. Maybe it was the fact the club was moving away from the shit that got *her* killed. The fact that the thought of not tasting Mia again made him want to claw his own face off. And there was also some part of him that had an inkling that those girls needed him. His girls.

He was jolted out of his thoughts by a hard clap on his back. Cade was grinning at him.

“Happy for you, brother. You deserve this,” he muttered.

Bull only nodded. He didn’t need to pour his fucking heart out to his best friend. He only needed to figure out a way to live with himself after making this decision.



“Jesus, that kid can fuckin’ sing,” Brock remarked after Lexie had belted out “Alive” by Pearl Jam.

Cade nodded in agreement. “Never heard a teenager with that much talent. They’re going places.”

Bull gritted his teeth. Fucker was right. Lexie was beyond good. She worked the stage like a natural. Like she’d been on a thousand times. Like the guitar was an extension of her hand. Like she wasn’t only sixteen years old. That band was going places. But Lexie was sixteen; she didn’t need to be going any fucking where for two years.

“What I would do to that tight little body.” Bull’s entire form stiffened at the slurred words muttered from beside him.

“Yeah, baby! Work it!” the voice yelled as Lexie started her second song. The sounds of his leers were drowned out by the crowd and the band. But Bull could fuckin’ hear him. As could Cade and Brock, who were glaring at the drunken fucker leering at Lexie.

Bull saw red. He fingered the gun inside his cut, wanting to shoot the fucker’s dick off for the way his way looking at a sixteen-year-old girl. Mia’s girl.

“Gunshots might ruin the band’s sound,” Brock remarked blandly from beside him.

Bull nodded stiffly. As much as he would love to make him bleed, shooting the bastard would only ruin Lexie’s night. He took a deep breath and moved his hand from his piece. Instead, he moved closer to the man and his equally inebriated friends, moving slightly in front of them. He lifted his arm and jabbed his elbow back so it collided with his nose. Bull was satisfied with the loud crack that followed and the groan of pain as the bastard fell to the floor.

“Hey!” one of his friends started to protest.

Bull narrowed his eyes at him, communicating in one look that he would repay the favor if they tried to defend their fuckwit of a friend. He felt his brothers at his back.

“We would kindly suggest you escort your perverted friend to the nearest exit before we chop his balls off,” Brock said cheerfully.

The men blanched. Even through the alcohol haze, they could see that they weren’t joking. They half dragged their bleeding friend to the door, looking back anxiously.

“Pussies,” Brock muttered before turning back to the stage and sipping his beer.

Bull struggled to contain his anger as he did the same. It helped that five minutes later Lexie’s eyes met his as she belted out her next song, and she grinned from ear to ear. The warmth that spread through him at such a simple smile worried him. The kid acted like he was someone worth smiling at, worth talking to. He wasn’t. He killed people. People that deserved it, definitely. But people who didn’t. Innocents. Wasn’t it his actions that killed the most innocent being to walk this earth? The most beautiful soul. The only thing she did was love him. And he repaid her by

getting her killed and defiled in the worst way possible. Bile rose up in his throat at the images that rushed in with those thoughts. Images that hadn't assaulted him in a while. Images that he thought he was fighting back. Images that almost made him eat his gun two years ago. Now, with the prospect of not one, but two people he cared about getting damaged because of him, he couldn't take it. Thing was, he couldn't leave either. He clenched his fists.

With all the poison swirling through his body he hadn't realized that the band had finished.

"You think we're going to be able to get them out of here without a fight?" Brock asked Cade casually.

Cade's face darkened. "Gwen is leaving. Whether she likes it or not. Shouldn't have even let them come. Shit's uncertain at the moment. She wants to go and watch a fuckin' band." He shook his head tightly, eyes on his pregnant wife who grinned at him and waved.

Brock slapped him on the shoulder before sipping his beer. "Do you *let* Gwen do anything? Bitch does what she wants and you ain't got no say. I speak from experience." He grinned at Amy who blew him a kiss.

Bull was focused on Mia, who paled slightly when meeting his gaze. Good. She should be fuckin' scared. He was going to tan her ass tonight. Bringing Lexie to a club. Making him fuckin' care so much. His frown deepened as she hugged the women and pushed her way through the crowd in the opposite direction she should have gone. The women started toward them and Bull struggled not to follow Mia.

"Hey sweetie," Amy said as she strutted up to Brock with a grin. He tagged her waist as soon as she was in grabbing distance.

"Jesus, Sparky," he muttered against her mouth.

She leaned back. "What?" she asked innocently.

Cade had Gwen in a similar clutch, his hand on her belly. Though his gaze wasn't as teasing. Fucker got high-strung with Gwen pregnant.

Rosie and Lucy joined the party, their faces flushed with an obvious glow from booze.

"How good was Lexie's band?" Rosie half shouted. No one answered so she poked Bull in the ribs. "Come on, even big macho silent types like yourself have to admit the kid has pipes," she joked lightheartedly, smiling at him.

He failed to smile back; though she was used to it, Rosie's smile dimmed slightly at the no doubt furious expression he was wearing. He couldn't help it. He was pissed as fuck at Mia, at himself, at the fuckin' world.

Understanding washed over her face. "Mia went backstage to get the kids and take them home," she said. She pretended to address the whole group but gave him a sideways glance. "Just in case anyone wanted to know where she is," she added with a mischievous grin in his direction.

With that declaration, Gwen gave him a small smile, ignoring Cade's glare. He felt uncomfortable with the attention on him so he gave a chin lift to his brothers and headed to find his woman.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



Mia

Before I could find a way to extract myself from the situation, Zane yanked me to his side, his arm sliding around my neck. I was too surprised even to resist.

Clay's eyes flared, but otherwise he showed no emotion at Zane's appearance and the gesture. The gesture that communicated possession.

"Bull," he nodded.

Zane didn't say anything; he only glared at Clay, who didn't seem too worried. Before Zane could commence disemboweling him as his look suggested, a teenage voice broke through.

"Zane!" Lexie exclaimed, a grin on her face as she rushed over to us with her guitar. Her face didn't even falter when she saw Zane and I in a decidedly intimate position.

"I'm so glad you came! This gig freaking ruled!" she said with a smile.

Zane looked at her a moment, then released me, taking the guitar off Lexie with one hand. His other yanked one of her curls lightly. "You were great, Lex. Got a lot of talent, girl," he murmured quietly.

Lexie's entire face lit up at this and she blushed slightly.

"Dude, you're in the Sons of Templar? That's like...freakin' sick." Sam interrupted the tender moment with teenage boy amazement, staring at Zane.

Zane glanced over at him with a hard glare, much like the one directed at Clay. I decided to interrupt this exchange, as I didn't want him sabotaging

Lexie's future by murdering her bandmate.

"Okay, let's get out of here, guys. You've all got parents to get home to, who I'm sure will think I've taken you to a rave if I don't get you back soon," I declared, clapping my hands together.

Clay opened the door that led to the parking lot where my car was. This was so they didn't have to walk in and out of the bar. The boys hustled out first.

Clay gave me a look. "Offer's still good, babe—call me if you change your mind. Regardless—" his eyes moved to Lexie, "I got her covered."

The air turned electric with those words, and Zane's entire frame turned to granite. Clay didn't even blink. Brave guy. Zane's gaze flicked to me.

"Take Lexie to the car," he half barked.

"Zane," I started to protest.

"To the fuckin' car, babe," he gritted out.

I sighed, clutching Lexie's hand. She had been watching the exchange with wide eyes. "Let's go to the car, baby girl. Let the men have their...conversation," I said. I pushed Lexie out first, reaching up to Zane's ear as I walked past. "And I mean *conversation*. Not brawl," I ordered firmly. Zane's eyes flickered slightly but otherwise he gave me no inkling that he knew I had spoken.

"See you, Clay, thanks again," I told him nervously, hoping he would still have working fingers to dial and speak to his record exec friend.

He grinned. "Later."

Crazy bastard.



We finally pulled up to our place after dropping very excited teenage boys off at their respective homes. I was surprised Betty could fit three growing boys who were all legs and muscle into her interior, but she managed. I also had to reassure one set of parents that the whole event was kosher. The other two didn't seem bothered their sons were at a bar nearing midnight. This worried me slightly.

"Thanks, Mom," Lexie said quietly as I turned off the car.

“For what, doll?” I asked, turning in my seat.

She met my eyes. “For letting me do that. I think about ninety-nine percent of good moms wouldn’t let their kid do something like that. Which is what you are, by the way—the best mom. Means a lot that you did. This is all I ever want to do,” she told me quietly.

I stroked her face. “Know that kid. Which is why I let you do it. Wouldn’t be much of a mom if I didn’t let you follow your dreams. Plus, I trust you. I’ve raised an awesome kid, if I do say so myself,” I joked. “Now let’s get you to bed, superstar. With your career ahead of you, you need to grab as many z’s as you can. Rock stars don’t get famous without getting eight hours every night.”

She smiled at me and got out of the car. I followed her lead. My eyes rested on the bike that was parked in the driveway across from us. The bike that had followed us to every house on the way home. And the bike that had a figure leaning against it. Lexie followed my eyes.

“Night, Zane!” she yelled across the street.

There was no answer but a hand lifted up, visible in the dim street lights.

“You go on in, honey, I’ve just got to have a word with Zane,” I told her.

She gave me a knowing look that she was too young to give and nodded. “Okay. Night, Mom, I’m going to crash,” she declared pointedly and kissed my cheek.

I watched her go into the house before crossing the street.

Zane hadn’t moved from his perch on the bike.

As I had almost made it to him, his voice cut through the darkness.

“No closer, babe,” he bit out.

I stopped, on instinct more than anything. Then I furrowed my brows. “Um, why the heck not? I’m about to give you a piece of my mind for that little performance and I would rather not wake up the neighbors by yelling. So, in order to give you a piece of my mind, I need to be in closer proximity than this,” I snapped, stepping forward.

“You come closer, I’m going to claim you mouth. Ain’t gonna be gentle and it ain’t gonna be fuckin’ G rated. Which is a problem, considering your girl is looking at us through your window,” he told me roughly.

I froze. My head turned a smidgen to see a small figure dart out of the window. Shit.

“Have you got Batman eyes or something?” I asked seriously.

Zane didn't answer, and my mind flickered back to the time he had been in this very spot and Lexie and I had both been spying on him.

"Okay fine, I'll say what I have to say from here." I crossed my arms.

"You won't say a fuckin' word, babe. You'll turn that sweet ass around, go into your house and come back over here in an hour," he ordered gruffly.

I opened my mouth to protest, but for once Zane hadn't finished talking.

"You'll come over wearing your sweet little nightie, and my shirt. There's gonna be words, Wildcat, fucking trust me. But those words will come after I fucked you, after I've tanned your ass, and after you're filled with me," he growled.

Whatever I had been going to say silenced on my tongue and my stomach dipped at his words.

"One hour, Wildcat," he repeated, stubbing out his smoke and pushing off his bike.

I blinked as he stood feet from me, realizing he wasn't going to go inside until I had made it safely across the street to my own house. As I woodenly turned around and made my way back, my eyes caught a shadow in our window skittering off in the direction of her room.



I didn't do it. Go over to his house. It took every inch of willpower I had, which was not much considering I routinely tried to cut back on my coffee consumption and it only lasted about an hour into the first morning. But thanks to some superhuman effort, I did it. I thought about all the times Zane and I had come together. Despite it being amazing, mind blowing even, it was always on his terms. At his command. I had been desperate for him, crazy for him, so I went for it. Some part of me knew I was too broken to have a real relationship, but another part of me told me I needed to set an example for my daughter, not let a man dictate the terms of...whatever Zane and I had. I had to ovary up. So, I tossed and turned all night and told myself I was going to be the one in control for a change.

I finally nodded off in the early hours of the morning to be awoken by a loud thumping what felt like five minutes later. One that shook the house

slightly. Worried, and rather zombielike, I half stumbled down the stairs. The thumping got louder as I reached the living room, as did the sounds of horrible music. I turned to see Lexie had pushed all the furniture to the side and was doing some ridiculous kickboxing move while the woman on the screen told her she was doing great. I groaned. My daughter.

“How are you related to me?” I moaned. She had been rockin’ out on stage last night. She should be acting like a proper teenager and rock and roll prodigy and sleeping till at least noon.

She turned her head, her pretty face was red and hair stuck to her forehead. She grinned. “Morning, Mom,” she puffed before turning her attention back to the TV.

I scowled at her back and stumbled into the kitchen, needing caffeine in my life more than oxygen at that moment. I surely wasn’t going to get any sleep with Bigfoot practicing kung fu in my living room.

I gaped in horror at the empty space where the coffee had been. I was sure it had been there. Right there. I must have been staring for a while, because a red-faced Lexie bounced into the room, sucking from a water bottle.

“Looking for coffee?” she chirped. Yes, *chirped*.

“Are Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell not the single most important couple in Hollywood, if not the world?” I shot back at her.

She moved to boil the jug. “I threw it out. Decided we drank way too much and thought we could try green tea instead. It’s got natural caffeine in it.”

I turned to face her slowly. “What?” I said quietly with a hint of menace.

“I said--“

I held up my hand to silence her. “I knew what you said. I just thought you were playing some kind of cruel trick,” I said. “Now I see you have just decided to kill your mother,” I finished.

She opened her mouth.

“Uh uh,” I interrupted. “You do not speak to me after what you have just done,” I declared icily. “I am going to get Shelly coffee, and the changeling that has replaced my daughter better be gone when I get back, or I will be forced to perform an exorcism,” I shot, moving out of the room.



I sipped the glorious caffeine filled cup, only now realizing that my outfit wasn't even close to matching. At that moment, I didn't care. I had coffee; all was right in the world. I was thinking of cruel and unusual punishments for my spawn when my phone dinged.

Lexie: *Sorry, Mom. I was operating under the influence of endorphins. They make your brain do weird things. Bring a latte home and I'll upgrade your retirement plan to a villa in Tuscany.*

I smiled at my phone. Then I ordered Lexie's coffee to go, plus another one for me. I would surely finish the one in my hand in no time. I needed a roadie. So, I had the last of my cup sitting in a booth, happy to stare into space when I felt a presence sit across from me. The presence that seemed to turn the air wired.

I looked up at angry—no, furious—black eyes.

"You didn't come last night," Zane bit out instead of greeting me like a normal human.

"Are you following me?" I asked him seriously.

Zane narrowed his eyes.

"Seriously, I'm only up at this hour on a Saturday because I made the mistake of letting my daughter think it was okay to eat healthy and exercise. What's your excuse?"

"Club business," he ground out. "Right now I don't need your word vomit. Need to know why the fuck you didn't come last night," he demanded harshly.

I stiffened. *Word vomit?* I may babble slightly, but I thought about my words before I spoke them. Most of the time. Okay, like one third of the time, but still.

I leaned in. "I didn't come over because I decided that I wasn't going to become a mindless sex drone that obeyed your every barked command," I whispered.

Zane's form stiffened but I decided I was on a roll.

“I have discovered I can no longer continue to sneak over to your place under the cover of darkness and let this just be about sex. I want more. I *need* more,” I continued.

Zane’s eyes bore into me as I silenced myself. I ignored the part of me that screamed to take whatever I could get from this complicated man.

“So do I,” he said finally, his voice gravelly.

I jerked slightly in surprise.

“I want more from you, Mia,” he continued. “It’s not enough just having your body. I want more. All of you. Every inch,” he declared roughly.

I tried not to open my mouth out of shock. I was speechless. That didn’t happen, like ever. I had a response for everything.

“Here you go, sweetie,” Shelly broke the moment by placing two coffees between us.

I distractedly smiled and thanked her. For once, the appearance of coffee actually pissed me off.

Zane’s face had shuttered with Shelly’s arrival.

“Tonight,” he murmured once she had left. He stood and leaned across the table slightly. “Tonight, I claim every inch of you.”

With those words and a smoldering look, he was gone.

I sank back into my seat, feeling the urge to fan myself with my hands.

He couldn’t just say goodbye. No. He had to rock my world and make my lady bits do cartwheels and disappear into the night. Well, not the night, the early morning...but still.



Later that night, I was battling with butterflies as I crossed the street. Not like the normal ones that I had creeping over to Zane’s. Usually, I had guilt at leaving Lexie alone in the house while her harlot mother went and got herself laid. Then I would get butterflies knowing what Zane would do to me, how he would fuck me. Finally, I got a different kind of butterflies, ones that told me to turn back, because they were terrified of the dismissal that was inevitable after he was finished giving me the best sex of my life. I never listened to those butterflies. But as I padded across the street

something felt different. Something had changed. The claiming possessive gesture Zane had made not only in front of Clay, but my kid last night. The surprising and sensual admission at the coffee shop. Something was different. Something I wasn't quite sure I was ready for.

On that thought, the door opened before I even made it to the front step. Zane's eyes followed my short journey. When I was close enough he grabbed my arm, yanking me into the house. The door slammed and before I knew it, I was over his shoulder.

I let out a little squeal. "Zane! What are you doing?" I half screeched in surprise.

A hand cracked down on my ass and a stinging sensation exploded along my cheek.

"Shut up," he commanded roughly. "We talk after. Now I'm going to fuck you." He threw me down on his bed roughly and before I even had time to think, his body covered mine. My whole body burned as he claimed my mouth like he was searing a brand onto my soul. His body covered mine, his hand on my neck. I could barely breathe as he continued his assault on my mouth. I didn't think proper thoughts for long moments after that.

"Zane," I murmured, my voice barely audible. I was surprised I was even able to speak while he pounded into me. This was different than any of the other times we had been together. It was furious, desperate, claiming. He was owning my body, making it his. I was loving every minute.

His hand spanned my throat and his eyes stayed glued to mine, the hard glint of arousal and something else, something deeper, searing through me.

"You're mine now, Mia," he grunted between thrusts.

I sucked in a breath at my building orgasm, unable to fathom his words.

He stopped moving and his hand tightened on my throat. The cords in his neck pulsed.

"Zane," I whined, needing him to move, needing him to keep going.

"Mia," he commanded, my eyes meeting his again. "Understand this. You. Are. Mine," he told me roughly. The certainty, the promise behind his words made me pause. My mind moved past the need for pleasure, for release.

I stroked his face. "I'm yours," I whispered, my words surprising me, not only the fact I meant them, but how I had felt like I had belonged to him for ages before.

He paused for a second, didn't say a word, just stared. And with that stare, with those words, a little part of my shattered pieces melded back together.

Before I could contemplate this, he plunged into me once more. And for a long time after that, I couldn't think of much but his body moving inside me.



“Is it time for words yet?” I asked quietly.

Zane's arm tightened around me.

“Jesus,” he muttered. “Can we not have a couple minutes more of silence before you try and yell at me and I have to fuck you to shut you up again?”

I chewed my lip. Another whole sentence. That was like a record. I was nestled up against his hard chest, my hands quietly tracing the designs I knew were there. I was yet to be able to inspect them in the daylight. But something had changed tonight that gave me hope I might. Not only within Zane, but me also. I had thought I was happy keeping him at a distance, not turning this into something more. But I was kidding myself. Using my past as an excuse to hide the hurt that he didn't want more. I convinced myself I didn't either. But now I knew I did. And that scared the hell out of me.

“How do you know I'm going to try and yell at you?” I asked defensively.

He was silent for a moment, “Are you not?”

It was my turn to be silent. “No, I just wanted to have an adult conversation about your behavior last night,” I said evenly.

“Fuck,” he muttered again. “You sound just like a mom scolding her child.”

I stiffened. “I am a mom, and you acted childish in the bar,” I snapped.

Zane lifted me onto his chest so my face faced his. I was expecting to meet a hard glare. But for once his eyes were clear; they were almost dancing. “Silence, babe, can we have some more of it? So I can enjoy smelling you, having your tight little body against mine?” he murmured against my mouth.

I pouted at him a second then relented. Who was I to pass up such an affectionate moment, one that was rare for someone I was in danger of falling for? My head nestled into his neck and his arms settled around me, the strength of them encasing me. One of his hands rested on my bare and slightly tender ass, cupping it.

I lay alone with my thoughts once more, but it wasn't long before I lifted my head. "What was that with Clay last night?" I asked, unable to keep quiet.

Zane shook his head slightly. "Not even a minute, Wildcat. You couldn't shut up if someone paid you." His tone was definitely teasing, I was loath to interrupt this new Zane, but we had to get shit straight.

I narrowed my eyes at him.

He sighed and brushed a strand of hair out of my face, his hand resting on my chin. "Clay was trying to get in on what's mine. He needed educating," he said simply, his eyes hardening.

"What's yours?" I repeated in disbelief.

Zane nodded stiffly.

I tried to get up slightly but his arms wouldn't let me. I frowned at him. "When did I become yours?" I asked stiffly.

"The moment I sank my cock into you," he answered bluntly.

I screwed my nose up. "If I remember rightly, after the first time you 'sank your cock into me,' as you so romantically put it, you kicked me out of the house," I snapped.

Zane stared at me and didn't answer.

"Great, so we're back to relying on my telepathy to have a conversation," I said in a tone dripping with sarcasm. "What happened to not being able to give me more?" I moved on from my original statement to reference what he had said earlier today.

Zane searched my eyes. "You happened," he said simply. "Lexie happened," he added softly.

My stomach dropped at his words. Fear and excitement curdled in my stomach. There was silence for a moment. "I'm not going to introduce this to Lexie if you're not sure, if this isn't certain," I told him firmly. "Lexie's already attached to you—I'm not breaking my daughter's heart," I told him. What I didn't add was that I didn't want my heart broken. Especially when he had already started to repair a sixteen-year-old break.

Zane knifed up with me on top of him, so his back rested against the headboard and I was straddling him. Both his hands went to my neck, pulling my eyes to meet his.

“Wouldn’t let you think this was something it’s not, babe. Would never fuckin’ make Lex think that.” His arms tightened. “I’m fuckin’ certain,” he promised.

I searched his eyes for doubt, indecision, dishonestly. I was scared when I couldn’t find it. At the same time his words, like before, mended a little piece broken inside me. This terrified me because if he had the power to fix me, he also had the power to break me all over again.

“I’m certain too,” I whispered, breaking the long silence. Despite the fear, the worry, I was. I had never felt more safe, more alive than when I was in his arms. I had never seen my daughter look up to someone like she looked at him. And the way I caught him looking at her, like he would protect her with his last breath, it took my breath away slightly.

His body jolted at my declaration, as if he was expecting something else. Then I witnessed something beautiful; his whole face softened and the menace and coldness seeped right out. He watched me with this new beautiful face, unmasked, before his mouth reached mine in a tender kiss. The kiss deepened and his hand tightened on my ass. I felt him press into my stomach and I moaned into his mouth. I didn’t think I would have been able to take more, but at that moment, I felt like I wouldn’t be able to take not having him.

Zane must have felt the same because he flipped me over, mouth not leaving mine, then proceeded to make love to me in the most impossibly tender way.



I awoke with a feather light kiss on my jaw. My back was pressed to Zane’s front, his huge hand cupping my breast, his mouth moving along my neck.

I relaxed into his body, enjoying the feeling of waking up to desire and a tender version of my favorite biker.

“Fuck,” he groaned in a gravelly voice, “Don’t do that Wildcat, you need to get up.” He gripped my breast, tweaking my nipple.

I moaned slightly. “I respectfully disagree,” I whispered back. “I do not need to go anywhere.”

Zane flipped me so I was on my back and he hovered over me. “I wanna fuck you so bad right now, Mia,” he growled.

“No one’s stopping you,” I said in a low voice, desire pooling in my stomach.

Zane’s jaw clenched. “That’s stopping me.” He nodded over to a clock on a bedside table.

My sleepy eyes followed his and I jerked up when I saw the time. “Holy Cheese Whiz,” I half yelled. “Lexie will be up in like, minutes! I’ve got to go.” I struggled to get up from underneath the human version of a paperweight.

Zane’s hand spanned my throat, holding me down firmly. Another wave of arousal tickled through me at the way he held me down. I could tell he felt it too by the way his eyes flared.

His other hand reached down to cup me between my legs. I struggled not to let my eyes roll to the back of my head. “Zane,” I whispered.

His hand started working my clit. “Know you need to go, babe, but you also need to come,” he said roughly, still holding my neck.

His hand moved faster and I lost all coherent thought. His rough, callused, fingers quickly brought me to orgasm faster than I thought possible. It may have been quick, but it was still earth-shattering.

Zane slowly moved his hand off my neck and leaned down to claim my mouth. “Fuckin’ hottest thing I’ve ever seen, watching you come, still shakin’ off sleep. Never knew anyone to look that sexy right after they woke up, baby,” he murmured against my mouth.

I smiled lazily, enjoying yet another full sentence. “You’ve yet to wake up with a Victoria Secret model. I’m sure they’ll give me a run for my money,” I replied.

“Don’t plan on wakin’ up with anyone else, Wildcat,” he replied with seriousness.

My eyes snapped open. We may have talked certainty and “you are mine” last night but we certainly didn’t talk long term “you are my last” type crap. Commitment phrases like that might be better than coffee than waking me up.

Zane didn't seem to notice my reaction; he rubbed my nose against his. "Need to give Lexie the lowdown, babe," he ordered softly. "Then we can actually wake up together without you having to rush off."

I narrowed my eyes. "I agree Lexie needs to know we're *dating*." I emphasized the last word. "In which a certain amount of time will go by before we even begin to contemplate sleepovers," I told him firmly.

"Babe. I don't date. Lexie knows her mother isn't a virgin. I'm not fucking around with that. I'm in your bed tonight," he said with a tone that brokered no argument.

"I'm sure that's the tone you use on infidels you beat into submission, but I'm not budging," I said snippily, sliding out from the bed to gather my clothes.

Zane watched me get dressed and didn't say a word. Once I was dressed, I put my hands on my hips and stood at the bed. "I didn't know it was possible to wake up deliriously happy, have a great orgasm, then get pissed off within the space of," I glanced at the clock, "fifteen minutes. But you, Zane..." I paused. "Holy shit. I don't even know your last name." I put my head in my hands. "I'm a terrible example for Lexie. I've been sleeping with a guy and I don't even know his last name. Or his favorite movie. Or his stance on..."

Zane ended my tirade by reaching over and pulling me to lie on top of him. "Williams," he said. His hand brushed the hair out of my face. "Other stuff, not important. To me, anyway. If it is to you, we'll get to it. For now, you gotta get home to your girl." He kissed me lightly on the mouth, then it got deeper. "Tonight I'm in your bed," he told me firmly.

Drunk from the kiss, I nodded distractedly and pushed off the bed. I wandered home in a kind of trance. It wasn't until I had finished my first cup of coffee that I realized what I agreed to.



"Hey there, sleepyhead," I greeted a rumpled and disheveled-looking Lexie as she stumbled into the living room, clinging to a coffee cup.

She didn't answer, merely sank into the sofa beside me and nestled into the crook of my arm, her eyes on the TV. I squeezed her shoulder and silently treasured the last moment of cuddles from my soon to be grown up daughter. We were affectionate, Lexie and I. But she was getting to an age when snuggling your mother on the couch was getting to be a rare thing. I knew one day it would become nonexistent. We were silent for a moment.

"Your body finally realized that it's a teenager and it cannot get up at six a.m. after a night on stage," I joked.

Lexie sipped her coffee. "I'm not planning on commencing said lifestyle until I learn how to function without eight hours of sleep," she declared, making it known that the past two days had caught up with her.

"As long as coffee is the only substance you abuse to get through lack of sleep, that's fine with me," I told her.

"Okay, so I should throw out the cocaine I scored on Friday night then?" she deadpanned.

I pretended to think. "Just leave it on my nightstand," I told her with seriousness.

We lapsed into silence and I stroked her head.

"Got something to talk to you about, kid," I said quietly. I was dreading this conversation. Yes, Lexie seemed to think Zane hung the moon, but this was more than a man who seemed interesting and cool and slightly exotic. This was a man coming into our lives. It had always just been me and Lexie. We were best friends. Our lives were happy and full of laughter. I was wondering how she would react to someone shaking that up. Someone who didn't exactly live a life of sunshine and laughter like we did.

"Does it start with a Z and end with an 'ane'?" my perceptive daughter asked, lifting her head.

"You've got more brains than I give you credit for, Dollface," I said.

"More than just a hat rack." She tapped her head. She was silent and gave me a look. "Mom, it's like totally obvious. Even the guys in the band saw it. I saw it way before then," she said impatiently.

Of course she had. Batman had it right. Double lives were hard. Hence the mask.

"And you're not mad? Don't have questions?" I probed.

Lexie fully sat up, placing her coffee on the table. "Mad? No way! I'm ecstatic. You deserve someone, Mom. You've had years of bringing me up, working your butt off to give us this." Her hands gestured around the house.

“I would always worry you didn’t have someone. Now I get it, you were waiting for the right person. Zane’s your person,” she told me confidently.

I shook my head. She saw what even my broken soul stopped me from seeing. “Yeah kid, he’s my person. But you’re my one and only, you know that, right? My main person. No one ever knocks you off that spot,” I told her firmly.

Lexie rolled her eyes. “Well, duh. I’m like the most amazing daughter ever. Even a hot biker couldn’t knock me off that spot,” she said. “Plus, I’m your meal ticket for when you retire. You need to stay on my good side.” She smiled at me brightly before standing up. “Got homework to do. Glad you’re happy, Mom,” she added the last bit quietly.

“Was always happy, kid,” I answered honestly.

She winked at me and sauntered out of the room.

Before I had time to think much about how awesome that conversation went my phone rang.

“Hey babe, Gwen gave me your number. Hope you don’t mind,” Amy’s voice greeted once I answered the phone.

I smiled and sank back into the sofa. “No, I don’t mind at all,” I told her honestly. I was happy these women had injected themselves into my and Lexie’s life so easily. We were social. I was social. I needed girlfriends only slightly less than I needed coffee. Although I sporadically talked to ones from home, I was lonely until these women came along.

“Saawweet. Well, I am calling to ask you and Lexie to come with me to LA to show me your sweet vintage shops, but I also have ulterior motives,” she spoke quickly. “Me, Gwen, Rosie and Lucy totally need the rundown on you and Bull. And I also wanted to make sure he didn’t like kill you and bury your body under the cover of darkness—he looked pissed at Lexie’s gig.” She paused. “Well, more pissed than usual.”

I laughed. I hadn’t wanted to talk too much about Zane to anyone. Maybe it was because I was ashamed, or because I didn’t feel full confident spilling my guts to people who were so close to him. Whatever it was stopping me, the barriers fell away and I found myself blurting the whole thing to Amy over the phone.

“So now he’s declaring me ‘his’ and talking about sleeping over here on the day I told my daughter about us and I’m worried this will send her the wrong message about sleeping with people and label me as a brazen hussy,” I finished, slightly breathless.

There was a full ten seconds of silence at the other end of the phone. “I’m coming over,” Amy declared finally.

I tried to protest that Lexie was within hearing distance, but I only got dead air. “Shit,” I muttered.

I decided to quickly tidy the house. It wasn’t exactly messy, but whenever I had company coming, I couldn’t help but straighten things up. Within minutes of finishing, I heard a knock at my door. I had checked in on Lexie to give her food and more coffee and she was hard at work with headphones in. Hopefully that meant the possibility of her getting scarred for life while overhearing her mom describe her sexscapades was significantly lower.

I opened the door to not only Amy, but Rosie and Lucy.

“Gwen can’t come ‘cause she had a baby doctor appointment,” Amy explained as I let them in the house. “She was going to try and get out of it but Cade gets all protective and pissy about that kind of stuff.” She rolled her eyes. “So I brought reinforcements.” She gestured to the women, then unearthed two bottles of wine out of her Celine handbag.

I gaped at her. “Amy, it’s barely lunchtime,” I told her.

Amy gave me a confused look. “So? We’re talking Bull entering into a relationship here. Wine is needed. I’ll get glasses.” Without another word she disappeared without asking where the kitchen was.

Lucy surprised me by hugging me. Something danced beneath her eyes. “Knew someone like you would catch one of the boy’s eyes,” she said quietly. “But I didn’t guess you would commence in fixing something I always thought would be broken,” she said softly.

I jerked, not really knowing how to answer that, so I instead gestured to the hall leading to the back. “Let’s take this outside.”

So that’s how I ended up replaying the story of Zane and I to Amy, Lucy and Rosie, who interjected routinely with questions and had their mouths agape when I finished the story.

Amy had a small smile on her face when I finished. “This is so fucking awesome!” she declared and I was surprised she didn’t fist pump.

I sipped my second glass of wine. “I don’t know. Isn’t this too fast? Especially in front of Lexie?” I asked uncertainly.

Rosie waved her hand. “No such thing. Your girl’s sixteen. She’s a product of modern society—she ain’t gonna bat one of those pretty little eyelashes, especially when she sees her mom’s happy,” she reassured me.

“Yeah, but this is just so intense, I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop. He seemed so adamant he couldn’t give me more. Now here we are...more.” I held out my hands.

Rosie gave me a sad smile. There was something behind it I couldn’t place. “Bull’s been through a lot. He probably didn’t think he’d ever have more. Ever want more. Now he does. Probably took him awhile to get right with that. He’s still probably trying to get right with that,” she told me softly.

Something moved in my mind. “What did he go through?” I asked, mindful of my own ordeal locked beneath years of hurt.

Lucy and Rosie exchanged a look. “That’s not for us to tell you. It’s better to come from Bull,” Lucy said slowly.

Rosie pursed her lips like she didn’t agree but nodded.

I groaned. “I’ve only barely got him on full sentences, I don’t know when we’ll make it to his life story,” I complained.

“Man like that, who needs him to talk?” Amy commented.

On that we all laughed and conversation lightened and moved on. I didn’t forget Rosie’s words, or the niggling feeling in the back of my mind that there was a lot to Zane I didn’t know about.



The women left a few hours and a bottle of wine later. Lexie popped in to have a chat and charmed the socks off them all before retreating back to her room to finish her homework. I switched to water after my second glass, not needing to promote day drinking in front of a teenager. Rosie was the designated driver, so she stopped after one glass. But I was happy to have a weight off my chest, even if it meant I still had more unanswered questions when it came to Zane and the Sons of Templar. I had asked the women what exactly went on with the club and they had told me it was like a big family. I knew there was more than that to what seemed like an outlaw motorcycle club, but they didn’t betray too much information. I got that. It was Zane’s place to fill me in. I wasn’t quite sure I wanted to know, but I knew I had to. I had more than one person to think about. And as much as it would pain

me to have any kind of distance between not only Zane but the people connected to the club, I would do it for my daughter's safety. I couldn't jeopardize it when I'd worked so hard to keep her safe from her own blood.

"Mom?" a small voice asked me, jolting me out of my thoughts. I was doing the most dreaded job in existence, folding laundry, so I was happy for the distraction.

"I'll give you a hundred dollars right here and now if you agree to fold the washing for the remainder of your time living at home," I offered.

She scrunched up her nose. "That's one hundred dollars over three and a half years. That's like...thirty-eight bucks a year, give or take." She raised her eyebrow. "That's slave labor—even Cinderella would have gotten more pocket money than that," she observed, sitting beside me.

"Cinderella got fancy shoes and a prince for a husband out of the deal," I reminded her.

She gave me a look. "So in addition to the hundred dollars, you're going to wave a magic wand to get me horrifically uncomfortable shoes and a prince for a husband?" she asked.

I shook my head, "Of course not, I don't need a wand to give you horrifically uncomfortable shoes. Just check out my closet. Fashion is pain," I told her sagely. "And on the prince front, I don't doubt your ability in snagging one of your own, though you better hurry up. All the good ones are getting snaffled up," I finished.

There was a pause. I glanced up; Lexie seemed...nervous? Lexie never got nervous. Not with me. My stomach dropped and ran through all the possible bombshells a teenage girl could drop. Should not have done that.

"What's up, sweetie?" I went for calm, trying not to pounce on her and search for the tattoo she was hiding.

"I was wondering," she said slowly, fiddling with her hands. She quickly looked up. "Well, I've got a date," she said in a rush.

I sat back in relief. "So no tattoo?" I clarified.

Lexie gaped at me. "Of course not! I'm only sixteen," she told me.

"Thanks for reminding me. I would have forgotten otherwise," I told her dryly.

"So, the date," she probed. "It's okay with you?"

"Of course it's not okay with me. I'd rather you became a spinster and lived with me until you were old and wrinkly, but I knew it was a long shot," I told her. "So I guess it's okay. As long as you're home by ten and

he doesn't get frisky," I said seriously. We'd had the sex talk. Multiple times. Being a product of teenage pregnancy, I really didn't want my daughter to repeat the cycle. I also didn't want her hiding things from me. So we had agreed when she was ready, she'd tell me before anything happened. I personally hoped she wouldn't be "ready" until she was thirty. But I knew that was also a pipe dream.

"So who's the lucky guy?" I asked. My stomach dropped as soon as the question left my mouth. I had been so wrapped up with possible tattoos or cult joining I hadn't even caught up with my own mind.

"Killian," Lexie said, a small grin on her face. She even blushed slightly.

Crap. She liked him. And I knew by the way his intense troublesome eyes followed her that afternoon he listened to her play, he liked her back. And not in a teenage boy way. In a Cade, Brock, and even Zane type of way. It was intense. And dangerous.

I tried to stay calm. "He's not taking you on a motorcycle, is he?" I asked with slight panic.

Lexie patted my hand. "No, Mom, he knows your rule. He's got a car."

I raised my eyebrows. "A car and a motorcycle? How does a teenage kid afford that?" I asked suspiciously.

"He didn't steal them, if that's what you're saying," Lexie snapped defensively.

I held my hands up. "I didn't say anything of the sort." I had totally been thinking it though.

"That's what you were thinking," my telepathic daughter declared. "He built the car from the ground up with his dad, and Cade gave him the motorcycle to do up when it was a pile of junk," she continued.

"You know a lot about the kid for someone who hasn't been on a date," I half teased.

Lexie furrowed her brows. "Yes, because we talked first. Had actual conversations. Became friends. Isn't that what you taught me to do?"

Drat. I did teach her that. "Take a chill pill, dude, I was only teasing. Let's move on to the most important question."

Lexie eyed me. "What?" she asked with suspicion.

"What are you wearing?"



It was safe to say I wasn't happy about Lexie's date. I was far from it. But I couldn't tell her whom she could and couldn't date. Well, technically I could since I was her mother, but I knew what doing something like that would do. Not only distance me from her, but possibly rock the peaceful relationship I had with her and turn a good kid into a hellion. I'd seen it happen with girls I'd been to high school with. The stricter the parents, the more they rebelled. The only difference was the parents didn't know a thing. I didn't want Lexie to lie to me, so I knew I couldn't stifle her with rules or else it would bite me in the ass. And she was a good kid. I trusted her. It was the little punk in the leather jacket I didn't trust. So when he knocked on the door later that night, my stomach was swirling. Lexie came running into the kitchen.

"I'm not ready I'm not ready," she chanted, hopping on one foot. "Answer the door, Mom. Stall him," she ordered, racing back into her room.

I was glad for this turn of events. When I opened the door, Killian turned from staring over at Zane's house to face me. He was clad in jeans, motorcycle boots, a Grateful Dead t-shirt and a leather jacket. It was hot as hell outside. Obviously hot guys and teenagers alike were impervious to frivolous things such as climate.

"Hey Mrs. Spencer," he greeted respectfully.

"Killian, come in." I gestured inside. "Lexie's not ready yet."

He walked through and followed me to the sofa. His demeanor was casual, relaxed; he didn't seem like a nervous teenage boy before a date. Then again, he wasn't dealing with a shotgun-toting father.

"Can I get you anything? Coke?" I offered, trying to swallow the dislike I had for him.

He shook his head. "I'm good, thanks, Mrs. Spencer."

I moved to sit opposite him. "Call me Mia," I said.

He nodded but didn't speak.

I decided to go right in for the kill. "I trust Lexie," I started evenly. "I know she's a smart kid. That's why I'm not going to lecture with rules and curfews. She knows them all, she'll respect them," I said, glancing to make

sure Lexie hadn't arrived. "But you hurt her...make no mistake, I'll kill you. Not in the figurative I'll shout at you a bit and maybe call your parents type of way, but in a straight up murder type of way. No one will find the body," I told him seriously.

Of course, I would never murder a teenager. But Lexie didn't have the gun-toting father, so I had to make up for it somehow.

To my surprise, the bad boy nodded quickly. "Wouldn't have it any other way, Mia. Lexie's special. I wouldn't do anything to hurt her, just so you know," he told me sincerely.

And damn it if I didn't believe him.

His eyes moved from mine as if he had some kind of sixth sense, and he stood. Lexie stood in the doorway looking beautiful. Her hair was plaited into a fishtail and her face was lightly made up with a dusting of pink lip gloss. She had on her lightest pair of skinny jeans and a fitted floral blouse, which had huge bell sleeves and a slightly plunging neckline. She was wearing my wedges and I felt a pang at how grown up she looked.

"Freckles," Killian muttered, looking her up and down, "You're beautiful."

Lexie blushed bright red.

I didn't blame her. The big, bad, leather-wearing, smoking teenager spoke softly and called her beautiful, in front of her mother no less. I'd be blushing too.

He moved to her and grabbed her hand. His eyes reluctantly moved to me.

"Have her home by ten, Mia," he promised before directing them out the door. Lexie gave me a little wave and then they were gone. I sank down into my chair and tried not to cry. I picked up the phone.

"Lexie's just gone on a date," I greeted as soon as Ava answered. I didn't give her time to respond. "And I want to hate him. He rides a motorcycle, smokes cigarettes and practically has *Dangerous* tattooed on his forehead. But he's polite and is clearly obsessed with my daughter," I groaned into the phone. "I'm torn between wanting to run him over with my car or be happy for them."

Ava laughed. "Sweetheart, you are going through what every mother goes through. Whether they're wearing leather or plaid, you're always going to instinctively dislike your daughter's first boyfriend." She paused, and I knew she was remembering her own daughter, who she lost to a drink

driver at seventeen. “But our Lexie’s a good girl. A smart girl. She would pick the right boy,” she said with a slight tremble in her voice.

“But I didn’t,” I half whispered. “I thought I was a smart girl—look what happened to me. Thank God it did happen because I got Lexie, but what if that happens to her?” I told the only woman I could talk to my greatest fear, tears welling in my eyes.

“Oh sweetie,” Ava said softly. “You were a baby. Not only that, you had parents that didn’t take care of you the way they should.” Her voice held a hint of anger. “Your parents were animals. You sought affection and solace in the one place you found it. That doesn’t make you bad or weak. Only human. You got out of there, made a life. Made Lexie a life. You’re strong, sweetie. You’ve got a strong daughter. We’re so proud of you.” Her voice cracked again and my tears really threatened to fall. “Lexie has such a good role model, she’d never have to blindly seek acceptance like a scared little one we knew. Trust her, be there for her, and make sure you keep a loaded shotgun under the bed, just in case,” she added lightly.

I laughed. A knock, no, a *pounding* at the door made me frown. “I’m sorry, Ava, I’ve got to go. Someone’s at the door,” I said, standing. “And I just wanted you to know, you’re a wonderful mother too. Alice was lucky to have you. And Lexie and I are more than lucky,” I told her softly. “Love you,” I added, knowing Ava didn’t do well talking about Alice.

“Love you, beautiful. Send my love to my Sunshine,” she said with a shaky voice.

I still had my phone at my ear when I answered the door; a furious looking Zane stood in it. His face changed as soon as he got a look at me.

“Babe?” He stepped forward and clutched my hips. His hand wiped a stray tear from the side of my eye. “What the fuck?” he asked with concern. Well, his version of concern.

“Nothing, I’m fine,” I reassured him. “It’s nothing,” I repeated.

Zane frowned. “Nothing does not equal tears.”

“Tear, singular—not plural,” I clarified.

Zane gritted his teeth, directing me to the sofa.

I threw up my arms. “Can a mom not get a bit emotional when her only daughter embarks on her first date?” I asked, only half lying. No way was I taking him on a trip down my memory lane. That was a place closed for good.

Zane’s glare returned. “Got to talk about that shit, Mia,” he bit out.

I straightened. “What shit?”

Zane looked at me. “Lexie going on a date with that little fucker,” he said roughly.

“I thought he was a friend of the club?” I said, confused and slightly worried Zane seemed so mad. Maybe I had judged Killian right on first glance. I restrained the urge to hop in my car and follow them.

“He was,” Zane said tightly. “Until he went on a fuckin’ date with Lexie,” he finished.

I relaxed. His fury was not due to the fact Killian was a troublemaker but out of protectiveness to my kid. A warm feeling spread through me.

I cupped his cheek. “He’s a kid, they’re on a date. He’s not whisking her off to elope in Vegas,” I joked.

Zane’s glare intensified. “She’s fuckin’ sixteen. Too young for that shit,” he argued.

I raised an eyebrow. “I’d had Lexie by the time I was sixteen,” I told him.

His face hardened. “Exactly.”

“What do you suggest I do, Zane? Look her up in a windowless tower until she is of the marrying age? Then sell her for five goats?” I asked sarcastically.

Zane grabbed my chin. He searched my face. “I’ll kill the little shit if he hurts her,” he finally said.

“Already threatened the whole murder thing—we’re good,” I patted his arm.

“You threatened to murder a teenager?” Zane said with surprise and respect.

“He was taking my daughter out on a date. It was my duty to at least threaten bodily dismemberment,” I deadpanned.

Zane looked at me a moment longer, then a shadow of a grin tickled the side of his face. I stared in amazement, but I didn’t have time to properly appreciate it as he pulled me in for a kiss. Then he deepened it and decided to fuck me on the sofa. I wasn’t complaining.



We were lying on the sofa dressed again, because I didn't want Lexie coming home early from her date to me naked in the living room . Some things you just couldn't unsee. I traced the patch on Zane's cut which said *Enforcer*. I didn't know exactly what it meant, but I knew it meant he wasn't crunching numbers for the club.

"Tell me about the club," I asked quietly.

Zane jerked slightly. He was quiet for a while. "What do you want to know?" he said finally, his voice guarded. I glanced up at him; his face was blank.

I had a multitude of questions. "I," I began, unsure of where one started asking their boyfriend about his potential outlaw motorcycle club. "Are you in danger?" I asked, needing to know whether said club would be a reason I lost him. I blanched at the thought.

He stroked my face. "Babe, it's dangerous riding my bike down the street. That's life. Ain't livin' if you do it scared," he answered

I chewed my lip. "So that's a yes, you are in danger," I surmised. "Does that mean the club breaks the law?" I asked quietly.

Zane paused. "Not gonna lie, babe. Club used to be into shady shit," He continued. "Last coupla years things have gotten on the right side of the law."

I raised a speculative eyebrow.

"We ain't ever gonna be society's version of law abiding citizens. We are going to significantly lower the risk of entering a state run facility or meeting the reaper bloody," he told me with honesty that made me sick.

I swallowed. "Meet the reaper bloody," I repeated. "People have died?" I asked weakly.

Zane's face turned shuttered, tortured even. His eyes were full of something I couldn't place. Sorrow. Regret. "Long time ago," he muttered finally. "Club's outta that shit now. Promise you that." His voice was husky, full of pain.

I wanted to ask him who had died. It was obviously someone important. Or multiple someones, but he already seemed on the verge of shutting down and I didn't want to push it. Rosie's words about sorrow and guilt reverberated in my mind.

"So me and Lexie having a connection to the club—to you—we're not in danger?" I clarified, needing to know my daughter wouldn't become

collateral damage.

Zane's grip tightened on my chin and he fastened it so my face met his. His eyes seemed to glitter. "You think I would let anything happen to you or Lexie?" he growled. "Think I would let you in my life if there was a possibility of you getting a hair on your beautiful head ruffled?" he continued with ferocity.

I shook my head slowly. I knew he would protect us. But I didn't want to have a lifestyle that needed protecting. But unfortunately, I already did. With or without a motorcycle club, there would always be a shadow that haunted my dreams.

We were silent for a long while and I traced the patch on his cut again. "Enforcer," I read quietly. "That mean what I think it means?"

Zane's frame was tight under mine. "Means I protect the club," he said simply.

"With that?" I nodded to the gun that sat on the coffee table. One that I was not happy having in my house. Not at all. Something we would sure be having a conversation about.

Zane nodded.

"And you use it?" I probed.

His face hardened once more. "If need be," he clipped.

I chewed on my question before finally asking it. "You've killed people," I said quietly, realizing it was more of a statement than a question.

Zane was silent. I knew this meant yes. I searched his face. Even though it was hard and expressionless at this moment, I knew it wasn't the face of a cold-blooded murderer. He could be hard, dangerous and menacing. He could also be tender and loving. I wondered if Jeffery Dahmer's girlfriend justified it that way. I didn't know how I could live with that. How I could get past that. I also didn't know how I could live without him. I wasn't in danger of falling for him. I already had.

"You gonna be able to get right with that?" Zane asked roughly.

"I don't know," I whispered honestly.

Zane's frame tightened even more and he moved to get up. I put pressure on his shoulders as he sat up and swung my legs so I straddled him, moving my hands to his neck. "I don't know how. But I'm going to try, because I can't imagine my life without you right know," I said to his eyes.

His frame relaxed and his fingers flexed at my hips. "I'm a selfish fucker," he growled slightly. "Shouldn't be giving you a choice. Should be

walking out right now. Can't do that, babe." His mouth brushed my jaw.
"You're under my skin," he murmured.

I shivered at his stubble brushing against me, his lips at my throat.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Lexie's date had gone well. Really well. Considering it was the day after and she was still wearing that slightly dreamy look which was on her face at 9:52 p.m. last night, well was an understatement. But, then again, she had been at school all day, where she no doubt encountered Killian once more. He had plenty of opportunity to give her another reason to smile like a dork. I'd had to physically restrain myself from peeking out the window when I heard him pull up last night, most likely giving Lexie her first proper kiss. I knew she'd been kissed before, but she hadn't seemed too impressed and was happy to go back to books and music afterwards. My motherly intuition told me this time books and music would not hold her interest in the way Killian did after said kiss. Looking at her across the car, I knew it was the case.

I had finished work early for a change and picked Lexie up from school to take us on a shopping outing in the next town over.

We were pulling up to our store and I couldn't help but smirk. "You know, if the wind changes your face will freeze like that," I remarked lightly.

Lexie, who had been gazing out the window, turned to look at me. "Like what?"

I grinned at her. "Like a little lovelorn girl, wistfully waiting for her one and only to send that fated text," I teased.

She didn't even roll her eyes or frown at my statement. She just smiled slightly and retreated back into her head.

I was taken aback. No usual witty banter? Wow, one date and he had her mute. Oh God.

I parked slightly down from the kick ass vintage store Lexie and I had found when exploring Hope weeks before. Since Lexie not only had dates with her new man-boy and gigs with her band, she needed new duds. I also needed new clothes...well, just because. My eyes rested on motorcycles lined up slightly down from us. I wondered if the Sons of Templar liked vintage shopping too. I grinned at the prospect.

“Zane coming over tonight?” Lexie asked hopefully, finally regaining her cogitative skills as we got out of the car.

I chewed my lip and linked my arm with hers as we walked toward the store. Zane had left last night before Lexie had returned home, declaring he had “club business.”

“That little shit is even a minute later than her curfew, you let me know,” he had demanded.

I’d rolled my eyes slightly at this. If he was a minute late I’d barely be ringing the alarm bells. I had kissed him instead of answering.

“Mia,” he had warned after kissing me soundly.

“Yes, O Macho One, I shall do as you command,” I told him seriously, with a hand on my heart.

At this he had shaken his head, given me a firm kiss and left. I had not seen nor heard from him since then. I told myself not to be worried or pissed off, yet I was both.

“Not sure yet, Doll,” I answered instead. Then I decided that I would not be waiting around for his call. “How about we make an afternoon of this? Head to dinner and a movie later?”

Lexie’s eyes brightened. “Can I call Kill and ask him to come?” she asked.

I stopped us, right there in the middle of the street, raising my eyebrows. “You want to have a second date with the boy you’re daydreaming about with your mom as a tagalong?” I asked in disbelief. “Tellin’ you now, kid, such boys do not appreciate chaperones while they commence broody looks at pretty young girls. I’d cramp your style,” I informed her.

She grinned at me. “Kill needs to know, sooner rather than later, my mom’s my best friend. He already thinks you’re cool. He won’t mind—he doesn’t have a choice anyway.” She added the last bit thoughtfully.

I gave her a proud look. “You go, girlfriend. Tell him who wears the pants.”

She smirked at me. "I'll call him now," she declared, rifling through her purse.

I grabbed her hand. "Now?" I asked in shock. "But the shop is right there," I pointed to the window, only a few feet away. "You're willing to delay shopping in order to talk to a boy?" I asked in horror.

Lexie merely patted my arm and shook her head, walking slightly away from me to make her call.

I shook my own head. "Never thought I'd see the day when a boy came before fashion," I muttered to myself.

My attention was diverted when four huge bikers sauntered down the street in my direction. I glanced at the bikes, which were parked in front of me. I deduced they were why the bikers were walking toward me, not so they could rob me. They got closer and I knew for sure they weren't anyone in the Sons. Not that I knew them all, but I was pretty sure their cuts were different, and on closer inspection these guys looked slightly rougher than the bikers I had come into contact with. And nowhere near as hot. I stepped back instinctively, going closer to Lexie, who was smiling into the phone. Unfortunately, I felt their eyes on me as they approached.

"Hey, darlin,'" one drawled, looking me up and down in a decidedly skeevy way.

I gave a quick glance behind me Lexie had her back to me and the bikers, for now.

"Um hey," I greeted back, unsure of what to do when half surrounded by mean-looking bikers. I guessed the smartest thing to do would have been run a mile. But I couldn't exactly do that in broad daylight. That would look pretty stupid. Plus, I couldn't run in these heels. I had to believe these guys meant no harm. Not in the middle of a reasonably busy street, in the middle of the day, anyway.

He continued to give me a look; this time there was something more working behind it, as if he recognized me. He wasn't exactly bad-looking. His shaggy hair touched his shoulders and was in need of a wash. His beard definitely needed trimming, but his face was handsome, in a mean kind of way. He was tall, and he seemed to be using his height and considerable muscles to intimidate me. His friends were a mixture. Some older and decidedly not attractive, others younger and not bad. It was the way they were looking at me that made them unattractive. In a way that made my skin crawl.

The guy's face lit up like he had placed me. "I know you," he declared with a smile. One that I did not like. "You're my buddy Bull's woman, right?" he asked, folding his arms.

I did not know how to answer this. I didn't exactly know if I was Zane's "woman" considering we only recently had the "you are mine" conversation. I didn't exactly want to discuss this with these men. I'm sure they wouldn't offer any helpful insight. I also found it hard to believe this guy was Zane's buddy. From what little I knew the men at the club were the only friends Zane had. They weren't buddies; they were brothers. But who was I to say? I knew precious little about the man that shared my bed. But in this situation, my instincts were screaming at me to be careful.

"Um, yeah," I said slowly. "I'm his," I said more firmly.

The men all smiled at me. My skin definitely crawled this time.

Before they had the time to answer, I felt someone at my side.

"Mom?" Lexie asked quietly in my ear.

I jolted when all sets of eyes focused on my daughter in a way that made me want to scratch their eyes out.

"Heya, sweetie," the bearded guy drawled. "Shit, you're almost as pretty as your mamma," he said, eyes darting between us.

Lexie gave me a look before meeting his eyes, no fear evident. I tried to position myself slightly in front of her, while looking around the street for a friendly policeman to be wandering by. None could be seen, and the few pedestrians that were around seemed to be crossing the street to avoid the bikers. Great.

"Thanks," Lexie said firmly.

I was about to grab her hand and make our escape when the biker spoke again.

"You need to let Bull know he shouldn't be letting his woman and her pretty little daughter walk the streets alone," he said slowly. "It's not safe for girls like you." His voice seemed to hold a threat beneath the fake concern. "Let him know you ran into Logan and we're happy to keep an eye on you both. More than happy." He stared at us a moment longer before tipping an imaginary hat and getting on his bike, along with his buddies and leaving. I stayed rooted to the spot the entire time, refusing to scuttle off like I wanted to.

"Ew. Totally need a shower after that," I declared, going for airy. I didn't need to broadcast to my kid that little meeting had scared me slightly.

Lexie grabbed my hand. “Yeah, they were creeps,” she agreed. “Shopping is definitely needed to wipe such an event out of our minds,” she said, directing us into the store.



Half an hour later, Lexie seemed to have forgotten about the incident entirely, while it still niggled at the edge of my mind. I did my best to shop it out of my system, although it did taint the experience slightly. I was angry at them for that alone. I decided to let Lexie do the shopping from then on, sitting myself on the sofa outside the changing rooms, playing the stylist. Lexie had just gone back in after showing me a sequined mini dress she just *had* to get, and my phone rang.

“You have reached the Queen of All Things Known and Unknown, currently stylist for rock star Miss Lexie Spencer,” I answered professionally.

“Mia?” The deep voice at the end of the phone sounded pissed and slightly panicked.

“I do also answer to that name. What service may I perform for you, kind sir?” I continued, whispering the last part slightly.

There was a pause. I grinned. Totally got him. “Where the fuck are you?” he clipped. Okay maybe not.

“Currently, I’m in a kick ass vintage store, saving beautiful clothes from being subjected to the horror of being unworn,” I said, patting the pile we had amassed.

“In Hope?” he gritted out.

I straightened. “How did you know that? Did your friend call you already?” I asked, confused. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe that guy was Zane’s friend, no matter how skeevey. “If that’s the case, tell him he’d be decidedly less creepy if he showered, and kept the leering of my daughter at a complete fricking zero, even if he was promising to look out for us,” I added, sounding slightly pissed at the end of the sentence.

There was a pause. A loaded pause. “Leering at Lexie?” he repeated quietly. Dangerously quietly. “Mia, who the fuck are you talking about?”

His voice was urgent.

At that moment Lexie came out, wearing a green dress that did nothing for her. I made a cutting gesture along my throat. “No honey, that one is *not* cute,” I told her firmly and she disappeared back into the room.

“Mia,” the voice was more furious than I’d heard in a while.

“Logan, your biker friend,” I told him patiently.

His response was instant. “Tell me where you are right now.”

I rattled off the address, more out of reflex than anything else. He sounded...freaked out. It chilled my bones slightly.

“Do not leave that fuckin’ store,” he commanded, then he was gone.

I frowned down at my phone, my stomach swirling slightly. The way Zane had sounded caused me to realize my first instinct with these guys had been correct. They were bad news. And not friends of Zane if his excessive cursing was anything to go by. I was more than happy to stay in the store if that meant we were safe from creepy bikers. It also meant we got to shop more. Twenty minutes and a small fashion show later, I heard the rumble of motorcycles, plural. Which was good timing as we had just rung up our considerable purchases.

I didn’t tell Lexie about Zane’s strange call, only mentioned he might swing by and say hello. Her face had brightened at this. But on peeking out the window at the multiple bikes, I didn’t exactly know how to explain that.

“Wow, looks like half the club is out there,” Lexie remarked in amazement as we left the store.

“Maybe they like vintage shopping here too,” I answered, not missing the way Zane nearly leapt off his bike when he spotted us. “Who knows,” I added, trying not to seem nervous, “maybe there’s a shop called ‘Alpha Style’ around the corner.”

Zane made it to us and he quickly ran his gaze along us both, as if he was checking for something. His face relaxed a tad when he seemed satisfied. I say a tad, because he still looked ready to blow.

“Zane,” Lexie greeted enthusiastically. “Fancy seeing you here. You coming to the movies?” she asked with a hopeful tone. I don’t know if she ignored the scary look on his face and the lineup of bikers at the curb or just didn’t notice it. My girl was observant, so I knew it wasn’t the latter.

“Come to make sure you and your mom got home okay, Lex,” he told her quietly.

I jerked slightly at this and Lexie's face turned blank. She knew what was going on. I didn't. "We weren't going home--" I started to argue.

Zane silenced me with a look. "Car. Now, Mia," he ordered quietly.

Something in his tone, his look had me complying without another protest. Something that told me Zane and half the club would not come hurtling to another town in order to escort me home if it wasn't important. Wasn't dangerous. Lexie's safety was tantamount to me at this moment. I'd get to the bottom of this when we were home. The look I gave Zane hopefully communicated this.



The whole drive home we were trailed by bikes. It felt kind of weird, like we had some sort of royal escort. Then I remembered the other bikers. It went from weird to downright scary. I didn't let Lexie think this was the case. I acted like having a motorcycle club escort us home from a shopping trip was something that happened every day. She played along, joking and talking about her various purchases. But her eyes flickered behind us every now and then. When we made it to the sign welcoming us to Amber, most of the bikes veered off. Except one. One that followed us the entire way home. Another bike was parked outside our house when I pulled up which had Killian leaning against it, his shades watching the car's journey.

Lexie leapt out of the car to run over to him.

"Don't worry!" I yelled to her back. "Your humble slave will carry your considerable purchases inside."

She waved a hand. "Thanks, Mom," she called distractedly.

I shook my head as I got out of the car and prepared to get the bags. Tattooed hands snatched them before I could even understand what happened. Stormy eyes met mine. "House. Now," he barked.

I jumped at his harsh tone.

"Mom!" Lexie yelled, interrupting the stare off I was about to commence.

"Yeah, doll?" I called back, ripping my eyes away from Zane.

“Is it okay if Kill and I go to the movies?” she asked, her eyes flickering to Zane a moment.

I chewed my lip. Things had obviously been serious, considering the escort we got home. I assumed whatever was going on was in Hope, and Lexie would be okay going to the movies in the late afternoon. If she wasn't, things would seriously have to change with Zane and I.

“Sure,” I told her and Zane's form stiffened. I ignored this. I moved away from him to make my way over to the couple.

Killian's face seemed to be as hard as Zane's, although his eyes softened looking at Lexie. It was a look which exceeded his seventeen years. “Hey Killian,” I greeted him warmly.

“Mia,” he nodded. I guessed that counted as a warm greeting.

“You both know my rule about motorcycles,” I said firmly. I threw my keys in Killian's direction. He caught them with one hand. “Therefore you may take Betty. Lexie only has her learners permit and I do not trust her not to crash it. Her mad skills in most things are yet to translate into knowing how to control what we call a motor vehicle,” I told him seriously.

“Hey!” Lexie started to protest.

I silenced her with a knowing look.

“Be careful,” I warned him, my eyes reminding him of my murder threat. He nodded tightly.

He pushed off his bike and grabbed Lexie's hand. “Let's go, Freckles,” he told her softly. “You can tell me all about your struggles with the complex process of driving on the way,” he teased lightly.

Lexie gave me a scowl and I blew her a kiss before she turned her back. I made my way back to a tense Zane, who watched my car reverse in the driveway.

“Killian looks funny driving Betty,” I commented, tilting my head. “I'm surprised my car doesn't like, eject such a masculine being out of a such a girly car.”

My joke didn't defuse any tension. Zane grabbed my elbow roughly and dragged me into the house.

“Hey!” I protested, ripping my arm out of his grasp. “Careful with the merchandise, buddy!” I rubbed my arm slightly.

Zane dropped the bags at his feet and stalked towards me. I backed into the closed door without even knowing until he had me boxed in.

“Would you like to tell me,” he began on a quiet tone, “what the fuck you were doing in Hope?”

I took a breath and moved my eyes to meet his, unsure of what made him so furious. “Shopping,” I told him honestly.

“Shopping?” he repeated quietly.

I nodded. “Evidence is right there, officer.” I nodded to the bags.

He slammed his open palm against the door and I jumped at the explosion of anger. It was only clothes. Jeez.

“Is everything a fuckin’ joke with you, Mia?” he half yelled.

I didn’t answer because I think that was a rhetorical question.

“You need to tell me exactly what happened with Logan,” he demanded.

I quickly recounted the interaction with the other biker that had Zane all riled, hopefully to get an explanation as to the origin of such rage.

He was silent for a moment when I finished, his frame scarily still. He seemed to be holding himself back from doing something.

I swallowed my fear. I knew he wouldn’t hurt me. “Those guys, they’re not your friends, are they?” I asked the question I already knew the answer to.

Zane didn’t speak, only shook his head slightly.

“Me and Lexie,” I began slowly, my face draining. “We’re not in danger, are we?” I asked in slight horror over the fact I had just sent me daughter off to the movies.

Zane stepped back, right out of my space. His eyes stayed locked on mine. “No,” he promised, his voice firm. “Not anymore,” he added roughly.

My stomach sank at something behind those words.

I stayed with my back against the door. “What does that mean?” I asked slowly, even though I thought I knew the answer. And the hurt sliced through me already.

“Means we’re done,” he said flatly, without emotion. With dead eyes.

I flinched slightly from the pain from those three words. I stepped forward, not toward him, but toward the sofa. My legs were in danger of giving out. I chided myself for being so weak. For letting a man worm his way into my heart once more. Giving him the power to affect me so deeply. To hurt me.

“You promised,” I half whispered, sinking down on the sofa. I lifted my head meeting his eyes. “You promised,” I repeated, this time, louder, stronger. “That you were certain. That you wouldn’t hurt Lexie—hurt me.”

Something moved in Zane's eyes as I said that, but his face stayed blank. He stood there watching me. "That's what I'm doing," he finally said, "keeping my promise."

And with that, he walked out the door.



Bull

Bull stormed into the clubhouse, striding through the bar and crashing through the closed doors to church.

"Want to tell me how the *fuck* that happened?" he roared at Cade while the rest of his brothers stared at him.

His best friend and president regarded him coolly for a moment. "Sit down..." he began.

"I will not fuckin' sit down and calmly discuss this shit. We are going to storm their fuckin' clubhouse. Now," he demanded. There were a couple of nods from around the table.

Cade ignored this. "You know we can't do that shit. Gotta play this smart," he said evenly.

Bull walked over to the head of the table and slammed his fist down. "Walked right up to my woman, her fuckin' *kid*, threatened them in broad fuckin' daylight," he hissed at his friend. "That was Gwen and Belle, would you be playin' this smart?"

Cade's face hardened. "I'd be acting the exact same way you were, brother," he said quietly. "I'd hope my club would talk me down. Make me see such a move could be more dangerous in the long run."

Bull and Cade stared at each other for a long moment, Bull struggling to keep himself together. "Broad fuckin' daylight," he repeated and Cade's eyes hardened.

His brother knew exactly what he was talking about. He wasn't having anything else he cared about snatched away from him. Which was why he

righted his colossal fucking mistake with Mia an hour ago. Should never have gotten close. Made her his. That put her in danger.

“They’ve got eyes on us,” he declared once he had himself in some form of control, once he battled the demons down to their cage. “Knew who Mia was,” he continued in a hard voice, taking his place at the table.

There was a multitude of hard looks with this declaration and the air turned dangerous.

“They’re going to be dealt with,” Cade declared. “When Old Ladies get involved, any form of mercy goes out the window.”

There was a chorus of agreements at this.

Cade’s eyes flared. “We deal with these fuckers. Tonight.”

At this Bull grinned.



The man coughed up blood and Bull stood emotionless, having enjoyed every moment of beating the shit out of Logan, the president of the Lost Knights. He stepped back so Cade could clutch him by the collar.

“I suspect you and your boys,” he glanced around at the various men who lay on the floor groaning. A couple were moaning over some bullet holes, which were barely flesh wounds, the pussies. “Have gotten our friendly message,” Cade continued blandly.

It had been laughably easy to storm their poor excuse for a clubhouse. They may have been recruiting heavily, but most of the shitheads they recruited were idiots who laid down their guns pretty quickly when they realized they were outmanned and outgunned.

Logan glared at him and said nothing.

Cade didn’t seem outwardly bothered, but a muscle in his jaw ticked. Bull itched to put a bullet through his skull, but the club was aiming to go legit. Which meant murder was frowned upon under their new rules. Or at least was a last resort.

“Your choice,” Cade told him, “You can agree to stay the fuck away from Amber and our women,” he tightened his grip on Logan’s collar at this, “or Bull here can drill a couple of rounds into you kneecap and see

how you feel toward such a situation after that,” he informed the sorry excuse for a president.

Bull stepped forward, his trigger finger itching as he clasped his gun.

Logan paled slightly, his eyes darting to Bull. “Fine,” he gritted out.

Cade let him go quickly, his body falling to the floor. “That wasn’t that hard now, was it?” he asked, wiping his gloved hands on his jeans. His face turned cold. “You do know we don’t give second warnings. We even catch a glimpse of your patch we’ll be burning this place to the ground. With you inside it,” he promised. And it wasn’t an empty one either.

With that, Cade and the rest of the club left. Each stepped on a piece of shit as they made their way out, laughing at the groans emitted from various prone bodies.

Bull failed to feel any relief over the fact they had finally gotten rid of the problem that had been a pain in their ass. Exacted revenge on the men who had threatened his woman. That was because she wasn’t his woman after this. Couldn’t be. This problem may have been taken care of, club might be cleaner than before, but he didn’t want to risk that feeling again. The feeling he got when the kid had informed him Mia and Lexie were in Hope. The feeling he got when Mia had told him about her encounter with the Lost Knights. Fear. Fear that was like ice in his veins. That was a weakness he didn’t need. He was willing to live in darkness so Mia and Lexie could have cloudless sunshine.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mia

I had done a lot of dumb things in my life. A lot. Thinking it was okay to eat an entire batch of raw cookie dough, for example. Letting Lexie convince me to go vegan for a week. Okay, a day. Got bangs. Married a guy who talked with his fists. But this took the cake. Or at least ran a hot second to marrying a loser who talked with his fists.

“Mom? We going to get out of the car?” Lexie asked from beside me.

I glanced over at her. She was smiling at me, her face lit up with excitement. A casserole dish sat in her lap.

“Yes,” I snapped at her. “Eventually,” I added.

I really didn't want to go into the unassuming yet rather cute little house. Like I would rather watch seven hours of “American Idol”. But I had already committed to the thing and I didn't want to face Rosie's wrath by bailing. I also didn't quite know how to explain to Lexie that Zane had ended it with me, whatever *it* was. The only reason she was in the dark was because Zane had disappeared on a “run” the day of the whole incident with the bikers. Gwen had been the one to inform me of this when she called to make sure I was okay the next day. I had played it cool and not let on I was reeling from being dumped. I didn't want to broadcast that to anyone just yet. I needed to lick my wounds, regroup. I wasn't letting Zane off that easy. Without a fight. I knew that look in his eyes when he left. The thing that flickered before the shutter went down. He thought he was trying to protect us by leaving. He didn't understand he'd be hurting us worse than

anything else could be by disappearing. I tried to run my eyes over the multiple bikes at the curb, searching for Zane's. I didn't know how long he'd be away for, but I'd been harboring a hope he might be here today.

"Mom," Lexie snapped her fingers in front of my face.

"Okay, okay, I'm getting out," I conceded, opening my door.

She grabbed my hand before I could get out. Her eyes searched my face. "You know, Mom, you need to talk to me about anything, you can right?" she asked softly, with understanding that reflected how beyond her sixteen years she was. I swear there was a wise old woman in there wearing a teenager's body.

I did my best to give her a genuine smile. "I know, Doll—same goes for you. But you seem to have your life completely sorted and have rendered your poor mom obsolete already," I half joked.

She gave me a long look. "Never," she promised. "I'll always need my mom." She gave me a smile and moved to get out of the car. I did the same.

We walked side by side, as we headed around back, as Rosie had instructed us to.

"Do I look okay?" I whispered in Lexie's ear as we rounded the corner to the backyard.

"Yes Mom, for the millionth time you look okay," she said with exasperation.

"Okay? Just okay?" I hissed.

She stopped walking and turned to me. "Well, the first time you asked, if you recall, I said you looked great. I also said that the second. I've lost the will to answer this question. You know you look good," she told me with a raised eyebrow.

I couldn't disagree. I had taken an extra effort with my appearance today, hoping Zane would be here and I could sway him with some good old-fashioned sex appeal. I'd straightened my usual wayward curls so my hair dipped way long down my back. Like my kid, I was big on the "no makeup" look, which of course meant at least an hour of makeup application. The blouse I had on was Lexie's, which meant it was slightly tighter in the bust area; not a bad thing with my current goal. It was sleeveless and had a deep v at the front and back, and was form fitting all the way down my waist. My jeans were my oldest and therefore most kick ass pair. They were so light they were almost white and fit me like an effing dream, if I did say so myself. I had my usual sky high heels on; this time,

cork wedges. I hoped my outfit might help me tame a wild biker. Or at the very least distract him from his macho man protection goal.

I took in the backyard. It was bigger than I had expected and cluttered with people. A lot of them I had already seen at the club gathering I had attended weeks before, so I got a lot of chin lifts and warm smiles. Lexie hadn't been introduced to a club gathering yet, so she walked around with her eyes wide. A few of the men gave her lingering looks, which immediately had my hackles up. I tried not to worry too much; whenever Killian got here, which he would considering he and Lexie were officially an item, he would deal out withering looks. Which was good, so I didn't have to ruin my cool mom reputation by tackling the bikers.

Unlike the party I had attended weeks ago, which was a lot of men and women getting loose, I was surprised to see a number of kids running around the grassed area. This was definitely more of a family gathering.

"Hey! Lexie, Mia!" A voice called to us from a seated area to our left. I relaxed when I saw that it was Gwen and Amy waving at us to come over. With a hand on Lexie's back, I directed her toward the women.

"Hey," I greeted as we approached the group. Gwen was sitting in a chair, Belle squirming in her lap as she fastened a hat on her head.

Amy stood beside her, looking like she was about to strut down a runway. Her red hair flowed past her shoulders, and a khaki strapless jersey dress clung to her every curve. My eyes stopped at her feet.

"Oh my gosh, I think I've fallen in love," I declared, gazing at the strappy tan heels which crisscrossed her feet and snaked up her ankles.

My head snapped up to the unfairly beautiful face. "Your shoes are the freaking bomb. I want them. Need them. Would you take payment in the form of my firstborn child?" I gestured to Lexie, who rolled her eyes. "She's house trained and a great cook...if you like kale," I added.

"Excuse my mother's unhealthy shoe addiction problem," she addressed both Gwen and Amy, "I'm looking into rehab facilities."

Both women laughed, and Gwen set an excited little girl down at her feet. The little girl ran straight for Lexie, who crouched down to smile and tickle her.

"Don't worry." Amy touched my arm. "I can totally hook you up," she winked.

I smiled back at her, wishing I had the money to take her up on the offer. I glanced to Lexie, who was giggling with the toddler. Totally worth not

having fancy shoes.

“You both remember Lexie,” Amy had met her briefly when we had been day drinking and discussing Zane and Gwen at the store when we first moved to town. She had stood up now with Belle in her arms.

“Yeah, who could forget such a beautiful girl with such killer style? Lovin’ the jacket, babe,” Amy exclaimed, looking over the multicolored cropped jacket we bought in the vintage store in Hope.

Lexie blushed slightly; no matter how beautiful she got, she still got embarrassed when people commented on it. “Thanks. Mom and I are seasoned vintage shoppers—we have the eye for it now.” She glanced at Gwen. “Your little girl is adorable.” She smiled down at the baby who was tugging on her curl.

Gwen’s hand rested on her bump, which was prominent thanks to the tight white tank she was wearing. “Yeah, she keeps getting prettier every day, I’m pretty sure her dad’s already polishing his shotgun preparing for the onslaught of boys in about twelve years,” she joked.

I laughed. “Try ten,” I corrected her, remembering the looks Lexie got when she was too young to understand.

Gwen stared at me. “Seriously?”

I nodded somberly.

“Oh man, Cade is going to go on a murder spree,” she groaned.

“On that note, how about we get a cocktail for you and a soda for Lexie?” Amy suggested with a grin.

“I’d love one,” I answered. More like needed some Dutch courage if Zane was ever going to turn up. I tried to subtly scan the yard for him. My eyes landed on many faces, some who were staring at me and Lexie with interest. I swallowed, turning my attention back to my group. It was safer that way. I so didn’t want to start a brawl in Rosie’s back yard because some biker was looking at my kid the wrong way.



An hour or so later I was feeling happy. Comfortable, at home. I had already gotten to know Amy, Rosie and Gwen well enough and the more I

knew the more I liked. I didn't at all feel like the boring old mom hanging out with the young glamorous beauties. I felt like I was with old friends.

Lexie also got on with them naturally, which didn't surprise me. She was a polite and sociable kid, who pretty much got along with everyone. She spent most of her time hanging with Lily, a pretty girl who was closest to her age, although she looked about twenty. Lily was also fielding scary stares from Asher, whom I had met before. He was yet another hottie in the club; no visible tattoos but seriously visible muscles. He had actually dragged her away moments earlier and Lexie had grinned at the retreating couple. She was currently chasing a very enthusiastic Belle around the yard, along with a couple of other kids who had taken a shine to her. I smiled as she gathered the toddler up in the air, twirling her around. She seemed oblivious to the glances she got every now and then. One she wasn't oblivious to was Killian, whose eyes hadn't left her the moment he arrived. He didn't seem to be approaching her just yet, merely watching. And, like I had predicted, sending withering glares at the couple of men whose gaze lingered on Lexie a moment too long. I was impressed. How a teenage kid could send menacing looks to hard bikers twice his age and pull it off was anyone's guess, but he did it.

"You've done really well with her, Mia," Amy said, nodding her head at Lexie.

"You really have," Gwen agreed from across the table we were sitting at. "I hope that I can do such a great job with Belle. I can't believe you did it all on your own," she said, eyes wide. "I was a nervous wreck the first year of Belle's life. You saved my life that day with the teething thing." She gave me a warm look of gratitude. "I don't know how I would have survived without Cade." Her eyes focused on someone behind me.

I knew it would be Cade, considering he routinely stared at her in the hour I had been here. He'd come over twice to check on her, rub her belly and chat to me. I ignored the green-eyed monster who had reared its head when I saw that, not to mention the interactions between Brock and Amy.

"You'd have done it," I told her with certainty, tearing my thoughts away from my own longing. I sipped my drink. It was my second and my last, considering I had to drive. "When you've got someone counting on you, someone who is your entire world, you find the strength," I explained.

"Where's her dad? If you don't mind me asking," Amy said softly.

For some reason, I didn't. I had lied and skirted past every question people asked me about Lexie's dad. Steve and Ava knew about him, but that was it. Even Lexie was in the dark about what a monster her father was. I glanced around the table at the women who I considered friends, who I trusted.

"He isn't a good man," I started quietly. "The worst, actually. I left when Lexie was a baby. You know what I said about surviving?" I asked Gwen.

She nodded, a sad understanding on her face.

"Well, I wouldn't have been able to do that if I hadn't left."

I didn't add if I hadn't run. Hadn't hidden. No matter how much I trusted these women, I couldn't tell them the whole truth. For my safety. For Lexie's.

Amy's hand covered mine. She gave it a squeeze then released it.

"I think we need more drinks," she declared to the table, winking at me.

"Yeah, 'cause then we'd be able to settle in for watching young love unfold." Rosie nodded behind me and all eyes moved in that direction.

I followed her gaze. Killian had dispersed all of the kids and was talking to Lexie. He had his hand at her wrist and his face was close to hers.

"Lexie had a boyfriend before?" Rosie asked, her eyes not moving.

"Nope," I replied, my eyes not moving either. "They are officially joined at the hip. I think I need to call his parents and let them know their son does still exist, he's just been sucked into a black hole of adolescent love," I joked. He had spent all his time at our place over the last couple of weeks.

Lexie had her eyes downcast and Killian's other hand went to her chin, directing it so her face lifted to his.

A silence settled over the table and I looked to see all of the women's faces grim. "Kill doesn't exactly have parents, Mia," Rosie explained softly.

Well, excuse me while I extract my giant, cork-clad foot from my mouth.

"His dad was a good man, a good father. He died when Kill was about eleven," she continued. Her face hardened. "His mom's a junkie, total bitch to boot. Doesn't give a shit about him. Club's pretty much raised him," she told me with sad eyes.

I felt a pang for this poor kid, the one who looked strong and unflappable from the outside. The one who also looked like a whole lot of bad news, but one who treated my daughter with unbelievable tenderness and me with respect. I had already begun to grudgingly like him. This just cemented it. Plus, I knew exactly what it was like to have parents who didn't give a shit.

It sucked. No wonder he gripped onto a girl like Lexie with both hands. Why he was happy to sit with us and watch movies he no doubt hated while we chattered through them almost half the time.

Lucy, who had been quiet, spoke to me. “Despite that, Killian’s actually a real good kid,” she told me with a small smile. “I’ve known him since he was a baby, and despite appearances he’s respectful. He’ll treat her well,” she promised.

“I already know he will,” I told her with a smile.

“Yeah well, if he doesn’t I know he’d have Cade to answer to,” Gwen interjected. “He’s pretty big on treating women with respect.”

“And Brock,” Amy added.

“And pretty much every guy in the club,” Rosie added.

“And me,” I added. “I may not own a shotgun, but I’m thinking of heading down to Walmart to get myself an arsenal.” I may have liked the kid, definitely felt sorry for him, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t in for it if he hurt my baby.

The women laughed. I wasn’t sure why, considering I wasn’t kidding.

Then I felt it. Something that made my eyes move from Lexie and Killian’s intense looking conversation. It was pressure, heat, anger. I could feel *him*. His stare. My eyes moved until they settled on dark, stormy, beautiful ones. Zane stood in the doorway that led into Rosie’s kitchen. He was wearing all black, as usual, despite the fact it was scorching. I felt like the temperature went up about a thousand degrees with his glower threatening to set me on fire.

“Mia, why is Bull looking at you like you blew up the Harley Davidson headquarters?” Gwen asked. “Did you guys have a fight or something?” The subject of Zane was surprisingly yet to come up in our chat. The women had all asked about what happened in Hope and had seemed sympathetic of me having to give up my favorite vintage haunt, at least temporarily, but no one had grilled me about my relationship with Zane. It was as if these women had a sixth sense about heartbreak, or at least they were waiting for me to bring it up. Zane’s unmistakable glare had them done waiting.

“Umm,” I drew out my response, willing myself to tear my gaze away, or at least to muster up my own glare. He wasn’t the only one who was angry. I may be trying to convince him not to give up on us, but I was still pissed as hell he did in the first place.

Before I got the chance, his eyes moved. They settled on Killian and Lexie. I didn't think it was possible for his gaze to turn more murderous, but it did. I was surprised Killian didn't scamper away or beg for mercy once he met it. But the kid stood his ground. I had to admire him for that. Zane stormed his way over there. He hadn't been around the past two weeks, so he obviously wasn't privy to the serious relationship that had developed in that time. Which was probably a good thing, considering what he was doing in his blissful ignorance.

Zane barked something at Killian and he reluctantly let Lexie go and stormed into the house, pushing past Zane.

Lexie looked after him with a faraway look in her eye. Her gaze settled on Zane and she beamed, running over to him. To mine and everyone else's at the table's utter surprise, she put her arms around him. He seemed to jolt slightly before engulfing her in his giant arms and kissing her head lightly. He pulled back once he had decided he'd shown enough affection without damaging his badass card. His face softened as she chattered away, smiling the entire time.

More than a few men in the crowd were watching in open amazement at his soft face and clipped answers to Lexie's chattering.

"Is that Bull actually having a conversation?" Amy asked in disbelief.

"And he might actually look like he has the possibility of a smile brewing," added Rosie, equally gobsmacked.

"And he let Lexie actually touch him in public," Gwen added with a sad smile. She looked to me. "You've fixed him," she declared weirdly. Her voice held a sad note to him.

"Fixed him?" I repeated in confusion, really needing to get behind the glint in all the women's eyes. The glint that was connected to the demons in Zane's. That, I guessed, was the reason Zane was trying so hard to keep his distance.

The ringing of my phone interrupted the conversation, much to my chagrin.

"Sorry, ladies, I've got to get this," I said apologetically. I did, considering I was on call at the hotel and I was sure something would go wrong right when I needed to be exactly where I was.

I put the phone to my ear, wandering away from the music and chattering.

“Hello, Mia Spencer speaking,” I answered the unknown caller professionally, happy it wasn’t the hotel. Maybe it was the president this time.

“Mia Spencer?” a formal sounding voice asked.

“This is she,” I replied, something settling in my stomach.

“Ms. Spencer, this is Officer Santos of the Washington, DC PD,” he said.

My heart turned to lead and I had trouble swallowing. I knew. Something bad had happened. Police officers didn’t just call for a chat. I tasted bile. What if *he* had found us? And this cop was on his payroll? I struggled to contain my fear. I looked at the back of my daughter’s head. I’d die before letting him find her.

“What can I do for you, officer?” I asked, trying to sound strong.

My eyes met Zane’s, and his didn’t hold anger. They were latched onto me with something akin to concern. He watched my every move.

“Ms. Spencer, I’m sorry to have to tell you this over the phone, but Mr. and Mrs. Thorndon had you down as their next of kin,” he said softly.

I jerked, not expecting this to be the topic of the conversation. I felt the world tilt and I struggled to stay upright. “Are they,” I choked. “Are they okay?” I asked, more liked pleaded him to tell me.

There was a pause. A small one. But one that made my heart break in two.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Spencer, they were murdered last night. We found them this morning.” His voice held sorrow but a distance, like a man who had done this a hundred times before.

My head pounded and I failed to let his words sink in. “No, you have it wrong. I just spoke to them yesterday, it’s not them,” I protested desperately. I started pacing. It couldn’t be them. It had to be a mistake. They were the only family I had. The only family Lexie and I had.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Spencer.” The voice held finality.

It hit me then; it sank in. They were gone. Murdered. My legs gave out from under me at that point and I collapsed into a chair that was perfectly placed. Otherwise I would have fallen to the ground. The cop may have been still talking. I couldn’t hear him. I couldn’t hear anything apart from the beating in my chest. The ripping, the soul-wrenching pain. My breath came in pants.

My phone was ripped from my ear and Zane crouched in front of me. His huge form took up all of my vision. I focused on it. On his vest. On his

strong arms, his tattoos, the thick cords of muscle in his neck. The day's worth of stubble on his jaw hiding his goatee slightly. Then I met his eyes, which were locked on me as he barked into the phone. I didn't move my gaze from them. They were my anchor, stopping me from toppling over the abyss.

"Who the fuck is this?" he demanded, half shouted.

There was a silence and Zane listened, his body taut.

"Murdered," I whispered, my voice broken, tortured. I was saying it to myself, tasting the foulness of the word on my tongue when I verbalized it.

Zane flinched when I spoke.

Murdered. How could the two most caring people I know be murdered?

My phone wasn't in Zane's hand anymore and his large hands spanned my neck, gripping it softly.

"Mia," he began in a voice so tender I had to stare a moment to make sure it was him that actually spoke. It was. The rough, sometimes downright scary dude was speaking to me in a gentle, soft and comforting tone. His eyes were the same.

"Who would want to kill them?" I asked him desperately. "They've never hurt anyone in their entire lives. They're grandparents, nice people. Ava *bakes brownies*. Who would want to hurt a grandma who bakes brownies?" I choked out. Though they may not have been blood, that's what they were. They were my parents. The only grandparents Lexie ever knew. Ever would know.

Zane's face hardened. It looked like he was going to say something, but a small voice beat him to it.

"Mom?"

I looked past Zane to see Lexie standing slightly behind him. Killian wasn't far away, his expression grim.

Pain sliced through me at the sight of my daughter. The one who was almost always happy. Who, despite her father and the fact she had grown up without luxury, had a good childhood. Largely thanks to two people she doted on. Two people who I would have to tell her were gone. Her carefree life would be shattered and she'd feel a pain it was impossible to protect her from, shield her from.

I stood from the chair, finding my strength in my daughter. I needed it for her. Zane stayed close beside me.

“Dollface, let’s go home,” I said quietly, failing to disguise the anguish in my voice. I didn’t want her to have to hear this here, around so many unfamiliar faces. Granted, the faces of Gwen and Amy were locked on us in worry, as were the gazes of their husbands, but this was not something Lexie needed to go through with an audience.

I tried to gently direct her to the street but she stayed still.

“No,” she said firmly, “I want to know now. Tell me what’s going on.”

Zane stepped forward, his face soft. “Lex, listen to your mom. We’ll get you home and you can talk there,” he told her quietly, his eyes searching hers.

“No,” she repeated, this time louder. Her eyes were determined.

“Freckles,” Killian tried, stepping forward to lightly grasp her elbow, a tender look on his face.

She wrenched her elbow out of his grip. “No, Kill.” Her voice broke at the end. She knew something was wrong. “Mom?” She moved her gaze to me.

I swallowed, knowing she wouldn’t move unless Zane carried her bodily. Stubbornness was a trait she inherited from me.

I moved forward to frame her face in my hands. “It’s Ava and Steve,” I said softly, willing my voice not to break.

Lexie looked at me blankly for a moment, then her face paled. Pain sliced through her beautiful features. I flinched.

“They’re going to be okay though?” she asked, clinging to a vain hope. A last shred of sanity.

I paused, gathering myself. My head shook slowly. “No, baby,” I murmured.

She got that blank look on her face again and I gathered her in my arms, hoping I could somehow take all of the pain out of her body and take it into mine.

She stood woodenly for a moment, not moving as I clutched her to me. Then her body started to shake; the power of her sobs actually shook her entire body. I managed to swallow my own tears in order to be strong for Lexie, although the pain of loss was cutting through me like a knife through butter.

I felt Lexie’s weight hit me, as the weight of her sorrow was too strong to stand under. I struggled to hold her. I struggled to hold myself.

Her weight was suddenly gone and I stood motionless as Zane gathered my sobbing daughter in his arms. I expected her to fight him, to struggle. What I did not expect was for her to bury her face in his chest and clutch his cut like it was a life raft.

His eyes met mine. “Car, babe, now,” he instructed that soft tone I would have told you five minutes earlier was impossible for him to produce.

I nodded stiffly, a thought striking me. “My bag.” I started to turn to where I had left it on the table, dreading facing strangers and my fresh new friends under the stifling weight of grief.

“Here you go, Mia.” Gwen pushed my bag into my arms, her eyes kind.

She squeezed my arm as I took it. “We’re all here. You need anything, just call, okay?”

I put my bag over my shoulder, struggling not to flinch at the pity on her face. Pity meant it was real. Other people recognizing this meant it was actually happening.

“Okay, thanks,” I said quietly, meeting her eyes. They may have held a hint of pity but they also held understanding, empathy, a pain of her own.

She squeezed my hand. “Anything you need,” she repeated softly.

Killian stood stock still watching Lexie sob, unable to do anything about it. His face was hard and he struggled not to comfort her. I gave him a sad smile.

I turned back to see Zane watching me, Lexie still burrowed in his arms. The pain that clouded my vision made it difficult to see how painfully beautiful it was. Together, we walked quickly back to the car, Lexie buried in Zane’s chest, his hand clutching mine tightly.

Gently, like she was made of fine china, Zane placed Lexie in the back seat of my car. I climbed in beside her, gathering her in my arms.

He stood at the door, eyes on us, eyes on me. Before I knew what was happening, he laid a soft, feather-light kiss on my head and stroked Lexie’s hair before slamming the door shut.



“You think you can walk into the house, baby doll?” I asked softly, stroking Lexie’s hair.

She lifted her head, her red-rimmed eyes gazing out into the driveway in confusion. I felt another stab to see the depth of sorrow etched on her face. She nodded quietly.

“That’s my strong girl,” I murmured, kissing her head. “We’ll get through this, Dollface, promise you,” I declared firmly.

She gave me a long look like she didn’t believe me. I cupped her face. “When your life has been full of light and happiness, the first eclipse that casts a shadow over everything seems like it’s going to last forever. But it won’t. It doesn’t. The light will come back, shine brighter than ever, and you’ll be the stronger person for it,” I promised her softly.

Her eyes cleared with my words and she nodded, burying her face in my chest once more. I held her and my eyes found Zane’s. He was staring at me with a look of unmasked wonder, as if the words I had just spoken shook him down to his core. I was unable to move as the look changed to something I could only describe as love. I squeezed my own eyes shut, unable to cope with something of that magnitude at the current moment. At the same time, that look gave me the strength I needed to overcome the dark shadow of grief that was settling over me. After a minute, I opened the door to Zane standing there, arms crossed, concern evident on his usually emotionless face. I smiled weakly at him.

“Let’s get my girls inside,” he declared firmly.

I nodded and helped him lift Lexie to take her into the house, not missing the “my girls” comment.

Once we got inside Lexie and I curled up on her bed. Now that she was in a familiar space, a safe space, her tears came rushing at a rate that shook me to my core. I stroked her head, wishing I had a magic wand, a freaking magic bean, something to make her pain vanish. Instead I settled for giving her my shoulder.



I woke with a start, my eyes blinking in the darkness, disorientated. Then, like a freight train of despair, it hit me. Why I was in Lexie's room, my arm draped over her hip as she faced away from me. Why it felt like a knife had been plunged into my middle and lodged itself there. I couldn't help the sharp intake of breath as I sucked air in out of agony.

I flinched when a hand cupped my jaw.

"Calm down, Wildcat, it's only me," a rough voice whispered.

"Zane?" I whispered back, confused. It was dark in Lexie's room. The blinds had been shut, but enough daylight peeked through to show me the outline of a large figure bending over the bed.

His hand moved to my waist and he gently pulled me off the bed to my feet.

"Quiet, we don't want to wake her up." I saw the dark shape of his head move to Lexie.

My eyes moved there to make sure she was still sleeping. Satisfied, I let him lead me out the door.

We didn't say a word as he directed me through the kitchen, his hand firmly grasping mine. We were still silent as he led me up the stairs, past the bathroom and the guest room, to the end of the hall where my bedroom was. I followed out of shock and grief more than anything else. My mind felt kind of empty.

Once we made it to my room I regained some wits and looked up at Zane.

"You stayed?" I asked dumbly.

He nodded. "Not leavin' you, Mia," he promised. I got the feeling he meant that permanently. I couldn't examine that just yet.

"Where?" I asked instead.

"Armchair in Lexie's room," he clipped, his hands moving to my jacket.

I let him pull it off my shoulders, inhaling his scent as he moved it down my arms. I gained comfort in the smell, in the soft way his hard body brushed mine. It had been two weeks, two weeks without his touch, without hearing his hard and husky voice. I even missed the monosyllables. Now I had him back, but under the worst of circumstances.

"Why?" I whispered as the jacket fell to the ground, his body staying close to mine.

His head moved down to me, his eyes locking on mine. They were swirling with emotions I couldn't place. Most likely because I hadn't seen

those eyes swirl with emotion, like ever. I had seen them dark with desire. Flare with hatred. Searching with a look that seared my soul. But nothing to betray emotion. Not the one he was currently betraying, anyway.

His hand moved to cup my jaw. “You know why, baby,” he said firmly. “Now sit on the bed.”

Something clicked in me. Something that shocked me out of my confusing interaction with a complicated man and the complicated feelings I had for him. Something trumped that.

“I can’t,” I said. “I’ve got to call people, pack,” I said quickly, pushing at his abs. He didn’t move. “Oh my gosh, I’ve got to plan, a...funeral.” I near choked on the last word. “Ava and Steve, don’t...didn’t have any children, any family apart from Lexie and me.” My mind didn’t let me go there, I moved to organization mode. “I’ve got to check the flights to DC.” I paused. “Maybe it would be better to drive. I’ve got to compare flying vs driving. I’ve got to pack,” I tried to move Zane again. “Yes, that’s the first thing. Pack...” My mind mentally went through my closet for a funeral outfit. I had to look my best. For Steve. For Ava.

Zane’s thumb went over my lip, silencing me. His eyes kept me in place, his hand kept my mouth from moving. “Sit. On. The. Bed,” he commanded. His tone was still tender, but it was firm.

I was about to argue but his body directed me to the edge and I had no choice but to go down. He gave me a meaningful look before bending to my shoes.

“Zane, what are you doing? Those need to stay on. I’ve got like a million things to do, things that require footwear,” I explained with a hint of hysteria. I needed to do them. Be productive. Busy. If I moved quick enough maybe I would be able to outrun the thoughts. The memories. The demons.

Zane ignored me and my shoes fell to the floor. He straightened and pulled off his motorcycle boots landing beside mine with a heavy thump. He lifted me in the air and settled himself on my bed, me half on top of him, tucked in his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” I asked, confused and more than a little peeved I couldn’t enjoy this crazy cuddle moment with a man whom I had missed like a lost limb for the past two weeks. I couldn’t let myself clutch him like I wanted to. I knew if I did I’d never let go.

“Tell me about them,” he instructed quietly.

My heart stopped. “What?”

“Tell me about them,” he repeated, voice still low.

My body locked in place. Now that Zane had me still, it all caught up to me. Threatened to destroy me with the sharp talons of grief. “I,” I choked on the first word. “I can’t, I’ve got to...”

Zane’s arms tightened around me. “Yes babe, you can. You need to tell me every happy memory you have of them, bring them up to the front of your mind so the demons can’t get in. You need to bring the light in before the darkness settles,” he told me in a resolute tone. One that seemed to speak from experience.

I paused. Zane’s strong arms tightened around me. I was safe. He had me.

I took a deep breath. “Ava used to bake all the time. She was a firm believer in using food and sugar to heal all ailments.” I paused. “I have no idea how Lexie didn’t contract diabetes from the amount of raw cookie dough she ate. Even though Ava threatened to tan her with a wooden spoon for doing it, although she never would, Lexie was the light of her life,” I smiled at the memory. “This one time...”

And there it was. The light. It didn’t dampen the pain, didn’t come close. That knife was still digging into my ribs, making it hard to breathe. But Zane’s arms around me, the comfort of memories, that’s what kept the darkness from swallowing me up.



I awoke with a jolt. The room was pitch black and there was a warmth at my back.

“Mia?” Zane’s gravelly voice was alert and full of concern, as if he had been lying awake the entire time.

I didn’t let myself think of it. Reality. The grim and heartbreaking reality. That was all *out there*. In here it was only me and Zane. Two weeks I hadn’t touched him, tasted him, felt him inside me. I needed him. So that’s why I twisted around from our spooning position, pushing Zane on his back and landing on top of his body.

“Mia,” he half whispered, his voice was dark with desire. I felt him hard underneath me.

“Fuck me, Zane,” I pleaded against his mouth.

I expected him to argue, say I was too upset or some crap like that. Instead, the moment the words came out of my mouth he flipped me on my back, capturing me in an earth shattering, panty melting kiss. We were a flurry of lips and teeth, desperate to get each other’s clothes off. I’m pretty sure Zane ripped my panties off in the end. He licked, bit and tasted every part of me, as if he had been away from my body for years, not weeks.

When he finally plunged inside of me, I almost came from him just filling me, from his brutal thrust.

He hovered over me, not moving. I could feel every inch of his body tense, his mouth hovering over mine. “I’m never leavin’ you,” he promised in a low voice. “No matter what,” he added before he started to move and no more words were spoken. No more words were needed.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A loud groaning sound awoke me. I weakly unstuck my eyes and searched for the source, groggy and confused. The sound repeated and I discovered it was coming from me, or more accurately my stomach. It occurred to me I hadn't eaten since lunch at Rosie's, and by the look of the light peeking through the windows it was the next day. I flinched at the reason why I hadn't eaten. Steve. Ava. Dead. Another thought assaulted my mind, one more important than my own grief, more important than the empty space in my bed that had previously been occupied by a large biker. Lexie.

I jumped out of bed and almost tripped in my haste. I looked down. Motorcycle boots. He was still here. Of course he was. I hadn't forgotten his firm promise in the moonlight. As much as I wanted to focus on that, I couldn't. My mind was instantly overrun with the grim reality of the loss I had to battle through. That Lexie had to battle through.

But first, coffee.

Stumbling downstairs was hard through the cloud of grief that threatened to bring me to my knees, but I managed. The smell of bacon and coffee carried through from the kitchen, as did the voices.

"Do you think we should wake Mom?" I heard Lexie ask.

I moved to lean against the doorway to the kitchen and felt my heart flutter slightly.

"We'll let her sleep, Lex. She'll wake when she's ready," Zane answered softly.

He was standing at the stove, with his back to me, as was Lexie, leaning against the counter close to him. She was wearing her PJ's and sipping from a mug. Zane was fully dressed, his cut resting on the back of a chair at the table.

“Either that or her body will go into caffeine withdrawals,” Lexie joked with a lightness that held a note of sorrow. My girl was being strong.

There was silence for a moment, the sizzling of the bacon the only sound in my small kitchen. I contemplated announcing my presence, but there was a peace in the silence between them, a companionable silence. I was loath to interrupt the sight of Zane doing such a domestic task as cooking breakfast, chatting to my daughter. It looked so natural. Don’t asked me how my little girl in her owl-printed PJ’s and a huge biker covered in tattoos, both standing in my kitchen looked natural. It just did.

She peered at him over her coffee cup, still not seeing me. “Do you believe in Heaven, Zane?” she asked on a broken note.

I choked up at the pain behind her small question. I almost pushed off the wall and gathered her in my arms. Zane was quicker than me.

He moved the pan off the burner and turned to face Lexie. His hand moved to cup her face lightly.

“Not sure about God, girl. Don’t believe in something that would cause so much pain to people that deserve a lifetime of happiness,” he stated roughly. “But I do believe those people, those good people, go somewhere better, somewhere they deserve,” he continued quietly, eyes on Lexie.

She stared at him, blinking rapidly. “You think Steve and Ava are there?” she asked quietly with almost childlike desperation.

Zane moved his other hand to cup her face. “Know it, darlin,’” he promised.

She smiled weakly at him, then her eyes flickered over to me.

“Mom!” she cried out, setting her cup down.

She ran over to me and into my arms. I embraced the warmth of my daughter, and rested my head on her shoulder. My eyes met Zane’s, something passing through the two of us that I could barely swallow. I didn’t get to think too hard on it before Lexie pulled back, her red eyes searching mine. She seemed to pull herself together and plastered a weak smile on her face.

“Zane made us breakfast,” she declared, gesturing to the table that was set. “And coffee. I’ll get you some,” she added, seeing me eye her cup enviously.

She moved to the pot, leaving Zane and I staring at each other. Lexie seemed nonplussed at waking up to him in the house, making her breakfast on what could possibly be the hardest day of her life so far. Maybe that was

why she was nonplussed. She also appeared to be clinging to the strength that seemed to emanate of his strong body. Whatever it was, she was acting like Zane had woken up with us every morning for years. I was only too aware he hadn't. No man had. I wouldn't know how to act with a normal guy in our domestic environment, let alone a burly, half mute biker. One that I was madly in love with.

Before I had the chance to think on it, Zane closed the space between us, his hand going to my neck. He pressed his lips to my head softly. I sank against him slightly, reveling in the comfort of his touch, of the intimate gesture. His lips left my head and his eyes moved to mine. He searched them a moment.

"Hard day for my girls," he murmured, eyes moving to Lexie who was standing close to us with my coffee cup. For once, I didn't feel the need to pounce on the coffee wielding child. Instead, I wanted to prolong this moment for as long as possible. Zane put his hand to the back of Lexie's neck in a similar hold to the one he had on me.

"You'll get through it," he promised. "Get to the sunshine on the other side." He looked at us a moment more then released us, moving back to the stove. Lexie handed me my coffee silently. I took it and we watched Zane move bacon and eggs onto the table. That companionable silence descended once more.

"We have placemats?" I asked, breaking it.

Lexie and I both giggled at the absurdity of people like us having such an item. People who spent most of their time eating out. And when Lexie did cook something that didn't have a thousand "superfoods" in it, we ate on our laps in front of the TV. The kitchen table was used for the consumption of coffee, pizza and sometimes the odd breakfast. Nothing needing placements. So we laughed. Zane stood there watching us, his eyes warm. When we had finished with our hysteria, he did that little half smile of his.

"Yeah," he said quietly to both of us, "my girls will get through this."

Whether it was his words, or our ability to laugh after having our hearts broken, or both, I believed him.



Bull

“Do you believe in Heaven?”

Bull’s eyes had moved from the pan to the beautiful and glistening eyes of a kid he was starting to think of as his own. No. He wasn’t starting to think it. He knew it. Lexie was his. As was Mia. That’s why it fucking gutted him to see the pain etched in Lexie’s face as she asked the question. Why it ripped him apart inside to see her collapse yesterday. Seeing Mia succeed in being strong for her daughter while she bled internally. Floored him to see how much strength they both had. Gave him strength, renewed vigor to fight his own demons.

It grated him that this was a hurt he couldn’t save them from, protect them from. The first time he saw them in two weeks was when both of their beautiful faces were contorted in pain. He was thankful as fuck he chose to come back today, after realizing he could barely live two weeks without the woman who consumed his mind. The kid who lit up his life.

“Not sure about God, girl. Don’t believe in something that would cause so much pain to people that deserve a lifetime of happiness,” he answered honestly. “But I do believe those people, those good people, go somewhere better, somewhere they deserve,” he continued.

Bull didn’t believe in Heaven. Wished he could. Wished with every fiber of his being that he did. That might have made the fight against his own personal demons that much easier. Given him another weapon in his arsenal. To know *she* might be in that place, whole and healed from the horrors life had given her in her final hours. But the darkness that he welcomed as an old friend, the one inside his soul told him there was nothing but black. Nothing to help. Nothing to ease the guilt. Not that he’d ever educate Lexie on this fact. He’d tell a thousand lies about a kingdom in the sky to his last breath if that meant he could protect her from the hurt.

“Do you think Ava and Steve are there?” she asked in a voice so vulnerable he knew he needed to give her everything he could to protect

her.

He cupped her face. “Know it, darlin,’” he lied.

The look of relief on her face was almost enough to make him believe there was something else. Surely the universe wouldn’t be that cruel to take something away from someone like Lexie and not give her guardian angels in return.

Her head turned. “Mom!” she exclaimed, and ran over to embrace her mother.

Mia looked beautiful even with her frame sagging from the weight of her grief. Even wearing the weak mask she had to protect her daughter from the extent of her sorrow. She was the most beautiful fuckin’ woman he’d ever laid eyes on. Ever. And he knew it. She was. That thought stabbed him in the heart as he locked eyes with her over Lexie’s shoulder. *She* had been beautiful. In every way. Inside and out. It was an innocent beauty. In a way her life had never given her pain, hardship or a rough road. Bull knew life had given Mia pain, hardship and a rough fuckin’ road. All the ingredients to chip away at beauty and ruin it. Instead it added to it. Made her beyond beautiful. A fuckin’ supernova.

So when Lexie moved away from her mother he had no choice but to go to her. To lay his lips on her head. Feel her warmth. Smell her sweet scent. Give her any strength it was possible to give her. Because he would give her and Lexie every ounce of whatever he had left in him to give them sunshine, give them a smooth road. He already knew they were the only fuckin’ light in the pitch black that was his life. Made him think something could grow out of the charred ashes of his soul. He knew in that moment he could never live in the darkness again.



Mia

One Week Later

I sat in my car, gazing at the wrought iron archway in front of me, unable to move. My seatbelt was still on. I had barely been able to turn the ignition off, but I did. I couldn't do more than that though, more than stare up at the building that I had grown to love in my short time in Amber. One of the many things I had grown to love. But now I couldn't get how I could go in there. How I could still love it.

It had been a week since the day I got the terrible news, since my and Lexie's world, and family got a whole lot smaller. Since the morning that Lexie's and my family also got bigger, with a biker giving us support that we wouldn't have been able to survive without. Packing, flying to DC, planning a funeral, dealing with fake and inconsiderate friends. It was harder seeing the real ones, the genuine friends who had been a part of not only Ava and Steve's life, but mine and Lexie's. People we hadn't seen in months, people who had come to support us. Somehow, that was harder.

Dealing with the police was a nightmare. Having to go through interviews while they didn't tell us a freaking thing about why this happened to Steve and Ava, only that it was a burglary gone wrong.

Through all of it, Zane had been there, by our sides. Mostly silent, but he spoke when he needed to, when it mattered. He was always close to me, touching me as often as he could, claiming me. It would be hard to call it affectionate, but it was somehow tender, even though he stayed stoic and blank-faced most of the time. His tender looks were saved for me and Lexie. He didn't shy away from giving gestures to show he was claiming her too. Brushing her hair out of her face, squeezing her hand, bringing her into his shoulder in the moments when she couldn't smile through her grief. He had made it clear to the world, and to us, he was inserting himself in our lives, in our family. Lexie hadn't questioned this; she had attached herself to Zane in a way that made me think she was claiming him too. She didn't even blink when he stayed in the same room as me in the suite we had at the hotel. The *suite* he insisted he pay for when I realized I couldn't stay in Steve and Ava's home, the first home Lexie and I'd had after we escaped Hell.



It was then, the first night in the hotel after the exhaustion of travelling and organizing the funeral, that I let Zane in on why I couldn't face it.

He had just made love to me. Nothing like the desperate, furious fucking we used to have prior to the party. Prior to him leaving me. This was a different kind of desperation. A desperation for him to imprint himself onto every part of me. Worship every part of me. Own my body. And my soul.

So after he was finished I was lying in his arms, tucked tight into his chest. We were silent, like we usually were after we made love. I was only just getting used to being able to relax, to bask in the intimacy of the moment and fall asleep feeling safe, which was why we were normally silent. Zane, because he was well...Zane and me because I was too busy in my own head, enjoying the moment to bother with words. A first for me. So I was especially surprised when Zane spoke.

"Weren't your parents," he said quietly.

I jerked slightly, not only at the fact he was speaking but also at the fact the words seemed like we were already halfway through a conversation.

"Pardon?" I asked, more out of shock than confusion.

"Steve and Ava," he clarified, shifting me slightly so I could meet his eyes. "They weren't your parents. You speak about them like they were, like they were grandparents to Lexie," he said.

I tried to ignore the stab of pain that seemed to come with every thought, every memory of them. I failed. "They were," I spoke quietly. "Parents to me, my best friends, grandparents to Lexie. Hell, Steve was the only father Lexie ever knew. They were my parents in everything but blood," I told him.

His eyes searched mine. "Your real folks?" he asked.

I was surprised at this curiosity; he was genuinely asking. I couldn't help but laugh without humor. "Who knows, probably wherever they can get the most drugs for the lowest price—rotting in the same trailer park I grew up in, most likely," I said bitterly.

Zane jerked slightly and his eyes turned hard.

"Steve and Ava were everything to me. They were the only people to give me unconditional love, apart from Lexie," I said honestly. "My parents," I scoffed, "I'm loath to even call them that. They didn't give a shit about me. I was merely a way to get some more money on the benefit, get their next fix," I told him. "That's why they fed me enough to survive,

clothed me so I didn't freeze. See, if something happened to me, I got taken away, so would a payday." I shrugged. "I'm luckier than a lot of people I grew up with. They didn't hit me, didn't abuse me. Just barely acknowledged me." I met his eyes, which seemed to be glittering. "I took care of myself since I was young enough to be able. Got out of there as soon as I could."

I skipped the part where I jumped out of the frying pan and into the fricking fire. Fire I didn't even notice until it almost killed me.

Zane was silent for a long moment. "Then Lexie?" he guessed correctly.

I smiled. "Then Lexie. Best thing that has ever happened to me," I told him honestly. Though the person holding me was quickly coming a close second. Not that I said that.

He seemed to search my face for a while. "Her dad?" he asked blandly.

I tensed. Zane hadn't asked me once about Lexie's father, which I had been glad about. He seemed to be protective of her since before we were anything, but his protectiveness didn't seem to translate to a need to know about her father. Until now. My movement was not lost on Zane and his arms tightened around me. He frowned down at me.

"Babe," he said as almost a warning. There was no getting out of this one. I knew I had to tread carefully. Not only because the truth would no doubt turn Zane into a mindless macho ball of fury, but because the truth needed to stay buried. For my safety. Or more importantly, for Lexie's.

"Lexie's dad was the first escape I ever got. First show of affection of love I ever had." I paused. "At least my fifteen-year-old brain thought it was love." I looked at Zane. "He wasn't from a family like mine. They seemed happy. Loving. Normal. Something I craved. And when I got pregnant they weren't angry, they supported me. Supported us. Moved me in, much to my parents' dismay." I wrinkled my nose at the memory. "It was the first time I'd seen them pay an extended amount of attention to me," I told him. "Thought it was because they finally decided they loved me, finally muddled through their drug-addled brains to find some affection for their only daughter," I scoffed. "Like always, they weren't worried about me, but their paycheck."

Zane's arms stayed tight around me and his gaze burned into mine. He silently urged me to continue.

"His parents...Lexie's dad's," I was careful not to say his name. "They sorted it. Moved me and him into a house next to theirs. Lexie was born,

best day of my life,” I declared. “Never thought you could love someone that much,” I smiled. “I thought I finally had a family. It was okay for a while.” I struggled not to get gripped by the memories, not to go in too deep and betray too much. “Then it wasn’t. So I left. With Lexie, then found Steve and Ava. They only had one hotel then, wasn’t much but I was desperate for a job to feed me and my baby.” I didn’t add I was desperate for a hiding place. “And all of the big places wouldn’t take on a kid with no experience. Ava and Steve did. Gave me somewhere to stay, a job, a way to feed my baby.” I paused, trying not to choke up. “Finally gave me a family,” I said quietly. “Gave Lexie the most precious thing ever,” I added.

Zane stared at me for a long time, his gaze hard and soft at the same time. His hand moved to lightly trace down my eyebrow to my jaw. “Didn’t think you could get any more magnificent,” he said hoarsely. “Stand corrected, Wildcat.”

The reverence in his gaze, the emotion behind his words did it again. Even amidst the grief and sorrow, another little broken piece inside me melded back together.

The softness of his gaze didn’t last for long. “Lexie’s dad. Wanna elaborate on what made you leave him, babe?” he asked with a hardness to his voice that wasn’t there before.

I swallowed. “The blindness of first love wore off. I saw him for who he was, *what* he was,” I said honestly, hoping I didn’t have to lie too much. I couldn’t, not in this moment.

Zane’s face hardened in suspicion, in a kind of pre-rage. “What was he?” he bit out through clenched teeth.

I knew if I told him the truth his rage would consume him. He would probably try and find Lexie’s dad. No, he almost certainly would if I told him the whole truth. Whatever had happened between us lately, that pivotal change had showed me just how far he would go. I knew he would kill him if he knew what had happened all those years ago. As much as I wanted the asshole dead, I couldn’t risk it.

“Not who I thought he was,” I said simply. “I realized he didn’t love me, didn’t love Lexie. Didn’t want a family, wasn’t what we needed so I left,” I lied.

“He just let the two most beautiful girls on the planet leave him without a fight?” Zane half snarled in disgust and disbelief.

I nodded, trying to omit as many verbal lies as I could. “He was young. Reality of family life hit him. He didn’t want it.”

Zane’s face turned to granite. “And now? He’s no kid.”

I shrugged. “Now we still aren’t on his radar. I’m glad.” This was kind of not a lie.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Want to kill that motherfucker,” he bit out. “Letting you leave. Missing out on Lexie growing up. You growing up.” He shook his head in disgust. “Stupid fucker.”

I blanched slightly. If he wanted to kill him because he thought he abandoned us, he could never know the truth.

Zane cupped my jaw lightly, rage disappearing. “Also tempted to thank the stupid fuck. If he wasn’t the asshole he was, I wouldn’t have you. Wouldn’t have Lexie,” he said quietly.

I didn’t know what to say, the rawness of past demons combined with the freshness of new grief making me hyper-sensitive to beautiful declarations coming from someone who didn’t give them often. I didn’t have the words, so I let actions speak for me. I leaned up to kiss him lightly, tenderly, pouring all of my feelings for him into one kiss. The kiss turned from tender to frenzied in a matter of seconds. And before I knew it, Zane had lifted me and pinned me down. He then proceeded to fuck my brains out.



That night had changed things even more. I watched Zane every now and then, looking at Lexie, no doubt thinking about her father, about her loss and giving her a small neck squeeze or a kiss on the head. He had barely let me go, not that I was complaining. So somehow, amidst the hardest times of my and Lexie’s life, I also found some of my happiest. It was safe to say it had been an emotional roller coaster that left me exhausted. When we arrived home last night, I had been ready to crash in Zane’s arms as I had grown accustomed to. But he had taken our luggage in then moved to the door once Lexie had gone to sleep. His face had turned from one I had come to be used to over the past week back to its original blank, hard gaze. I had almost flinched. Especially when he declared he had “club business”

and he didn't know how long it would take. He had then given me a chaste kiss on the mouth and was gone.

I hadn't seen him since then and hadn't heard from him. Which meant I hadn't crashed last night like I had planned. Instead I had tossed and turned, waiting for Zane to come home and playing over events to see what could account for the change. I had narrowed it down to a phone call he had gotten just before we left the airport. This all contributed to about one hour of sleep, which in turn made me into an even bigger wreck. I had already had a week off work and I needed to get back. Especially since our owners were...gone and I would have to run things until the lawyers settled the estate and new owners took over. I didn't have time or space in my brain to think about what that would mean.

I also needed to be busy. To be alone with my thoughts, wallowing in grief was the last thing I needed. So even though I had desperately wanted to curl up on the sofa with Lexie and watch *Friends* reruns, I had gotten my ass ready for work and Lexie for school. She had missed enough already and needed to be kept busy. I had planned on dropping her off but Killian had been on our doorstep this morning, ready to take her. As much as I hated to admit it, I was glad. He treated her like she was made of glass and seemed to give her the same strength Zane gave me.

She had seemed worried to leave me, but I assured her I would be fine. Obviously since I was unable to get out of the car, I wasn't. My phone ringing made me jump. I stared at it in my hand, remembering my first day, sitting in the car with all of my doubts. Steve's encouraging words echoed through my thoughts. I'd never hear his voice on the other side of the phone again. Never get the support and unwavering belief and faith he had in me. The phone stopped ringing. A single tear trailed down my cheek and it hit me. The reality of it all. I'd stopped moving. Stopped running and it had finally caught me. I hadn't cried. Not at the funeral. Not when Lexie had sung the most beautiful rendition of "Over the Rainbow" at the burial. Even Zane's eyes had glistened suspiciously at that. No. I couldn't. I was focusing on being strong for my kid. So now that I was away from her, now it all hit me, the tears were flowing down my face. I struggled to catch my breath. I didn't know how long I stayed there sobbing for; it felt like a long time. Then my door was opened.

"Fuck," a deep voice muttered.

I didn't register the concern or anything else in the tone, only the familiarity of the arms that scooped me out of the car. I burrowed into Zane's shoulder, clutching the sides of his cut. The smell of leather, oil and tobacco calmed me slightly.

"Take care of the car," I heard him bark at someone.

Then he was carrying me. "They're gone," I stuttered in between sobs. "I didn't realize it until now, gone—like never coming back," I hiccupped, glancing up at him through tear-clouded eyes.

Zane stopped walking and gazed down. "You going to be good on the bike, babe?" he asked softly, nodding toward the curb.

I looked over to see his Harley sitting there and slowly understood his question. The whole time we had been together, I hadn't been on his bike. The main reason was that up until recently our relationship hadn't seen us together in the light of day, or even outside the bedroom. Plus, I couldn't really forbid Lexie to go anywhere near a motorcycle, then ride off into the sunset on the back of one.

Zane seemed content to let me tick this over in my head. He gently set me on my feet, resting his hands at my waist as if to steady me. I moved my gaze from his bike to him. His face was hard and he was observing me with a blank gaze.

"I've never been on one before," I half whispered.

The edges of his eyes softened and he ran a fingertip down my temple. "I've got you, babe. All you need to do is hold onto me," he murmured quietly. I knew for some reason he meant more than with a motorcycle ride.

He gave me one more long, searching look then moved to hop on the motorcycle. I didn't hesitate. Didn't even look back into the building that caused my meltdown, just hopped on behind him and let him take me away from it all.



We rode for a long time. It felt like hours. Ocean scenery sped by us, though I didn't pay much attention. I focused on the hard body I was pressed up against, the vibration from the bike, the feeling of freedom of hurtling along

the highway. Every dark thought that polluted my mind fell away until there was nothing but me, Zane, and the road. My head cleared and I felt like I could breathe without choking on sorrow. Zane somehow knew what I needed and gave it to me. I didn't need words or moping. I just needed him and his bike. We slowed down, turning down a semi-abandoned looking road that ended with a small empty parking lot, overlooking the sea. A lone park bench sat beyond the lot on the top of a gentle slope. I imagined it gave an amazing view of the ocean. After he parked his bike, we sat there for a moment, the roar of the waves replacing the rumble of the bike that I had become accustomed to. Zane swung off, turning to me. He gently undid the helmet that he had buckled on me before we took off and discarded it. His hands went underneath my armpits and he lifted me off the bike as if I was a child. After gently setting me down on my feet, he engulfed my hand in his, leading us towards the seat. We got there with not a word spoken between us. He pulled me down into his lap, continuing the silence. I reveled in the warmth of his arms and the safe feeling they gave me, my eyes watching the ocean.

My life was loud. I was loud. Lexie and I were always talking, joking, devouring movies, TV shows and food at alarming rates. We were busy. Our lives were full of sound, noises and happiness. When that happiness was shattered a week ago, it was still loud, busy. So Zane giving me the gift of silence. In that moment, it was the most beautiful thing he could have ever done for me.

“How did you know?” I asked finally, my voice croaky. I wanted to know how he knew what I needed. How he knew to give me silence.

Zane's arms tightened around me. “Had a prospect on you,” he said by way of explanation.

I jolted and my eyes searched his face. Well, I guessed I also needed to know how he knew I was having a mental breakdown in my car outside the hotel. I hadn't even thought of that.

He was still staring at the ocean. “You had a prospect on me?” I repeated.

He nodded.

“Why?”

He finally looked down at me and I almost flinched. His eyes weren't hard or angry; they were haunted. Demons I didn't even know he had were dancing at the surface.

“Need to know you’re safe,” he said simply.

I regarded him. “Why would I be unsafe?” I asked quietly, my stomach dropping at the thought of him finding out the truth. Of why I was running. That I was running at all. Whom I was running from.

He was silent, his jaw turning hard as his eyes left mine again.

I lifted my hand to cup his jaw, moving it so I got his attention. “Zane?” I pressed.

He sighed. “Nothing concrete, just shit with the club,” he bit out. “Highly unlikely to even touch you, but I’m not taking any chances,” he declared firmly.

I relaxed slightly. Yes, “shit with the club” was hardly anything to be relieved about, but knowing Zane wasn’t aware of just how precarious my “safety” was, helped a little.

His eyes sharpened at my relief but I didn’t give him time to inspect it. “Lexie?” I asked, worry creeping in now.

Zane’s jaw turned to granite again. “She’s covered,” he replied.

I nodded, knowing Zane would never endanger her. The fact he had someone on us more than worried me. I chewed my lip as I questioned the dangers of being involved with someone in a motorcycle club. Of the day when those men had sent a soft foreboding down my spine. Zane’s anger when I had told him about it. The concern that lay under that anger. Concern that led him out of our lives for two weeks, thinking he was doing the best thing by us. My mind turned to Amy, to Gwen and her baby girl, her pregnant belly. The men’s adoration of those women. I refused to believe the men who treated their women like they were responsible for their sanity would put them in danger.

“I trust you, to keep us safe,” I whispered finally. I did. With every part of me.

Zane moved me suddenly so I was straddling him. His hands went to my neck, his eyes searching mine. “Didn’t think I’d have this,” he muttered, his hand tightening at my hip. “A fuckin’ beautiful, strong woman. Woman who gave me a family, gave me her trust, not caring about the fact I lived my life in darkness,” he clipped, his voice raw.

My heart clenched at the way he thought of himself. I stroked his face. “You’re the one who’s given me and Lexie everything,” I told him. “You took a heartbroken little girl, and her equally heartbroken mom, and got them through the darkest part of their lives,” I said firmly. “That doesn’t say

you've got a life lived in darkness. Says you're a good man who can take two people back to sunshine," I half whispered, touching his goatee.

His eyes did that thing again where they spoke for him, saw right into me. He squeezed my hips and laid a light kiss on my head. We sat there for a long time, his forehead resting on mine, saying everything without speaking.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mia

One Month Later

“Are you freaking *joking*?” Sam near shouted, pushing out of his chair.

Lexie was grinning ear to ear and shook her head.

“Holy shit!” Wyatt also half yelled. He sheepishly looked at me. “Sorry, Mia.”

I smiled back at him. “I think my delicate parental ears may recover soon from such a cuss out,” I told him sarcastically.

“This is going to do like, freaking wonders for our image,” Sam continued, pacing the room. He stopped and faced his friends on the sofa. “Like the Sons of Templar, the baddest of the bad asses, want us to play at a party.” He put his eyes to the sky. “Huge, dudes.”

“Well, it isn’t exactly the baddest of the bad asses that requested your presence,” I cut in, hating to put a damper on the teenage boy freakout. “It’s the wife of said bad ass, but they did allow it,” I added, hoping that wouldn’t totally bum them out.

Sam shook his head, waving his hand. “Doesn’t matter who requested us—we still got the gig.” He turned back to Lexie and the other bandmates. “We need to figure out set lists like, yesterday. No girly shit that makes us seem like pussies.” He eyed Lexie, who rolled her eyes. The talk then went to potential songs and about their “street cred” to which I switched off.

Gwen had asked if I was okay with Lexie and her band playing for her and Cade’s second wedding anniversary party. I had mixed feelings about

my daughter playing in a band for a motorcycle club, fearing that 'Bad Mom' label might pop out from somewhere, namely the PTA mothers at her school. I already wasn't popular. I turned up late, sipping coffee and mostly trying not to fall asleep, despite the coffee. I didn't even want to be on a freaking PTA anything, but I felt it was some sort of motherly duty.

I had said yes in the end. Namely because I had already been to club gatherings, and apart from the drunken guy that groped me, nothing unsavory had gone down. Well, apart from me getting fucked against the wall that one time, but that was totally consensual. Gwen had assured me this party was a lot more G rated. The club girls, or "sweet butts" as they were called, were banished for the day, and families and kids were replaced. I'm pretty sure she uttered that it was going to be more like a picnic. Not that I guessed any of the bad asses that were going to be there would let such a phrase pass their mouths. Nor would they let such a label be put on any event that happened at their clubhouse. But then again, Cade seemed to relent to anything Gwen had asked him from what I could see.

I had been hanging around the club a lot lately. There was always some sort of gathering, barbecue or dinner that Lexie and I were invited to. Now that I was Zane's "Old Lady", I was part of the crew. Not that he acted like Cade and Brock did around their women. He barely touched me when we were at these events, merely watched me from a distance with his eyes burning. Now and then, he'd surprise me when I was walking from the bathroom or to freshen my drink, pressing me up against a wall, a tree, or an abandoned car for a steamy make out session. Then he'd abruptly walk away, leaving me all hot and bothered and confused. I was getting a little hurt by this behavior and would have seriously thought he didn't feel the same way for me as I did about him, if it wasn't for the nights. The nights when he would consume my mind, body, and soul with ruthless and beautiful fucking. He then would clutch me tight to his body all night, leaving me sated and exhausted to pass out in the warmth of his arms. He would normally wake me up with his mouth or his dick; either way it wasn't a bad way to start the day.

The odd morning he'd have breakfast with Lexie and I, cooking for us and ruffling Lexie's head affectionately. He didn't say much, mostly just observed and let us bask in the warm glow of his presence. Lexie didn't blink at this. In fact, she loved it. She and Zane seemed to have a special sort of connection. They played guitar together when he got home, her

voice carrying over their soft strums. Despite this, he seemed to be holding back, keeping secrets. There was still trouble behind his eyes, fury that would appear at the strangest of moments, then simmer down behind his blank mask. Then there was something else. Pain. Pain beyond anything I'd ever seen behind anyone's eyes. It would appear sometimes after he was done fucking me, still inside me, watching me. Or when he was playing with strands of my hair, holding it and staring at it so hard I wondered what could possibly be working in his mind.

I didn't know what to do. It wasn't like I wasn't keeping secrets either. Mine were buried deep, like his. And like I suspected his were, mine would always be there, tearing at the pieces of my broken soul.

"Mia." A deep voice shocked me out of my inner turmoil. Lucky as well. Dark corners of my mind were not places to linger in. I turned from the kitchen window I had blankly been staring out.

Zane was leaning against the doorway, looking delectable and dangerous in his usual all black. His cut, like always, was over top of his black Henley. His eyes were narrowed at me, searching. "There a reason the little fucks in there," he jerked his head toward the living room, "were hounding me 'bout my favorite fuckin' song?" he clipped with irritation.

I couldn't help it. The image of excited teenage boys—albeit trying to play it cool—asking Zane, of all people, his favorite song made me burst out laughing. Like throw my head back, cackle type laugh. I felt Zane's arms at my waist and he was watching me as I giggled, moving into his hold. His eyebrow rose in question as to what I could find so funny.

"I could imagine you told them your favorite music was that of your Harley pipes singing from underneath you," I giggled, wondering if Zane even liked music. My thoughts rested on the slow soulful songs he played with Lexie every now and then.

His hands tightened at my waist. "Only sound I like from underneath me is you screaming when I make you come, Wildcat," he growled in my ear. His tone and the tickle of his beard at my cheek made my downstairs tingle.

I pulled back slightly. "You can't do that," I chastised. "Make me all...tingly when there're minors in the other room," I whispered. "Minors whom you cannot call little fucks," I told him firmly.

"They're in a band with Lexie. She's a knockout who's funny as fuck, and they're teenage boys. Therefore, they are little fucks," he half growled.

I rolled my eyes. I was pretty sure Noah was gay, and I knew that Lexie knew that also. None of the other boys did, nor did his macho father. So that was something I wouldn't tell Zane. The other two had oodles of girlfriends coming and going. Plus there was the small matter of Lexie's own mini alpha boyfriend. Though not so mini physically. "Have you forgotten Killian?" I asked sweetly. "He would pummel any of those guys if they even *look* at his girl the wrong way," I told him. "Plus, let's not forget you glare at them within an inch of their lives whenever you cross their paths," I teased. I was actually impressed with the courage of the boys, still being in a band with Lexie while they got death stares from not one but two(ish) scary macho guys.

"Killian," Zane muttered into my neck. "Biggest fuck of all."

To say things were tense between the two of them was an understatement. I was surprised Zane didn't sit on our porch in a rocking chair with a shotgun over his lap every time Killian came over. Which was a lot. Almost two months was a long time in teenage relationship years, and Killian and Lexie were going strong. I couldn't say I liked it, but I had to admit I grudgingly liked Killian and the way he treated my kid. With respect. Like she hung the freaking moon. Plus, he had her home by or before curfew every night and drove her to and from school. My only worry was how intense it was for two kids so young.

"You've yet to settle down on the whole 'I'm gonna kill you' thing you've got with Killian," I told him. "It's not going to change anything."

Zane gave me a hard look.

"Okay," I said cheerfully. "Next subject. The boys were asking your favorite music because the band is playing at Gwen and Cade's shindig next week," I informed him, hoping to move away from dangerous topics.

The stormy look that crossed his face told me that aim was dead in the water. "What the fuck?" he clipped.

I rolled my eyes, pulling out of his firm grasp and going to the fridge to get him a beer. He silently took it when I handed it to him, watching me expectantly. "I don't know what else you expect me to say. Gwen asked. I said yes. That's all, folks," I told him. I frowned. "Do you not think it's a good idea? Is Lexie not safe there or something?" I asked him quickly.

Zane stepped forward. "Safest fuckin' place for her," he bit out.

I relaxed. "Well then, what's with the 'tude, dude?" Not that he didn't always have a stormy look on his attractive face.

He shook his head at my phrase, used to such things from me by now. He did one of his almost smile things and kissed me soundly.

“Um okay, teenage daughter approaching. Cool it with the tongue hockey, peeps,” we heard Lexie call.

Zane immediately released his lips from mine. His hands stayed at my waist.

Lexie was grinning at us both, not in the least traumatized by totally wrecking the mood. “Zane, will you please help us out by letting us know at least one biker appropriate song?” she pleaded with her doe eyes on. “The boys are like, freaking out,” she added.

Zane’s jaw ticked on this and I couldn’t help it, I burst out laughing all over again.



Bull

He was happy. No other word for it. Bull was fucking happy. After Mia and Lexie had gotten over the trauma of losing two important people in their lives, their only family, they got back to themselves. Bull was fuckin’ shocked at his girls’ ability to carry on, to smile, joke, be fuckin’ nuts while they still grieved for people who were obviously their world.

He’d never forget Mia’s words that day in the car. The words she spoke to her daughter, trying to soothe her broken soul. What she had done was soothe Bull’s. Not completely; it would always be like a break that never healed right, but in that moment, she brought the sunshine in to the last dark corner of his soul. He loved her even more in that moment than he ever had. He loved her. Had for a while. He’d never admit it to himself. He couldn’t. He thought by doing that he’d be betraying *her*, dishonoring her memory somehow. Now he knew, he fuckin’ knew she’d want him to be happy. Have his family.

He’d never be happy like Cade was, like Brock was. Just wasn’t in him to show that easy affection his brothers did. Not anymore. He knew it got to

Mia, hurt her. He struggled with that. No, battled with that. So he did his best to show her when it was just them, when he had a moment, how much she meant to him. How much she owned his soul.

But seeing her, seeing Lexie with his brothers at his club, taking to the life so well, he felt conflicted. He felt proud to give them something they had lacked, something Mia had lacked. A family. It ate him up inside every time he thought about the detached way she had told him about her lowlife parents. Killed him thinking someone like Mia hadn't been given love. Then he almost burst with pride seeing what it had done to her. Hadn't ruined her, broke her. It had made her determined to give her girl the best life she could, be the best mom he had ever seen.

Something had niggled at the back of his mind when she had told him about Lexie's dad. He had been meaning to dig up where the fucker was hiding so he could put his mind at ease, but he hadn't had time. Shit was busy with the club. Just because they turned legit didn't mean they lost money. They fuckin' gained it. They diversified, adapted. Which meant he was doing a lot of shit. Not all of it was always strictly legal, but it wasn't exactly running guns either. With that came the other edge of the sword, having Mia and Lexie around the club. He loved his club, loved his brothers, but watching Mia with them sometimes made him feel like he was watching a ghost. Mia wasn't like *her*. Nothing like her. Different in every way, apart from the golden hair on her head. But he felt the same as he did before. Happy, part of a family. Way he felt before his life got ruined forever. So he was waiting. Bracing. There was something that told him to be on guard. Something was coming. Brothers felt it too. May have had something to do with the whispers that the Lost Knights weren't heeding their warning, that they were up to their old shit again. The plan was to check it out after the party, put their minds at ease.

Little did he know the party was going to be the thing to blow it all to shit. Take him back to darkness.



 Mia

The day was amazing. The sun shining on the clubhouse, coupled with multiple children tearing around the joint, made it seem less of a biker hangout and totally more of a picnic. Not that I would ever tell Zane that. Or maybe I would, just to tease him. To see if I could turn that little twitch in the corner of his mouth he got sometimes around me and Lexie into an actual, honest to goodness smile. It was my mission to make him laugh. Not having laughter in your life was a sad thing indeed. From someone who laughed a lot, I knew it was the best medicine.

Various people turned out for the party, surprisingly, not all bikers. A beautiful African American man wearing the most *to die for* Alexander McQueen tee arrived. I had spoken to him briefly, met his partner, who was equally beautiful in a more rugged and hot guy way, similar to Zane and Cade in their broody silent type look. I was pleasantly surprised that the openly gay couple didn't ruffle any feathers with the decidedly masculine crowd. There was also yet another hot dark-skinned man with the most kick ass tribal tattoo snaking up his arm. I had briefly been introduced to him and almost melted at his accent. It was the same as Gwen's, as he was a friend from New Zealand, but I had never heard it on a man. Totally sexy. As was the way his eyes followed Lucy around the party, although she spent a good amount of time glaring at him.

Zane was, as usual, in a man huddle with a couple of other bikers, eyes flickering over to me every now and then. He had yet to openly acknowledge me, although Lexie had near pounced on him when we arrived. He had spoken to her quietly and tugged one of the pigtails she had in her hair. My girl looked cute. In her usual boho rock chick apparel, she was wearing a baby doll lace dress with a white lace tee layered underneath. She had a multitude of necklaces slung around her neck and high heeled slouchy cowboy boots. I, on the other hand, had gone for a pure white sundress, strapless and tight across the boobs with a full skirt than finished above my knees.

"Mia?" Gwen called.

She was sitting on Cade's knee while he nuzzled her neck. I swallowed the lump in my chest that had me wishing Zane could show such easy

affection.

“Yeah hon?” I called back with a forced smile.

“Could you pretty please go and make sure all the plugs are switched on for Lex? I promised I would, but a certain *biker* is not letting me off his lap.” She glared at her husband who didn’t look bothered in the slightest.

I laughed. “Sure.”

Honestly, I was happy to get away from the PDAs. I was feeling more than a little depleted that my own “Old Man” hadn’t even kissed me hello. I thought I looked okay. Great, actually. With the amount of effort I went to I thought at least I’d get a blazing look. But no. “Mr. Broody and Handsome can’t manage that,” I complained to myself, checking all the wires.

“Can’t manage what, Wildcat?” a deep voice grated, hands seizing me by the waist.

I was whipped around and my body pressed to a hard one. Zane’s eyes were now blazing. “A kiss hello,” I half snapped at him, but I wasn’t really successful, considering my voice was slightly breathy from his look, his touch.

Zane frowned at me slightly then pressed his mouth to mine. He attacked me with a desperation I could barely survive. I was slammed against the wall as his fingers dug into my hair. The sounds of the party drowned out and I wrapped my leg around his waist, needing friction, contact. His hand moved to cup my bare ass as my dress rode up.

The clearing of a masculine voice had him instantly release me, yanking my dress down, half covering me with his body.

Lucky stood there grinning like a crazy person. “The band sent me—thought there was something wrong with the wiring, considering it was taking *two* people to sort,” he informed us lightly. “Should I go and tell them it’ll be another,” he glanced at Zane, “ten minutes?”

Zane growled slightly at the innuendo and I half giggled. “No,” I said quickly, putting my hand on Zane’s shoulder. “We’re coming now. It’s sorted.”

Lucky raised a brow. “Really? That quickly?”

Zane’s face darkened and he took a step forward. Lucky’s grin didn’t even flicker, the weirdo. I quickly clutched Zane’s hand, pulling slightly. “Let’s go, can’t miss the first set,” I said quickly, directing him past Lucky. Lucky actually winked at me as I dragged Zane past him. I couldn’t help but laugh. Zane wasn’t feeling the jollies.

“This is Lexie’s first time playing at a club gathering. How about we don’t have her witness you shooting one of your brothers?” I teased lightly as we walked back through to the party. “How about you actually pretend to be happy instead?” My tone was still light but there was a truth to the words. Half the time Lexie and I were at anything to do with the club, Zane’s mouth was set in a grim line and he snapped at most people, his eyes on us the entire time.

He stopped at the entrance to the clubhouse, the crowd of people visible from our spot. His hands moved to cup my face, his eyes searching mine. “I am happy,” he clipped, his expression and tone confusing his words. His eyes flickered to the gathering, the soft strums of a guitar carrying as Lexie stepped up to the microphone on the little stage they had erected. He looked back to me. “That’s the fuckin’ problem,” he muttered to my eyes. He then pressed a firm kiss to my head, released me and strode off, leaving me standing there, confused as ever.

He made his way through the crowd, moving to sit on a table far at the end of the stage. My gaze flickered to Cade, whose grey eyes were watching me. Even from the distance I was at I could feel the intensity. He gave me what I could only call a concerned look. I plastered a fake smile on my face and beamed at him before walking to the party to enjoy the rest of the day. Little did I know in a few minutes the whole thing would turn into a nightmare.



Lexie and the band were awesome. They played a great mix of songs that were totally appropriate for a biker group while still not comprising “their sound”—Sam’s words not mine. Killian sat at one of the picnic tables closest to the group, his eyes fixated on Lexie in that intense way that niggled in the back of my mind. Her eyes routinely found his when she was singing, a warm smile directed at him. The songs they were playing were decidedly upbeat and a few people had even gotten up to dance. Surprisingly, some of the scruffier looking bikers were among them, easy smiles on their faces. This may have had something to do with the beers in

their hands. Amy had dragged a reluctant Brock up, and even though he shook his head the entire time, his face was decorated with a grin and he held his wife tight. Gwen had attempted the same thing, but Cade's face had turned firm and he instead yanked her back into his lap and was currently whispering in her ear. She had a lazy smile on her face that made me think she wasn't that pissed that she wasn't tearing up the dance floor.

When Lexie started strumming "You and I" by Ingrid Michaelson I had to get up, considering it was the most cheerful song on earth and suited the day perfectly. I had been at first confused they played such a song at all, but by the way Lexie winked at Gwen at the start, I knew it was a request. I was happy for it too; that song rocked. I dragged Gage up with me, the friendly and hot biker that I had chatted to a couple of times and was fond of. He was more than happy to comply, swinging me around with no worries about his man card being comprised at dancing to such a song. The air was light with laughter and I couldn't feel more at ease. Gage pulled me to his waist.

"Think you might have to go to your man now, babe. Don't really need my arms to be yanked off," he murmured in my ear, nodding his head to Zane who was glaring daggers at us.

I laughed easily. "Well, I better go and save your limbs," I told him. "Thanks for the dance," I called over my shoulder.

He winked. "Anytime."

And then everything exploded. There was a huge bang and everyone stopped suddenly, even the band jumped, the music dying out. The man right in front of me jerked, a red spray erupting from his body. I was momentarily confused and there were a couple of screams as gunshots rang out. My eyes locked on Zane, who was at the other end of the party. Something was in his eyes at that moment, something I had never seen. Fear. I watched his mouth move as if he was shouting at me, but my ears seemed to be ringing. He started to sprint toward me while I was rooted to the spot. Sound came back in a rush as I watched him run through the hail of gunfire in horror.

"GET DOWN!" Someone yelled amidst the chaos.

I felt something whiz past my face and people started falling to the ground everywhere. Once I figured what was going on, I whirled around, one thought on my mind. "Lexie!" I screamed, sprinting towards the stage.

I dodged past the men who tried to grab me and pin me down. My frigging daughter was standing atop of a stage while people *fucking shot at*

her. She was a prime target. To my horror, she and the band hadn't even moved; it was like she was frozen in horror. Then, before I could get any farther Killian vaulted onto the stage like some kind of Olympic athlete and half tackled Lexie, covering her body with his. I watched him yell at the other guys as they too dropped to the ground, covering their heads. I realized that I was still running toward my daughter, gunshots still deafening my ears amidst the screams. Vaguely, I noted other men, our men, crouching and firing with their own guns. Brock was shielding Amy with his entire body, while shooting on his stomach. Then I wasn't standing anymore. I was on the ground, a hard body crouched over mine.

"Stay down, babe," Gage commanded urgently.

I struggled with him slightly. "Lexie!" I pleaded at him.

I watched him glance at the stage, something working in his eyes.

Then there was silence. Not complete silence; there were a couple of whimpers, screams at the odd gunshot as men leapt up, firing at the bikes that were screaming out of the parking lot.

Gage quickly ran his eyes over me. Satisfied, he leapt up and I followed him with my eyes to see him sprinting to his bike with a couple of other men. To make chase. I repeat to chase the people who had just come and *shot up a party*.

I didn't think about that, just scrambled up and raced toward the stage, not seeing anything but my daughter standing amidst a hail of gunfire. My eyes locked on Killian, who was crouched next to her, gently pulling her up, his hands hurriedly moving over her body as if to check for something. My whole frame stilled. Gunshots. He was checking my baby for gunshot wounds.

And with that, arms circled around me, stopping me from making it to her. I struggled to get free.

"Baby, stop," a tight voice commanded.

I didn't stop fighting, even though the voice was familiar, full of urgency and panic. "Let me go," I half screamed.

Hands moved to grip my shoulders and turned me to face him. Zane quickly ran his eyes up and down my body. His eyes were tortured. It seemed like his entire body sagged in relief when he realized I wasn't bleeding from any gunshot wounds.

"Let me go to my daughter," I gritted out in fury.

He jerked at my tone and his eyes grew panicked as they sought out the stage. My eyes followed his, and I sagged in relief to see Killian lifting her off the stage and setting her on her feet. Her eyes locked on mine and Zane's and she ran over.

"Mom!" she cried.

I pulled slightly out of Zane's arms to embrace my daughter. I clutched her to me, smelling her hair, letting myself finally breathe since the moment I heard those shots.

"You're okay," I whispered into her hair. "You're okay," I repeated this time to myself. I watched the horror unfold around me without letting her go. Kids were crying, but luckily unharmed. Cade had his small daughter clasped tightly in the crook of his arm while he crouched in front of his pregnant wife, eyes worriedly roving every inch of her. He barked orders to those around him. My eyes moved. A woman lay sobbing next to the prone body of a greying man in a cut. My eyes moved. The beautiful African American man I saw earlier was leaning against a picnic table. His grim-faced partner was pressing his tee against his arm, red blossoming through the shirt. My eyes moved. The boys from the stage were, thank God, unharmed and pale faced, helping direct younger children inside.

My eyes moved and locked on tortured ones. Familiar ones. His hand rested on Lexie's head for a moment, his eyes closing as if to make sure she was real. He gave me a long look, then he was gone. My eyes followed him as he mounted his bike along with a couple of others and roared off in the direction the shooters had gone moments earlier.



"She still asleep?" I asked quietly.

Killian nodded stiffly. His face was grim. Lexie was curled up against him on the sofa while he was half lying down. He had refused to leave her side the whole horrible afternoon, which I thanked my lucky stars for. She was trying to hold it together but was visibly shaken. His presence seemed to calm her slightly. I was also trying to hold it together, considering I was the mom and everything. The cops had arrived pretty quickly, not long after

the ambulances, taking the three wounded people away. The coroner also came to take the one dead body. Dead *person*.

Cade had also insisted Gwen be taken into the hospital, even though she seemed shaken but unharmed. Their small daughter went too.

Before the police had arrived, Cade had come over to me to make sure I was okay. It was the only time he actually left Gwen's side before she was taken away. Once he had been assured of my health, his concerns moved to something else. "Cops are going to come soon," he said in a low voice.

I nodded. There was just a freaking shooting; of course the freaking cops were coming.

"Need to know what you saw," he clipped.

My head jerked up. "What do you mean?"

He eyed me. "You see the shooters, Mia?" he asked carefully, gently even.

I wasn't fooled by his tone, and had a small inkling of where this conversation was going. "I was too busy dodging bullets to get a clear vision for any police sketch, if that's what you're asking," I said a tad sarcastically.

His face hardened. "Lexie was on the stage. She see anything?" he asked slowly.

I bristled, looking to my daughter, who was smiling weakly at no doubt a bad joke Sam was telling to try and lift her spirits. She was tucked tightly into Killian's shoulder. "I haven't really interrogated my daughter, considering she's mildly traumatized from *getting shot at*," I informed him icily.

Cade's face gentled. "Know this shit is hard, babe. My pregnant wife and baby daughter were there too." His eyes turned murderous and he glanced their way, as if to make sure they were still okay. "But you need to know. We handle this. Not the cops," he said firmly.

My heart sank and I got what he was asking. "The cops handle this, because it's *how it freaking works*," I whisper yelled at him.

He shook his head. "Not in this world."

I swallowed tightly. "If you're asking me to tell my daughter to lie to the police, you're crossing the line. In fact, you're so far past the line, the line is a dot to you," I hissed, failing to be intimidated by his stare.

He sighed, running his hand through his stubble. "People that did this killed my brother," he said tightly. "Shot at your kid." He nodded to Lexie.

“You want them serving a bullshit sentence if the cops ever do get around to catching them, or you want justice?” he asked flatly.

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re not talking about justice, you’re talking about revenge.”

He eyed me warily. “Sometimes they’re one in the same, babe.”

I chewed my lip, something swirling in my belly. I wanted to gather my daughter up and get her the fuck out of here. These people were nice, good people. But no matter what way you swung it, their lifestyle caused someone to get dead today. Almost caused my daughter to get dead. Zane was nowhere to be seen. Who knows where he was, if he was covered in his own blood...or someone else’s. I shivered at the thought. My mind moved involuntarily to the issues, the problems my kid was no doubt going to have after witnessing this shit. The nightmares. Her happy, carefree life would never be the same. The way she viewed the world would never be the same. An ugly part of me wanted those people who shattered that view to be punished. Not in a way that had them sleeping in a cell and getting out for good behavior.

“I’ll find out if she saw anything,” I said finally, hating myself. “If she did I won’t tell her to lie to the police,” I told him firmly. “But if she did see something, you’re the first to know.”

Cade’s face was blank, then he nodded. He touched my shoulder lightly. “You’re a good mom, Mia, and a strong woman. Your girl too.” He paused. “You’re good for him.”

I knew immediately who he was talking about.

“Today was heavy,” he continued.

Understatement of the freaking century.

“It’s not normal. Not okay. And will never happen again,” he promised firmly. “Our life might be rough, slide into grey sometimes. But trust me, this isn’t how it is.”

I felt like he could see my thoughts, see my panic. My desperation to get the fuck out of here as quickly as possible. He was trying to get me to understand. I nodded slowly, more to disguise my true intentions than anything else.

He looked at me a moment more then got up, continuing to make his rounds.

Turns out Lexie did see something, something that could help at least.

“They were covered,” she said slowly, Cade and Brock watching her. We were in the room called “church” where they had directed Lexie, Killian—who refused to leave her side—and I once I informed them of her information. To their credit, they were gentle and patient with her, speaking softly. “Their faces, I mean,” she corrected quickly. Her voice was stronger than mine would have been. I smiled tightly, proud of her strength. But then a teenage girl shouldn’t have to be strong when recounting what she saw from a freaking drive by shooting.

“But they had bikes—kind of like yours, like Zane’s, but not as cool,” she smiled slightly and Killian squeezed her hand.

Brock’s mouth turned up a tad but Cade’s face stayed blank.

“Couldn’t say what make they were, but definitely weren’t Harley’s,” she said with certainty.

My eyebrows rose at this. Since when did my daughter know the difference between a Harley and a anything?

Brock’s eyebrows also rose at this and he looked...impressed. “Lost Knights,” he muttered under his breath.

Cade nodded tightly. “Maybe,” he said back. “Anything else, honey?” he asked slowly.

She nodded. “The vests. Leather like yours, but with a different patch. I don’t know what it was but it had red in it,” she said firmly. Something moved in her gaze and she sat up straighter. “The bikes,” she said quickly. “I knew they were familiar but I only just remembered where from. You know that day in the vintage shop in Hope?” she asked me.

I nodded as the blood drained from my face.

“That’s where I knew them from. They’re the same ones, I’m sure of it,” she declared confidently.

Cade’s face went hard as granite and I would’ve been terrified if it was directed at me. It wasn’t. It was at the Lost Knights. It was the look of murder. It immediately transformed when he focused on Lexie once more. “Thanks honey, you did great.”

He made to move.

“You don’t want me to tell the police, do you?” she asked suddenly and Brock and Cade both jerked with surprise.

“Lexie...” I started, my stomach swirling once more at the mature look on my daughter’s childlike face.

She looked at me. “No Mom, it’s okay.” She turned back to Cade and Brock, who were staring at her. “I get it. The police, they probably won’t find them. Even if they do, there’s a chance they might not even go to prison.” She paused. “Not all of them, anyway. But you—” She gave Cade a meaningful look. “You’ll find them, won’t you?” Her voice was certain.

He nodded slowly. I didn’t imagine it was easy to surprise Cade, the big bad president of the Sons of Templar MC, but I’m pretty sure my sixteen-year-old just did. She sure surprised the ever loving shit out of her mom, and not in a good way.

Lexie nodded too. “Right. Well. That’s that, then,” she said firmly.

Cade seemed to jerk out of his amazement, and bent down and kissed Lexie on the head quickly. He gave me a meaningful look then left the room. Killian was looking at Lexie in the same kind of proud amazement as Brock and Cade, and murmured something in her ear.

I, on the other hand, was not impressed my daughter figured it out, then took it upon herself to make clear she wouldn’t be ratting to the cops on what she saw. My sixteen-year-old daughter, lying to the police because of some biker code. I felt like throwing up over the fact the bikers that Zane assured us we were safe from were the ones that shot at us today. That killed someone today.

“Lexie,” I started to say.

She stood up. “No Mom, I know what you’re going to say but I’ve made up my mind. This is Zane’s club, Zane’s family.” Her eyes moved behind her. “Kill’s family. I trust them. And I barely saw anything anyway,” she added.

I didn’t know what to say. I honestly didn’t. I felt sick at what I, and Zane by proxy had exposed her to. No, omitting a tiny bit of information in a police interview didn’t equal a future of becoming a heroin smuggler, but it did expose Lexie to a world I did not want her venturing into. A world I opened the door to.

She could not be persuaded otherwise, so I just had to look on helplessly while I watched her inform the tight-faced, very attractive police officer she saw nothing but masked men on bikes. The same police officer dragged a shaken Rosie into a corner and had heated words with her. Angry words, which resulted in him storming off and her watching after him with a drained look on her face. I so didn’t have space in my brain to inspect *that* right now. So, after hours of police statements and urging that we stay at the

club, I was finally able to take my baby home. Not without a tail and Killian, whom I wasn't unhappy to take with me.

I also wasn't unhappy to see Lexie asleep on the sofa in his arms. At least she wasn't catatonic or having a mental breakdown. She looked...at peace, safe, in his strong arms. So that was likely why I lost my mind and put a blanket over them. And why I uttered my next words.

"She stays asleep, you guys spend the night here," I whispered.

Killian jolted slightly, his eyes widening.

"Only if she stays asleep," I continued firmly. "And if she stays here on the couch," I added. "She wakes up, take her to her room and then you stay on the couch. I've got like, x-ray mom vision. I can see through the floor. And my room," I pointed to the ceiling, "is right there. So I'll know."

Killian nodded tightly.

I gave him a look. "I'm trusting you, kid."

He nodded again.

I was trusting him completely. It may make me an idiot. But the kid literally *jumped in front of bullets*, then shielded my daughter with his own body today.

I surprised him by touching his shoulder lightly. "You quite possibly saved her life today." I nodded to my sleeping angel. "You've earned yourself like a gazillion brownie points. Owe you big time, kid," I said softly. "Night." I turned. "Remember, x-ray vision," I added.

"Mia," he called quietly.

I turned my head.

"Won't break your trust," he promised.

And I, stupidly or not, believed him.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I wasn't asleep. How could I sleep with the events of today going on repeat in my mind? So when a figure entered the door I left ajar, I wasn't shocked. My body did flinch slightly on reflex, due to the fact my body was highly strung and firmly ready for both fight or flight mode. I relaxed slightly when the moonlight illuminated a familiar face. I sat up in bed slightly and felt his weight as he hit it. Neither of us spoke, the sounds of his motorcycle boots thudding to the floor reverberating in the silent room. I also heard the slight crinkle of leather as his cut fell to the floor too. My eyes narrowed in that direction, even though I couldn't see it, I knew it was there. That piece of leather held so many complications within its seams.

The covers moved and I felt Zane slip under them. Within seconds my body was yanked into his, full contact. I didn't want to, but I instinctively curled into him, every inch of my body yearning for his touch, the sense of safety that came with it. Ironic, really, since he was the very reason I knew what gunshot wounds looked like. That my daughter knew what being shot at felt like. Even then my body screamed out for him.

"Killian's sleeping on the couch with Lexie downstairs," he clipped, his voice hard.

"I'm aware," I replied softly, but in a tone that dared him to challenge me.

There was silence as he chewed over this, his body tight. I knew every inch of him wanted to fight me on this. But she was my daughter. She needed to sleep in the arms of the man who loved her. He'd proved himself a man today by jumping in front of bullets for her. She deserved to feel safe, like I was right now. And as much as I wished I could, I couldn't give her

the safety Killian could give her right now. Thankfully, Zane chose to stay silent. The silence lasted a while. There was a lot you could say without words. Like goodbye.

“I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me where you were?” I asked with resignation.

Zane held me tighter, as if he couldn’t get me close enough. “Hunting,” was all he said.

I nodded slightly.

“Mia,” he began.

“Someone died today,” I said quietly. Zane’s body stiffened. “Right in front of me someone died,” I whispered.

“Mia,” he tried again.

“People shot at me today. With bullets, with real, people killing bullets.” I don’t know why I said that; what other kind of bullets were there? “People shot at my daughter today,” I continued.

“Mia.” His voice was tortured.

“She is my world,” I stated, cutting him off. “The center of my universe. My everything. My baby. And she almost died today.” My voice cracked slightly at the end.

Zane twisted my body so he was lying half on top of me, his hand cupping my jaw. He reached over and switched on the light, flinching at what he must’ve seen in my expression. He searched my face in desperation. “Mia, tonight. We got them, made them pay, I won’t let anything like that shit happen again. I’ll protect you. And Lexie, I fuckin’ swear,” he declared firmly.

I shook my head sadly. “It’s *my* job to protect my daughter,” I said quietly. “Protecting her means I don’t ever put her in situations where her being the victim of a drive by shooting is actually a possibility. Put her in situations where she lies to the police to protect your club.” Zane’s entire form stiffened when I said that.

I was silent for a moment longer, my heart preparing for the necessary break. “No matter what I feel for you, what we have, my daughter comes first. Always. I’ll do anything to protect her.” Even break my own heart. Tears welled in my eyes as I locked gazes with Zane once more. His jaw was hard and his eyes for once were unguarded. They were dancing with emotion that usually only glimmered below the surface, hinting at the

depths below. It was exposed now for the world to see and I had to squeeze my eyes shut a moment.

Zane's touch was feather light on my face, trailing down on my temple.

"Open your eyes Mia," he whispered.

I couldn't help it, I did.

"What happened today will never happen again." His voice was fierce. "Shit's taken care of. You need to know this though. The club's a part of me. It is me. I am who I am, 'cause of that cut." He nodded to the floor where the leather lay.

He was telling me he would never leave it. Never leave the club that killed his brother today. Got people shot today. In a weird way, I got it. The things you love are never perfect. Sometimes they're downright ugly. But that's the way of love. It's not about sense or aesthetic or even reason. And Zane loved his club. His brothers. No one could ever rip him away from it. Like he said, he was the club. You loved him, you loved the club. I loved him, every inch of him. I loved the broken parts he seemed to only be able to give me. I even loved the club. The sense of family, the loyalty. But it wasn't just me. I didn't get to be selfish. Didn't get to throw reason and sense out the window. I had to hold onto that shit, because of the being downstairs.

He must have seen it in my face because his whole body tightened, shut down, his eyes closing for a moment. I reached up to touch his face, memorizing what it felt like.

"Zane," I whispered, and he opened his eyes. "If it was only me I'd be there with you, at your side no matter what. I'd trust you with my life," I promised. "But it's not just me. I know you promise this won't happen again, but I can't take that chance. I could for you, for us, with me. But not with my daughter's life," I finished quietly. I didn't meet his eyes. I couldn't.

His fingers gently lifted my chin to lock my eyes with him. I braced for the fury. For the glare I had only just said goodbye to. But it wasn't there. There was a hardness to his eyes, hiding something. But there was also tenderness. Love. I nearly choked when I saw it.

"You're a fuckin' good mom, baby. Protecting your girl. I get it," he ground out, like it was physically painful for him to say. "Gonna fuck you now," he murmured. "Taste every inch of you one last time, so I can imprint it into my memories. So you'll feel me for weeks after this," he growled.

Then it was nothing. No words. His mouth claimed mine. Different than any other time before. I didn't think it could be better. But it was. Zane wasn't holding anything back; he was giving me everything. Taking everything. I clutched to him for dear life. Wishing this moment, this night, could last forever so I never had to say goodbye. That's what it was. Goodbye. Countless times he made love to me, worshipping every inch of me, possessing every inch of me. Then in the early hours of the morning, he bundled me into his chest, surrounding me with his warmth, his strength.

"Sleep, baby," he commanded softly.

And although I didn't want to, didn't want to surrender to the force dragging down my eyelids, I did. I was too far gone to hear him murmur in my ear.

"Love you, baby, to the moon."

And when I awoke, he was gone. Most of me was gone too.



Bull

The moment the first gunshots sounded was the moment his heart stopped entirely. His eyes had already been on Mia and he had been bursting with fury. Not because Gage had his hands on her, although that did contribute, but mostly because it wasn't him. He couldn't smile and laugh while twirling her round to some stupid fuckin' song. One Lexie could sing the shit out of, no matter how silly it was. It grated him that he couldn't be the one that made her laugh, give her what Brock gave Amy. Even Cade, who didn't dance had Gwen curled in his lap, murmuring to her. Bull couldn't even fuckin' do that. His past, his demons had screwed him up so bad he couldn't even give the woman he loved what she deserved. Be the man he was before. He was watching Mia make her way over to him with a small smile. Even knowing what he couldn't give her she still smiled, still took what he could give. Christ, if he didn't love her even more.

So when he saw her standing among people who were getting cut down by bullets, he couldn't think. Couldn't move for a second. He was frozen in terror. Only for a second, then he found his feet. Found his voice.

"Mia! Someone get Mia!" he screamed desperately as he watched her spin and sprint toward the stage. She dodged every one of his brothers easily, her movements desperate. He watched as Gage finally get a hold of her. He was never happier to see Mia in another man's arms as he was in that moment. His terror translated to Lexie. His girl, who was on the fuckin' stage. Every part of him screamed to be able to be there, protect his girls. His mind quieted slightly to see Killian shielding Lexie.

With them taken care of he moved his body, pulled out his piece and started firing. He didn't even bother to crouch down. Fuckers were riding off anyway. He thought he managed to clip the last one to run off, but he wasn't sure. As soon as the danger disappeared, he didn't make chase like some of his other brothers did. He went for his girls. He tried to swallow the bitter fear that poisoned every inch of him. When he finally made it to Mia, when she struggled in his arms like a banshee, he relaxed slightly. She was struggling, screaming, fighting. Which meant she was alive. Once he had catalogued every inch of her gorgeous body to make sure it was unharmed, he felt like he could breathe slightly.

"Let me get to my daughter," she demanded in a voice he didn't recognize, a voice laden with terror. He flinched and felt that same terror inside him at the thought of Lexie. His eyes fell on her girl, climbing off the stage with the help of Killian.

"Mom!" she screamed, running over.

Bull let Mia go so she could hug her daughter. He watched in relief as Lexie hugged her back, unscathed. Unable to help himself, he touched her golden head, closing his eyes, thanking something that they were both okay.

His eyes met Mia's. For the first time ever, his woman's eyes were hard. He restrained a flinch at the sight of them, tried to communicate a silent apology, a silent declaration of how much he loved them both in his look.

Then he left. Because he had to. Had to punish the fuckers who killed his brother. Shot at his two reasons for living. Not existing. But *living*. Anyone who tried to extinguish that light was dead.



Bull met Cade at the front of the warehouse they were cleaning up. Or more accurately, the prospects were cleaning up.

“It done?” Cade asked with a hard glint in his eyes.

Bull nodded. “Took care of every last one,” he assured his president. He had taken pleasure in watching the life drain out of the fuckers. Great pleasure.

“We clean from this?” Cade added after nodding in approval.

Bull gave him a look. A look that said what he needed to say. No way Bull would let this blow back on the club.

Cade nodded, running his hands through his stubble, looking weary.

Bull didn’t have time to hash this shit out, he had a family to get back to. Cade gripped his arm. “Your girls, they did good today,” he told him.

Bull nodded.

“They’re strong. Both of them. Love you. Love the club,” Cade continued.

Bull looked at him a moment and Cade released him.

“Thanks, brother,” he muttered.

Bull had a shower before he went to Mia’s. Didn’t want to be dragging the filth of what he did into the house she made with Lexie. The *home* she made with Lexie.

He paused when he saw both Killian and Lexie asleep on the sofa. He struggled not to drag him out of the house with his bare hands. That would mean waking Lexie. Unbidden, the memory of Killian protecting her with his body came to mind. With effort, he walked past them both.

Everything melted away when he finally got into bed with Mia, got her into his arms. Then everything was fuckin’ shattered when he realized what she was doing. Didn’t blame her. Not for a fuckin’ second. Hell, he respected the shit out of her for it. Made him love her more. He knew how she felt about him. She was a crappy liar at the best of times, and her eyes didn’t lie, not when he was inside her. Not when she watched him with Lexie when she thought he wasn’t looking. So he knew. And if it was anything to rival how he felt about her, he knew it’d be ripping her up

inside. Which was why he didn't fight. He wanted to do, to the death. He wanted to never let her go until the reaper took him. Never stop loving her till the day he died. But he couldn't. She was protecting her girl. Doing what he wasn't strong enough to do. Because even though the fucks who shot at them were in the ground, they made their death blow right there in Mia's bed.

After he had made love to her, memorized every inch of her beautiful body, she lay in his arms. Bull clutched her to him. When he felt her drift off, he finally murmured the words he had been aching to say.

"Love you, baby, to the moon," he told her sleeping body.



Mia

Two Months Later

"Mom!" Lexie yelled up the stairs. "We're leaving now!"

I hopped down the hallway, trying to put on my shoe without breaking my neck. I was late. Story of my fucking life. I reached the top of the stairs; Lexie and Killian were standing at the bottom. Killian had Lexie's guitar case over his shoulder.

"You know the whole 'don't do drugs, don't drink booze or you'll be grounded for the remainder of your young adult life' bit, don't you?" I asked her and Killian.

Lexie nodded. "Gambling's alright though, isn't it?" she clarified.

I nodded. "Only if you win," I deadpanned.

Killian chuckled slightly. Being a regular at our house the past four months, he was down with our brand of humor. And with our serious attitudes towards movie watching order, as he had learned in our *Star Wars* marathon last week. Idiot actually suggested watching it in episode order. I'd never look at him the same.

I turned my serious face on this time. "Take care of my kid, Kill," I ordered softly.

His face turned serious. “Always do, Mia,” he returned.

Lexie rolled her eyes and waved her hands. “Helloooo, overprotective mother, overprotective boyfriend, I’m right here! My ears work and everything. So how about we stop talking about Lexie when she’s not here,” she ordered.

“Did you hear something?” I asked Killian, looking around the room.

He did the same. “Nope.”

Lexie let out a frustrated sigh and stomped out the door.

“Love you!” I called to her back.

She waved a hand. I was pretty sure I heard her mutter “Yeah, yeah, put it in writing.”

Killian grinned at me, then went after her.

I tried not to give in to the familiar feeling of panic that assaulted me every time she left the house. It helped slightly that Killian was with her. When we cut ties with the Sons of Templar and everyone connected to them, Killian was the one exception. I didn’t exactly have a choice. I was reasonably sure shit would get all *Romeo and Juliet* up in here if I had forbidden Lexie to see Killian, as well as everyone else. She had been mad at first. No, furious would have been more accurate. It was our first fight. Our first rip-roaring, “I hate you, Mom”, storm out the door kind of fight.

“You can’t do that!” she yelled. “You can’t just cut them all out of our life like that. They’re *nice*. Gwen’s nice. Amy’s nice. Rosie’s nice. They care about us, they’re your *friends*,” she half screeched.

I had tried to be calm. “They are nice, sweetie. They’re good people, all of them. But the stuff they’re involved in, it’s not good. Not for you and me to be around. It’s dangerous. I’m not going to take a chance on anything or anyone that might hurt you,” I had told her evenly.

“But it wasn’t even their fault!” she argued. “They didn’t do anything!”

I pursed my lips. I didn’t want to tell her people didn’t just rock up somewhere and start shooting at a motorcycle club for no reason. It would have been fuel to an already out of control fire.

“I know, doll. But we need to stay away from them, just until this dies down,” I lied. Forever was a long fricking time to a teenager. A week was a long time to a teenager.

Lexie had calmed slightly, then her body jerked. Full on jerked. “What about Zane?” she asked carefully. Quietly. Too quietly.

“Zane’s included too,” I said, trying to keep the hurt, the agony out of my voice in that statement.

Her whole frame had tightened at my words and her face flinched in hurt. “You can’t do that!” she yelled, tears beginning to stream down her face. “He cares about you, he cares about us. *He needs us,*” she cried. “He’s got no family without us. He’s playing guitar with me,” she added hysterically.

I flinched. My beautiful girl saw way too much sometimes.

“He’ll be okay,” I stepped forward, moving to take her arms.

She ripped them out of my grasp. “He *won’t,*” she hissed. I felt a lance go through me at my daughter’s chilling certainty. She stared at me with a look of pure fury. One that was not welcome on her usually smiling and carefree face. “I hate you,” she whispered brokenly. Then she ran out the door.

I stood there staring in the middle of the room, bleeding from the wounds of her words. The truth to them. Then I sank into the couch and sobbed.

She had returned an hour or so later, her face tearstained but her expression full of apology. She crawled up next to me on the sofa, cuddling her body into me.

“I’m sorry, Momma,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean it. Any of it. I don’t hate you, I never could. I know you’re just doing your best. For us. I understand.”

And with that, my little girl proved she was in fact a teenage unicorn. In the space of an hour her head seemed to have wrapped itself around reasons I even struggled to grasp. And for every day after that, she seemed to be back to her happy self. Sometimes, however, I caught her looking over at Zane’s empty house from time to time with undisguised hurt on her face.

That was another thing. Zane. Every waking moment I was thinking of him. Yearning for him. Hating myself for the decision I made. Questioning it, even when I knew it was the right thing to do. To protect Lexie. But that didn’t stop the hurt. From me bleeding inside. From me struggling to find sleep every night. Then waking up to nightmares of me saying goodbye to him. Losing him. I don’t know how I would’ve coped if I had to know he was right there, across the street. Simple. I wouldn’t have. I would’ve had to pack up and move. Which I had already considered. But I wouldn’t do that to Lexie. Uproot her again. Take her away from the boy she loved, the

band she lived for. Amazingly enough they were still together; surviving a shooting together creates a bond even worried parents can't break. But luckily, the night everything happened was the last night I saw him. His house stayed dark and empty, every day, every night for two months. The grass grew long and I thought it might run wild until I saw Cade ride up on his bike and set to mowing it. I'd smashed the glass I was holding when I had heard the Harley pipes at first. Then seeing Cade, my heart dropped. I watched him for a while, then I saw him stare over to our place, something working in his mind. I swear he started to make his way over before he shook his head and hopped on his bike. I was beyond glad he didn't show up on my doorstep.



I had been avoiding Gwen, Rosie, Amy, Lucy, and everyone connected to the club. I didn't like doing it. In fact, I hated it. I dodged every call I received, ignored every text and deleted every voicemail. I felt like an evil shrew. Lexie was right. They were nice people. The best. I had grown attached to them all, felt a bond with them. It hurt me to have to cut ties like I was doing. I questioned it multiple times, like when I gave in and listened to a voicemail Gwen had left.

“Hey, Mia, it's me, Gwen, again.” There was a pause. “Just wanted to make sure you were okay. Bull's...he's gone away for a while.” She cleared her throat. “I'm sure you know that. Look, I get it. Why you're distancing yourself, Lexie. I understand. It's a lot. Trust me, I know. But we miss you. Things, they're better. They're getting better. The club, they're always here if you need anything. If Lexie needs anything—” Another pause. “I'm always here if you need to talk or whatever. When you're ready. Just don't cut us out, 'kay?” There was a click signaling the end of the message.

I had stared at my phone a long time after listening to that voicemail. It had been a week since I got it. I missed her. All of them. They were my friends. And avoiding them forever in a town like this was damned near impossible without becoming a hermit. Which was what I was doing. Lexie and I were not hermits. We did things. Apart from when we were watching

movies, or when Lexie was devouring a book, we were never stationary. So I was getting cabin fever. Something had to change.

Hence me saying yes to a date with Clay. He had got my number somehow off someone who knew someone who knew someone. Friggin' small towns. Anyway. My heart was still bleeding; in pieces actually. But I had to do something. So a date it was. A date I was late for. Lexie and Killian were off to some kid's party that Lexie's band were playing at. Their street cred had gone up exponentially since the incident, and she was always away for a gig. Which I didn't like. Hated, actually. But I went to the ones I could, hovering at the back, trying not to have a mental breakdown. Killian went to the rest I couldn't go to, plus the ones I could. And a party at some kid's house was not something a mom could go to unless I wanted to subject my daughter to eternal mortification.

So it was a date. Clay had called at exactly the right time as well, when I was feeling weak and like I needed a change. His voice had been all husky and attractive and his words had been all the right ones. Convincing without being pushy, interested without being over the top. Lexie had darkened slightly when I informed her of my date, then she put on a very fake smile and declared she was happy for me. It was safe to say she missed Zane almost as much as I did.

A knock on the door jolted me out of my thoughts. I poked myself in the eye with my mascara wand, causing me to ruin my carefully applied smoky eye makeup.

"Fuck," I muttered. This was definitely a fuck moment. I was only wearing one shoe, my makeup now looked like Alice Cooper's and I was nowhere near mentally prepared to go on a fucking date.

I glanced at my phone. He was ten minutes early. Since when did grungy hot guys who owned clubs ever turn up ten minutes early? I was expecting him to be at least fifteen minutes late. "Stupid, punctual silver fox," I muttered, throwing on my other shoe and doing emergency makeup procedures.

"Coming!" I yelled when there was another knock.

I half ran to the door, trying my best not to trip on the journey. Then again, a hospital trip would mean I wouldn't have to go on the date. I paused. Was I seriously considering maiming myself in order to get out of a date with a perfectly nice and attractive man? "You're like super early," I

said, opening the door breathless and unharmed, “I was expecting you to be...”

My eyes landed on breasts encased in a kick ass silver tee with a plunging neckline. Last I remember, Clay didn’t have breasts or kick ass silver tees. My eyes traveled to meet pretty blue eyes framed with expertly applied winged liner. They were currently narrowed on me.

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” Lucy informed me coldly, pushing through the door and storming into my house.

I stood shocked, with the door open for a moment before closing it and following her to the living room. She was sitting on the sofa with her legs crossed and a stern look on her face.

“Sit.” She pointed a well-manicured finger at my chair.

“I’ve actually...” I started.

“Sit,” she repeated.

At her tone my body moved automatically. I thought those long nails might embed themselves in my cheek if I didn’t.

She barely waited for my ass to hit the cushion before she started.

“You need to cut the shit,” her throaty voice declared. I had never heard Lucy speak in anything but a soft tone; the hardness under her words surprised me.

“What?” I began.

Again, she interrupted me. “You going all radio silent on everyone. On your girls. That shit is not cool,” she informed me with narrowed eyes.

“Lucy,” I tried once more.

“No,” she snapped. “You cut yourself off from the club. Your decision. Stupid one. But I get it. You do not, however, cut yourself off from your girlfriends,” she informed me snippily. I didn’t even have time to get a word in. “For a start, Gwen needs you. She’s having trouble with Belle and kid shit. Us,” she pointed to herself. “Much as we would like to help, we don’t know shit about kids. It’s not just her wanting you back ‘cause she needs your mom’s wisdom. She just plain misses you and Lexie.” She gave me a meaningful look. “We all do,” she finished softly.

I sank back into my chair, feeling thoroughly told off by a woman who I was pretty sure was at least five years younger than me. I felt like a chastised teenager.

“I’m sorry,” I started, my voice sounding tired; no, exhausted. “I didn’t want to. It killed me to cut myself and Lexie off from you girls, from—” I

choked on the word, *Zane*. I couldn't even say his name out loud. "I'm just doing what I thought was right, to keep Lexie safe," I pleaded with her to understand that.

She raised her eyebrow. "Cutting yourself off from people you care about, people that care about you? That's keeping her safe?" she said speculatively.

I sighed. "The shooting, the club. I can't have that kind of shit happening to my kid. I'm her mom. I'm protecting her from that. The main job they give you when they hand you a kid is make sure it doesn't die. That day I almost failed in that basic job."

Lucy's eyes softened. "Shit, babe. I don't have a kid, so I don't know what it's like to love someone that much, to want to protect them from the world." She paused, her eyes going far away for a second. "But that—what went down that day was once in a blue moon type crap." She screwed her nose up. "No big, bad, biker males are gonna let that moon anywhere near their women again. They'd find a way to get up there and like beat the crap outta that moon if they had to."

"They will try. But the club, the way they live their lives? Chances of that stuff happening when you're connected with them, it grows," I told her.

She looked at me a moment. "You're right," she said finally. "But most of the time the stuff worth having in life is the stuff that comes with the highest risk. Bet I could go my live without having kids, without findin' a man to love 'cause the risk of getting your heart broken skyrockets when you give it to someone else to look after." She gave me a look. "I expect I could do that. You know, to protect myself from hurt. To protect my heart from dying. Problem is, if I did that, by protecting my heart from dying I'm also stopping it from *living*," she said sagely. "Whatever your choice about the club, about a broken man who lives and breathes for you and your daughter, we'll be here. If you let us back in." She added the last part meaningfully. Something was working behind her eyes. Something that made me think her own advice had suddenly hit home. Most likely involving a very attractive man with an equally attractive accent.

I stared at her. "Holy shit," I muttered. "You're Yoda in Manolos."

She laughed and it wasn't delicate like I expected. It was throaty and I'm pretty sure there was a snort. Yoda did not snort.

She stood, giving my metallic jersey dress and sky high heels a once over. "I'm guessing you've got somewhere to be," she guessed correctly.

There was no judgment in her gaze. No silent “you crushed a man’s heart and are now going out with another, you man-eating bitch”, look. Just understanding. I stood and quickly hugged her, feeling lighter knowing I didn’t have to say goodbye to the friends who already meant a lot to me. “Thanks,” I told her hair.

She squeezed me before releasing me. “Cocktails tomorrow, all the girls. You’re there,” she ordered.

I nodded.

“You’re giving us the rundown on who you’re going on a date with. Then we can beat you silly for letting the other one go,” she declared.

There was no venom in her voice when she said it, but I felt a stab nonetheless. With an air kiss and a wink she was gone, and I was left standing in the middle of the room contemplating whether I had actually fucked my entire life up two months ago.



“Thanks,” I muttered across the car, my eyes glancing shyly at Clay. “That was fun,” I half lied.

The date wasn’t bad. He wasn’t fifteen minutes late... only five. He was charming and interesting to talk to and hot as hell. The food was good, as was the place he took me. But I found myself miserable and forcing down the stuff that I should’ve been savoring. The jokes I normally would have found funny had me laughing in a way that sounded fake, even to my own ears. I was putting on a terrible show because the whole time my mind was on Zane. And on Lucy’s words. “You’re a shitty liar, babe,” Clay’s throaty voice informed me, turning my chin with a gentle touch from his hand.

“Know you went through some shit,” he said, his gravelly voice somehow gentle. “Also know, even miserable, you’re fuckin’ different. Special. The kind of special I’m willing to wait for.” He paused. “So when you’re ready, call me. I’ll be waiting,” he murmured.

And before I knew it, his lips were on mine. They were soft, gentle and the kiss was nice. Nice in a way I knew I would enjoy had I not been broken in pieces. Nice in a way that I knew he’d make some woman very

happy with his superior kissing skills, his manners, his hotness and his incredible perceptiveness. Not me, though. That didn't mean I didn't kiss him back. It was like auto kiss. I had no choice. When a hot, rough and gentle guy kisses you, your body takes over.

His mouth hovered over mine and I felt his eyes bore into me. "You need to get into the house now, babe," he half growled. "Before I forget 'bout being a gentleman."

I jerked back slightly at the roughness of his tone and quickly undid my seatbelt. "Thanks for dinner," I said quickly, hand on the door handle His hand caught my wrist before I could escape.

"Call me when you're ready," he ordered.

I nodded quickly. I'd never call him. No way I'd ever be ready.

He let me go, and I struggled not to sprint inside.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It had been a long day. Like marathon long. As usual, I was surviving off three hours of sleep and three hundred gallons of caffeine. My dreams were worse last night. I kept myself awake until the early hours, torturing myself over my decision. Lucy's words echoed in my mind, convincing me I had fucked it all up and made the wrong choice. Then reason came back in and reminded me how hard I had worked to keep Lexie safe, and not to compromise it for matters of the heart. Round and round it went until I fell into an exhausted sleep. Then, I jolted awake from one of my nightmares, and I was so sure I saw him there, standing in the corner of my room, watching me. I closed my eyes again, wishing for it to be real; then when I opened them again he was gone. I was officially hallucinating. Which meant I was going insane. I just had to hold off until Lexie was old enough to look after herself, then I'd take the one way trip to crazy town. Crazy people didn't get lonely. Down to their bones lonely like I was. They had voices to keep them company.

So, pulling into my driveway dog-tired and facing the prospect of cocktails with the girls, I completely missed the Harley in the driveway across from mine. Maybe I didn't miss it; maybe I saw it and assumed it was one of my hallucinations. Whatever the reason, it didn't register. I busied myself trying to position my bag and all the stupid office paperwork I had to take home while getting out of the car. Once I got to our doorstep, I stopped. Then everything—the events of today, the lack of sleep, the loneliness—everything hit me. I dropped everything at my feet and sank down onto the doorstep, replaying the meeting I had today. The one that may have just changed my life.



“Left it all to me?” I repeated, dumbstruck.

Heidi, the lawyer, glanced at her papers and shuffled through them. “Well, not technically *all*,” she clarified. “There are payments needed for the funeral, a couple of debts, and contributions to some charities, but after that, they’ve left it all to you,” she told me. “Their properties, both the one in DC and the one in Malibu, and the hotels, of course.”

I opened my mouth then closed it again, unsure of what to say. Steve and Ava had left me everything. I knew they didn’t have any children, only Alice, and since she died there was only me. And they didn’t have any other family apart from me and Lexie. I should have naturally come to this conclusion, but one doesn’t really think about this stuff when overcome by grief. Well, not me anyway. I was too busy wishing someone would invent a time machine so I could go back and save the two people I loved.

“And there’s an amount put away for an Alexis Spencer, in a trust for when she turns twenty-one.” She glanced at some papers. “Although there is an exception saying you can use the funds for college tuition before then.” She looked at me. “Though the amount they left to you alone could cover that anyway.”

“The amount?” I repeated, obviously unable to speak unless I was parroting everything this lawyer said.

She gave me a soft look of understanding before getting back to business. “Yes, you’ll be receiving roughly one point two million dollars.”

I almost choked on my tongue. “Million?” I gasped.

I knew Ava and Steve were wealthy. Their house was beautiful, in an upscale area and they had an equally amazing condo in Malibu. Steve owned four boutique hotels all over and they all did extremely well. They did well because he worked hard, came from nothing and put his blood, sweat, and tears into them. So even though I knew they had money, it was never something I thought too hard about. They didn’t act like rich people, and I sure as hell did not take a dime from them, even in my hardest times when I struggled to find a dollar to give Lexie to buy a candy bar. I was proud. Didn’t want charity. I knew it hurt them, which was why we got

outrageous gifts every birthday and Christmas. I knew from the gifts, and from the fact that he ran all of those successful hotels they were comfortable, but a million dollars? Not counting everything else? Fuck.

“I, um...” I stuttered, unsure of what to say.

Heidi smiled at me. “I understand this is a shock. Nothing needs to happen straight away. We will need you to sign some things—transfer of ownership, things like that. Then we can organize the possible sale of the houses if you like. And you can also decide what you would like to do with the hotels. They’re running fine at the moment.” She glanced around. “As I’m sure you well know, Steve hires excellent managers. But you will need to give this some thought.”

She slid a piece of cardstock across the table to me. “My card,” she explained. “When you’re ready.”

And like that, it seemed Lexie and I had become millionaires. And I had become the owner of a small hotel empire. I contemplated it all while sitting on that step, my head in my hands. Ever since I escaped that day I worked hard. I wasn’t born into privilege; I was born into poverty. A lot of Lexie’s early life was spent near poverty, not that Steve and Ava would ever let it get that far, but I was stubborn. When I could afford to get a place for us both I did. I worked like a dog to make a home, however shabby it was. Studied hard while still working. And when I finally was qualified, it was still a struggle. Even prior to this day money issues were always at the back of my mind. Now, it was something I’d never have to worry about. Not about unexpected bills, mortgage payments, college for Lexie, nothing. And in an instant I’d give every cent of it back, welcome every one of those worries, if I could have Steve and Ava back.

But I couldn’t. Something clicked in me. Lucy was right. I could protect Lexie from every single thing I thought had the possibility of hurting her. I could do that out of love. But by doing that, I’d just hurt us both, taken away an entire family that Lexie already loved. Taken away a man that already was part of our family. That was my soul. My head snapped up. My heart dropped at the Harley in the driveway. I blinked. I wasn’t hallucinating. It was there. I didn’t think. I just ran. Ran over to the door and pounded on it hysterically.

Finally, the door opened and I lost my breath. He was there, beautiful as ever. I drank him in. His huge body taking up the entire doorframe. The splashes of color peeking out from the arms of his black Henley. The two-

day stubble shadowing his face. The hair that was growing, shiny and black and almost long enough to grab. His eyes. The dark eyes focused on me and they flared slightly before turning hard. His whole face was blank while he seemed to be running his eyes over every inch of me.

“So you’re back,” I commented needlessly.

His eyes didn’t move from mine, nor did he speak, most likely because I was stating the obvious.

There was a silence for a long while. I didn’t know what to say. For once I didn’t want to say anything, just drink in the fact he was here. In the flesh.

“I was wrong,” I blurted.

His body jerked and I continued.

“To push you away. Let you leave, I was wrong,” I whispered. “So fucking wrong,” I repeated, definitely needing the “fuck” in this moment.

Zane stayed silent.

“You’re everything to me, to Lexie. We need you,” I told him honestly.

I couldn’t hold it in any longer. Couldn’t speak. So instead I launched myself at him and hoped he’d catch me.

The moment my mouth touched his, his stiff demeanor changed. He lifted me, devouring my mouth. I wrapped my legs around him, melting into his touch. The kiss went furious and desperate in an instant. Months without him and I felt like I wanted to climb inside his skin. I couldn’t get close enough. He pushed me against the door and I vaguely noted we were inside. That wasn’t important at the current moment.

“Wait,” Zane clipped, pulling his head away from mine.

I jutted my lip out. He pressed his finger to my lips.

“Can’t do this shit, Mia.” His eyes were dark, and the veins in his neck pulsed.

I felt like something hit me in the stomach, and he slowly put me down, distancing himself from me. “What are you talking about?” I choked out.

He ran his hand through his hair then looked at me. His eyes were tortured. “You were right to break things off. Distance yourself. I’m not putting you in danger. I can’t.” He seemed to be dragging the words out.

I stepped forward, putting my hands on his chest. “I trust you. The club. I know you won’t let anything happen to us,” I told him firmly.

Zane looked at me before grabbing my wrists and taking them off his chest. “You’re wrong,” he informed me coldly. “I’ve done it once. Failed

someone. I won't do it to you and Lexie. I couldn't exist in a world where you didn't have sunshine," he declared fiercely.

I frowned at him. "What are you talking about, Zane?"

He sighed, giving me a long look before his body sagged. "Gotta tell you some shit," he declared. "When I tell you, you decide for yourself whether you want you and Lexie tainted with my darkness," he clipped, eyeing me.

I stroked his rough jaw. "Promise you, no matter what, it's not going to make me want to live without you. Make Lexie want to," I told him firmly.

He stared at me a moment. "We'll see," he muttered, looking to the floor. He took a breath then looked back up, his eyes full of a pain so deep it hurt to look at.

"Her name was Laurie." He spoke her name roughly, like he hadn't uttered out loud in years.

I knew this wasn't going anywhere good. In fact, I knew this was going somewhere downright horrific.

"Zane," I muttered softly.

His finger went lightly over my lip. "You need to hear this," he told me firmly. "Her name was Laurie and she was everything to me. I haven't had love in my life. Hadn't known it. Got shit parents—dad who liked to smack me around and a mom that didn't give a shit." His voice was detached and sounded strange. Maybe that was because I'd never heard him say so many words before. Words about himself. Who he was. Why he was the way he was. There were more. And they were soul destroying.

"So when I met her, discovered the type of love that existed, thought I was the luckiest motherfucker to walk the earth. She was the light of my fuckin' life. Parents didn't approve. They were good people. Saw the club for what it was. Back then it was nothing fuckin' good." He paused. "But 'cause they were good people, they wanted their daughter to be happy, so they accepted me." He shook his head slightly. "So I thought I had it fuckin' all. My girl. My club. My life was fuckin' sunshine," he declared.

I shivered because all I wanted for Zane was sunshine, but I knew this wasn't where it was headed.

"Then one day my sunshine turned to darkness. Single fuckin' day, that light was gone, my life over." He searched my face like he was remembering every single detail. "We were into deep shit back then, shit that leaked out and got Laurie killed. Raped. Tortured. Then killed."

I flinched, physically flinched, at the dead way his voice rolled over those words. Tears started streaming down my face unbidden. He wiped them away softly.

“Thought my life had ended that day, Mia. Was certain of it. Made my peace with the darkness, with a life void of anything. Made my peace ‘cause I didn’t plan on living in the darkness too long,” he said, no nonsense.

I placed my hand over my mouth. He actually meant....

“Was gonna check out. Eat my gun. The guilt, the fuckin’ poisonous shit swirling inside me was killing me slowly anyway. Would rather it have been my own hand that did it in the end.” He gently removed my hand from my mouth and kissed it gently.

“Then someone saw it. There’s a look you get when you’re halfway in the grave. Didn’t know it. Brothers didn’t know it. *She* did. They pulled me back babe—the club,” he clarified. “Was angry as fuck at first. I just wanted it over. I was tired. So fucking tired of the constant fight against the shit inside my head. The darkness. Fuck, *I* was the darkness, a fuckin’ monster. What I turned into, what I still am.” He traced my face lightly. “And at first I was angry at you. You came into my life, made me want something I knew I could never have. Not with the marks on my soul. Not when I’d already killed one person who didn’t do a thing but love the wrong man.” He gave me a hard look, trying to communicate that I was loving the wrong man. “I’ll be forever grateful, for them, the club. For saving me. So I could somehow find more sunshine,” he murmured, eyes locked on mine. “See, what I had before bathed my world in a warm glow. Was beautiful. But what I’ve got with you and Lexie almost fuckin’ blinds me, it’s so bright.” The soft look left his face quickly. “Which is exactly why you were right that day. I was blind. Couldn’t see what I was doing, repeating the fuckin’ past,” he growled as if he was angry with himself. No, furious.

I didn’t know what to say. What words did you choose when someone bares their soul to you? When someone rips it open bare, so you can see every broken piece, every heartbreaking shard and presents it to you?

“Zane,” I whispered.

He gripped the back of my neck tightly. “Way I feel about the two of you,” he interrupted me. “I’d be fuckin’ *gone* if anything happened to either of you. There would be nothing left. That’s why I can’t risk it. Can’t risk

you,” he finished. He looked at me with guarded eyes, like I was going to rear back in disgust after his heartbreaking story.

“You are the most beautiful man I’ve ever met,” I whispered through my tears. “The fact you went through *that*,” I flinched at the thought, “and can still fill my and Lexie’s life with so much happiness makes you the most amazing person on this planet,” I declared.

He opened his mouth to argue no doubt.

I put my finger to his lips. “No. Mia’s talking now,” I said firmly. “I’m sorry. From the depths of my soul I’m so sorry that happened to you. To Laurie. My heart breaks for you. For her.” I searched his eyes. “Cause she probably felt like the luckiest girl on earth every second she was with you. And I bet if she was here now she’d say she’d do nothing different if it meant she got that time with you. To be loved by you,” I whispered.

Zane’s face turned stormy. “You can’t say that shit, Mia,” he growled. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

I refused to back down. “I can,” I told him with conviction. “Because if that was me, I’d go through *anything*—” I barely got the *ing* out of *anything* before Zane’s lips fastened over mine, shutting me up and filling me at the same time.

He twisted us around so my back slammed into the wall, his entire body pressing on mine.

“Fuck, Mia,” he murmured against my mouth as his hand ran along my hips, stopping at my breasts. “This is us,” he murmured in between kisses that trailed down my chest. “Saying that shit—” He looked up, yanking my breast out of the cup of my bra. “Means I’m never letting you go again. Ever,” he promised before his mouth fastened on my nipple.

I ran my hands through his hair, crying out at the pleasure, the touch I had been denied for months. I moaned in protest as his mouth left my nipple and moved back to brush mine, his eyes flaming with desire.

“You gotta realize, Wildcat—you may be my sunshine, but I’m still darkness. I’ll always be what that day made me,” he growled.

“Beautiful,” I finished for him.

His face froze for a split second before his mouth claimed me once more, and he lifted me, striding us toward his bedroom. It was a wild sort of desperation between the both of us, to get each other’s clothes off, get skin touching skin. Once Zane had me naked, he didn’t push me down on the

bed like I expected. He stepped back. I made to reach down to his jeans and pull them off, but he stopped me with a brisk command.

“Stay there,” he ordered, his eyes on my naked body.

I did as I was told, feeling exposed but safe. The way Zane’s eyes roved over every inch of me made me feel powerful, beautiful.

“Two months,” he murmured, stepping forward. “Two months,” he repeated against my mouth. I lost my breath when he roughly pushed me on the bed. He spread my legs, staring right *there*. “Imagined every inch of your body, your beauty,” he told me. “Didn’t think I had it wrong. I did.” His eyes met mine. “More beautiful than I ever remembered. Pussy’s more beautiful than I pictured.” He yanked my body so my hips were at the end of the bed, kneeling in between my legs. “Let’s see if it tastes sweeter than I remember,” he growled.

He then licked, sucked, and bit at my clit in such a way I thought I’d be the first woman to die from an intense climax. When I came down, still breathing, I relaxed, only to have Zane flip me on my stomach, lifting me so I was on all fours. He leaned over me and kissed my neck. His hand moved from my sensitive clit backward. “Told you I was going to take every inch of you,” he said on a low growl, his finger probing my ass. “Gonna do that now, Wildcat,” he continued, while he pushed in.

I didn’t expect to love it, but I was with Zane so I don’t know why I didn’t expect anything less than a-fucking-mazing. He started slow at first, then when he registered my sounds of pleasure, me pushing back against him, he went fast. And hard. And it was magnificent.



Bull

Bull thought the past four years of his life had been hard. They had. They’d been fuckin’ agony. Living in that void, that void of nothingness, despair and self-hatred. That was a fate worse than death. Living those two months didn’t compare to that hell, because at least he could breathe knowing his

girls were still in the light, still bathing in sunshine. That's what got him through every day. That and the club. He'd gone nomad for two months, driving all over the fuckin' country, trying to find a way out. A way out of the darkness he found himself back in, facing a life without them. So he did shit. Shit that took him back to the depths. Shit that left the taste of ash in his mouth. But nothing could get him to forget her. Forget them. Not for a second. So he lost his control, found himself back in Amber. Told himself it was only to sell his house. Talk to Cade about leaving permanently.

Then he saw her. The light came gleaming back in as soon as he glimpsed her. Her struggled against it. Fucking battled, especially when he tasted her lips again. Took everything he had to pull himself off her. When he couldn't find it in himself to be cruel, to dismiss her, he tried to disgust her. By telling her about Laurie. He spoke the words that had never seen the light of day, expecting her to think of him as a monster, the way he thought of himself. Instead, his beautiful girl gave him more. Forgiveness. The look in her eyes, the acceptance, somehow led to him forgiving himself. Finally letting go of that shit that had been festering, poisoning his soul. Then he got her back. In every way. And fuck if he didn't feel like grinning, ear to ear.

"Zane?"

Bull jerked up, moved his eyes from his guitar. The one that Laurie had bought him. The one he played in bed to her, after she would beg him to play stupid girly songs. He would. Back then, he'd do anything to put a smile on her face. Didn't take much to put a smile on his either.

His eyes landed on Lexie. She had already thrown herself at him earlier that night when she first saw him. Beamed at him, gave him another shaft of light. She'd teared up a little, then commenced in an epic fuckin' chatter, filling him in on everything he had missed in the last two months. Her face wasn't light and easy like it had been then. It was tortured, full of anguish, something that didn't belong on such a face.

Mia had told her. He wasn't surprised. There were no secrets between those two.

He braced. He didn't know what to expect from Lexie.

"Yeah, Lex," he answered softly, carefully.

She walked up to him, moved to stand in front of him, and paused.

"Can I play you a song?" she asked finally, her voice quiet.

Bull gazed at her, then nodded.

She gave him a small, sad smile, then sat on the chair in front of him.

She started to play 'Unclouded Day,' by Audra Mae.

Bull had no fuckin' clue how she knew to play that song. How she knew her soft voice, playing those fuckin' soul wrenching words would fix him. Shake him to his core. Somehow bring him peace. Bring Laurie peace. He didn't know how she knew to play that song, but he loved her for doing it. Every part of him. That moment, as she trailed off, finished the song, he knew he'd never see a glimpse of darkness again.

Little did he know, shit would happen to prove him fucking wrong.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Mia

One Month Later

I was happy. It wasn't an excuse but it was one of the reasons. I was deliriously happy. Never in my wildest dreams would I have conjured up a man like Zane. Big. Tattooed. Scary. Silent. Silence was not something I knew well. Not something my daughter knew well. But it seemed to fit us. Seemed to counteract our constant chatter. Gave us balance. He didn't need words to communicate how he felt with us. But he was using them more often, speaking to us. I commented on it, one night in bed. I was curled up in his side. I didn't know what I had expected his answer to be, but I definitely didn't expect my heart to almost explode with love.

He pulled me to lie on top of him, like he did when he wanted to command my complete attention.

"I don't speak because up until recently, I haven't had anything to say," he began gruffly. "My attention, my life, was dedicated to the club and my thirst for revenge. That thirst coursed through my veins in a white hot intensity that dwarfed everything else." His eyes were far away; even though he had his arms around me, his mind was somewhere else. "When I got that revenge, thirst was gone. Fury was left. And the battle—" He paused for a moment, eyes moving back to focus on me as if he had to make conscious effort to drag himself out of his head. He stroked my cheek. "The battle that I fought every day against the demons that threatened to destroy me. To speak, to joke, is to do more than exist, and, baby, that

wasn't what I was doing. I was *surviving*. I was doing that in silence, or as close as I could get. My life was a dark, lonely place." He paused again, wiping a tear that had trickled down my face at his words. At the glimpse beneath the hard façade. He did his half smile thing before continuing.

"People came into my life, shed some light. It wasn't much, like the last glimpses of a sun before the night takes over, but it was something. It was a fraction more than existing, but nowhere near living. I was living life in fuckin' limbo." His face changed completely, tender replacing the hard, battle worn look he wore as he spoke. He looked at me. Not at me. But into me. "Then you," he half whispered. "Then you and Lexie let the light in and goddamn blinded me with it. That's why I was angry with you. Furious. My battle in the dark had been brought into the light. I didn't want to live in silence. You and Lexie, you don't fuckin' shut up. You don't stop talkin' 'cause you don't stop livin. You made me want to talk. Have something to say. You gave me life, baby," he said with passion.

I stared at him for a long moment, letting all of his beautiful words sink in, letting them warm my soul. "I love you," I blurted. "I'm usually the one who can't shut up, got words for everything," I told him in a slightly choked voice. "But I got none. Apart from those three."

Zane tightened his hand around the back of my neck and yanked me down so our mouths brushed. "Those are all the words I need, Wildcat."

Then there were none.



Besides being deliriously happy, I was also living with the shadow of guilt. Zane had bared it all to me, everything. His broken soul, his heartbreaking past, everything. I was the one still holding onto secrets, onto my own damaged past. It hurt me, keeping secrets from him, but I was doing it for him. Telling him, opening that can of worms, would do nothing but bring back that fury, that thirst for revenge he had only just sated. And because those three weeks of us, of Zane, Lexie and me was so full of happiness, I didn't want to pollute it with the poison of the past.

So that was the reason why. Why I slacked. Let down my guard. Failed to notice until it was too late. Lexie and I had just arrived home. Killian was due to pick her up any moment so she was anxious to get in the house, drop off her mountain of books and head off into the sunset yet again. She was chattering away and I felt a warm glow at her unbridled happiness, the fact she was healing so well after her loss. So I didn't notice the car parked slightly up from our house. Something that would have sent alarm bells normally. I was also anxious to get home, knowing Zane would be back in a matter of hours. I had house prep to do, lady maintenance to do. So I was distracted and didn't notice the door was unlocked. The door I always locked no matter how small, how friendly the town was.

"No Lexie, you cannot borrow that sweater," I said, walking through the door. "It's my favorite one and I don't want the risk of it disappearing into the depths of your closet, never to be seen again," I teased, dropping my handbag on the sofa.

"You are acting like I'd hold the sweater hostage," she replied with slight sarcasm.

I glanced over my shoulder at her. "It's happened before. Remember the time you wouldn't give me back my second favorite tee until I let you cook quinoa in the house?" I asked snidely.

She screwed up her nose. "One time," she argued.

"Remember--" I started but Lexie interrupted.

"Okay, so I have a small history with clothing kidnapping but I cross my heart it won't happen with this sweater." She gave me doe eyes.

I rolled my eyes. "Fine," I conceded.

She grinned and moved to her room. "If you could get it for me, that would be great," she called over her shoulder.

I shook my head, moving toward the stairs. "Child treats me like her slave," I muttered, "doesn't know it should be the other way around, considering I endured *labor* to bring her into this world."

I was too busy chattering to myself and thinking about Zane arriving later on that night from his run that I didn't notice the white rose petals scattered on the stairs. It was only when I entered my room and I smelled the perfume that turned my stomach did I realize. My blood turned to ice and I moved to sprint down the stairs.

"Lexie!" I screamed in terror as arms fastened around me.

“Long time no see, Button,” a sickening voice murmured in my ear. A voice that took me back in time and struck absolute terror through every inch of me.

I reacted on instinct. On pure, survival instinct. My heel went to his shin and I kicked hard. He wasn’t expecting me to fight back so his arms loosened and he cursed. It was enough for me to scramble out of his grip and sprint toward the stairs. Toward my baby. Her terrified face met me at the bottom of the stairs.

“Run!” I yelled at her, hearing his footsteps gaining on me.



Bull

He wanted to get home. He *needed* to get home. Not in the years since he had welcomed the darkness did he ever think he’d be anxious to get back. When he was on runs, doing what he did best, was when the demons were silenced. When he was beating the living fuck out of people who needed to be beaten. Extracting information out of those who knew too much. Killing sick fucks who wronged the club, wronged humankind in the worst way possible. Rapists were his favorite. He sought them out. Made them suffer. He couldn’t change the past. Couldn’t go back and save her. He could save others. Could make those men hurt in ways they never thought possible. What was another black mark on an already charred soul?

But now, he didn’t need to draw blood to get relief. Respite. He only needed to sink into Mia’s pussy. Taste her mouth. Smell her hair. Hear Lexie’s laugh. Play guitar with her. That was more effective than drawing blood. Taking lives. The light was coming back. Scratch that. It *was* back.

“You gonna make it official, brother?” Lucky asked him with a grin.

Bull glanced at him from the bar, downing the last of his whisky, savoring the burn. His silence spoke for him.

“If you like it then you should put a ring on it.” Lucky did some fuckin’ ridiculous gesture with his hands. “Give us another reason to celebrate,” he

clarified, lifting his own drink. “We just smoked the last mother fucker connected to the shooting—that’s cause for a drink.” He finished it as if to make a point. “But a wedding—” His brother gave him a look. “That’s a reason to fucking *par-tay*,” he drawled on a grin, “and a great way to get me laid.”

Brock, who was on his way out, punched him on the arm, not lightly. “As if you need a fuckin’ wedding to get yourself laid, you horny fuck,” he chuckled. “I doubt Bull’s going to put your cock into consideration when debating popping the question.”

Lucky shrugged his shoulders. “Well, my cock will be happy nonetheless,” he said.

Brock grinned at Bull and for once, Bull felt like grinning back. He wouldn’t, but at least he felt included in the easy banter he had been distant from for so long.

“Your cock gets happy on anything to do with Mia, I’ll chop the fucker off,” Bull declared, only half joking.

At this, half the clubhouse roared with laughter at Lucky’s panicked expression and instinctual cupping of his crown jewels. Bull didn’t make jokes, only promises, hence Lucky’s terror for his boys.

Cade appeared from church and slapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t think any fucker would be stupid enough to even look at your woman the wrong way,” he declared lightly. “Applaud Kill for having the balls to even go near Lexie, with you breathing down his neck.”

Bull bristled at the mention of the little fuck. He was not showing any signs of getting sick of Lexie. He was besotted with her. It worried him. Lexie was destined for greatness; she was a superstar in the making. Killian was a Son. Wasn’t patched in yet, but as soon as the kid turned eighteen he knew he was going for the patch. His life was the club. They’d half brought him up after his father died and his mom checked out. He was a good kid, his interest in Lexie notwithstanding. But he wasn’t going places. Not like Lexie. That meant trouble. She was about as obsessed with him as he was with her. And not in a temporary, fleeting, teenage kind of way. In the lasting, once in a lifetime, type of way. He knew it because she looked at Killian the way her mother looked at him.

Bull shook the thoughts out of his head and stood. “Yeah well, that’s why I’m not sitting here with you ugly fuckers a moment longer,” he declared in a tone so light he was surprised it came out of him. “I’m going

home to my family.” A warmth settled in him at that statement. That’s what they were. His.

“Zane!” a voice screamed.

And that voice, the warmth that had taken up residence in his belly turned to ice. His body froze as Lexie ran in. Lexie covered in blood, her tearstained face locked on his.

He didn’t think. He covered the distance between them in seconds, ignoring everything else around him. His hands went to her shoulders, eyes searching her for wounds, his heart beating a thousand miles a minute. Her whole body trembled under his grip.

“Where are you hurt, baby?” he asked urgently, able to keep the tremor out of his voice. He struggled to keep the tremor out of his hands. His girl was covered in fuckin’ blood and he couldn’t lay eyes on his woman.

She didn’t answer and he moved his gaze from her body, unable to find the source of the blood. His hand moved to grasp her chin in his fingertips. “Lex, you need to tell me where you’re hurt,” he repeated, trying to sound calm. Problem was he wasn’t calm. His girl was covered in fucking blood. Her expression was etched in horror and her body was shaking in terror.

“It-it’s not mine,” she stuttered. “It’s Killian’s,” she half sobbed.

The kid limped through the doorway, holding his shoulder and shrugging off Steg, “Lexie,” he grunted.

Bull registered the obvious gunshot wound in his shoulder. “What the fuck happened?” he clipped.

Lexie’s gaze darted between Killian and Bull. “They shot Killian, then they took Mom,” she uttered, a tear rolling down her cheek.



“Pulled up to Lexie’s, something felt wrong. Couldn’t put my finger on it, but it was off,” Killian explained.

His face was pale but determined. He had barely let the doc stitch and bandage him up. The only reason he’d stayed still for so long was because Steg had declared that he couldn’t fill them in on what was going on if he died of blood loss. Even that hadn’t swayed him. He finally relented, only

with Lexie by his side. She had clung to Bull's hand as she watched Killian get stitched. Without anesthetic. Kid was tough. Bull didn't give a fuck. Personally, he would have been happy to get the story as soon as fuckin' possible, whether or not the kid was bleeding or not.

His fists clenched on the table as they sat in church listening to what had happened.

Gwen had turned up minutes ago and was cleaning Lexie up. She had not wanted to leave Bull. Bull wasn't too hot on having her far from his side but he needed to find Mia. Had to. There was no alternative.

"That's when I heard Mia scream," Killian continued.

Bull stiffened and Cade's gaze flickered to him in worry.

"Didn't think, knew Lexie was in there, knew you were on a run." He glanced at Bull. "Got inside, some guy had a gun to Lexie's head." Killian's face turned stormy at the memory. "Didn't think about that either, charged the fucker. We struggled, gun went off." He frowned slightly. "Must have got me then, didn't feel it though. Managed to knock him out, grab Lexie. Some other guy had Mia, top of the stairs. Had a gun too." A grim, guilt-filled expression cloaked the kid's face and he met Bull's eyes. "Mia was yelling at me to take Lexie and run. Fucker was shooting at me, I had to get Lexie outta there," he explained.

Bull stared at him for a long moment, thoughts churning in his head. He wanted to be angry with the kid. Be furious for leaving Mia. But he couldn't. He was a fuckin' kid. A kid who not only took a bullet for his girl, but more than likely saved her life. For the second time Bull stood, making his way over to Killian. The entire table tensed; all his brothers were expecting him to lose it. Instead he clapped Killian on his good shoulder. To his credit, the kid didn't even flinch as he approached, but his eyes flickered in surprise at the gesture.

"Saved my girl," Bull muttered quietly. "Took a bullet for her," he continued. He searched his eyes. "Owe you," he told him.

Killian met his eyes. "Give my life for her," he said. "Didn't do it for you. She's mine," he declared.

Bull didn't have time to worry about that statement.

"We need to get my fuckin' woman back," he addressed the table calmly. He didn't think they expected him to be like this. To be locked down. He didn't have a choice. The monster inside him was pounding at the walls, roaring to get out. Bull knew he couldn't unleash the fury that simmered

barely below the surface. That wouldn't help Mia. Wouldn't help Lexie. Boys would have to lock him down like before. He wouldn't be able to save his woman like that. And he had to save his woman.

Cade recovered first. "What do we know? Who the fuck has a beef big enough with the Sons to go after an Old Lady?" he asked calmly. "Who's fucking crazy enough?" he added. His face was blank but he knew his brother was feeling this.

"Devils?" Lucky suggested, referring to a club who had caused a bit of trouble recently.

Brock shook his head. "Don't have the numbers. Shit we got on them, they don't take a piss without our approval unless they want the mob knowing that they're ripping them off," he clipped.

"Russians?" Ranger suggested, his face grim.

Steg shook his head. "Got no beef with us." His face was hard. "Plus, it's not their style. Don't kidnap women and children, they murder them," he said.

Bull tensed at the thought.

Wire burst into the room, his eyes darting everywhere. Kid was a new patch. Skinny, with a mop of dark hair and a pale as shit face, he wasn't someone who screamed biker. He was however, a fuckin' amazing hacker. Spent half his days inside the dark room where the club housed all their camera feeds and computers. Was a wizard with anything to do with IT. Bull wasn't sure he even slept, with the amount of caffeinated drinks he sucked down.

"What we got?" he barked at him.

"We got a problem," Wire replied, glancing at Killian.

Though he was a new patch, he knew the rules. Kid soaked up information like a sponge; club rules weren't any different. Don't talk club business with anyone who don't wear a patch.

"He's good," Cade finally said.

"Mia and Lexie Spencer don't exist," he told the table.

"What the fuck?" Bull half yelled.

Killian tensed beside him.

Wire's eyes settled on him. "Prior to sixteen years ago, when Mia Spencer began her employment with Steve and Ava Thorndon, there is no record of her anywhere," he explained, placing some papers on the table. "Like she and Lexie popped out of thin air, didn't exist before that."

Bull clenched his fists.

“What does that mean?” Cade asked tightly.

Wire looked at him. “Means Lexie and Mia were running from someone.” He paused. “And whoever it is, they found them.”



CHAPTER NINETEEN

 Mia

I was in a trunk. Well, I was reasonably sure it was a trunk. It was dark and cramped and I was aware of the fact we were moving, considering the painful jabs I got when my body was thrown from side to side. I was unable to catch myself, as my arms were tied behind my back, which meant my face slammed into hard edges when the car turned. The warm trickle that followed the sharp pain on the latest turn had me sure I had ripped open the skin on my head. My thoughts were groggy. Sid had hit me with the butt of his gun moments after Killian had disappeared with my daughter. I had woken up in the trunk. I felt nauseous and my head throbbed. My arms screamed in protest at the angle they were bound and were raw from me struggling to free myself. None of this mattered. My mind was desperately clinging to the vain hope that Killian had gotten away with Lexie. I remember the gunshot. The sound that chilled my veins. The blood blossoming on Killian's shoulder. The blood he didn't seem to notice as he dragged Lexie out of the house. To safety. I prayed to safety. But he had a gunshot wound. I was sure Sid would have other men stationed around. I didn't see how they could have made it. But I prayed they did. I didn't care what Sid did to me if Lexie was safe. If Killian got her to Zane, then I'd die happy. Zane would protect her. From this monster. From her father.

The car stopped suddenly and my face went flying into the back of the trunk once more, pain exploding in my nose. I knew I was bleeding this time. I also knew if Sid was driving, he did this on purpose. He liked to

inflict pain. He got off on it. I managed to scoot myself over and tried to press my nose against my shoulder to staunch the bleeding. Light glared into the darkness as the trunk opened.

“Button, what did you do to yourself?” a concerned voice asked. I blanched at the hands that circled around me, lifting me out of the trunk.

My eyes squinted at the light and I failed to hide my flinch at the familiar face that was gazing down at me with false concern. He looked to his side.

“Jones, don’t just stand there you, stupid fuck. My wife is bleeding—get her something,” he ordered in a cold tone.

He started walking. “Put me down,” I half croaked, needing to get his disgusting hands off me.

Sid ignored me.

“Put me down now,” I repeated, knowing how stupid it was to order him around, but I was afraid I would vomit if I stayed in his arms much longer.

Sid’s face flickered in annoyance, but he quickly masked it. “Don’t be silly, Button. You can’t walk, not after your *accident*. We need to get you to bed,” he told me insanely, as if I had tripped over a shoelace, not been kidnapped and pistol-whipped by him.

I moved my gaze from his handsome and evil face to inspect where I was. We had moved from a garage into a home. We were walking down a hallway; the artwork on the walls, coupled with the rest of the ostentatious decorating hinted money. No, actually it screamed money. I wouldn’t inspect anything less from Sid. Subtlety and taste were never his strong points.

“Seems you’ve moved up in the world, Sid. Looks like ruining lives is profitable,” I sneered at him.

He didn’t look down at me, although his jaw hardened and his grip on me tightened to the point of pain. I didn’t make a sound, and struggled to keep my expression blank. I knew pain and suffering got him off.

He opened the door to an opulent bedroom, four poster bed and all.

“This is your room,” he explained, setting me down on the bed. I flinched when his hand came up to brush the hair out of my face. “At least until you recover from your fright today and we get our daughter back. Then you’ll come to my room, of course,” he promised with a flare in his empty eyes that made me want to retch.

“You’ll never touch her,” I hissed. “I’ll die before it comes to that.”

Sid's face was blank. "Don't be so dramatic, Abby," he said in a bored tone. The door opened and one of his henchmen came in with a small towel. He handed it to Sid, who held it out to me. I thrust my chin up in defiance.

"Just take the fucking towel, Abby," he exploded, his calm demeanor cracking to reveal the monster underneath.

With a shaking hand I clutched the towel, then pressed it to my nose. It had stopped bleeding, but I did my best to clean myself up.

Sid straightened. "Now, that wasn't so hard, was it?" He buttoned his suit jacket. "You'll do well to remember it's best to listen to me, Abby. I know it was a long time ago, but I'm sure you remember what happens if you don't." He gave me a pointed look. "We'll be talking about the past, more specifically, my daughter, when you've had your rest," he promised, giving me another meaningful look before turning and walking out the door. I heard the click of a lock, sealing me inside my nightmare.

I immediately jumped up, searching the room for something, anything that would get me out of here. Back to Lexie. Back to Zane. Back to my family. My search was in vain, finding only a walk-in closet and a fancy bathroom. Neither with weapons or exits. But what they did have disturbed me. Clothes. Racks of them, all designer, all beautiful. All in my size. Same with the shoes. The bathroom held all of the toiletries I used, down to the right foundation shade. I shivered. He had been planning this. Not only that, he had been in my house. The only thing that kept me from crawling into a panic ball in the corner of the room was that he didn't have Lexie. I hoped she had gone to Zane by now, that he would protect her. I knew he would try and find me, that the club would try. But I also knew Sid. He was dangerous before, but now with the money obviously had come more power. I was back in the hell I had escaped from sixteen years ago.



Sixteen Years Ago

"You were staring at him," Sid shot at me with venom in his tone. Venom I didn't recognize or understand.

I looked at him from the stove in confusion. “Who?” I asked, keeping an eye on the dinner I was cooking.

“You know who, don’t play fucking dumb,” Sid answered quietly, glaring at me.

I swallowed at his tone, at the look on his face. I hadn’t seen it before. He’d always been loving, doting. Since he found out about the baby he had been more so. The way he looked at me on our wedding day had me thinking I was the luckiest girl in the world. It wasn’t like it was much, just a ceremony at town hall with his parents in attendance, but it was all we needed. It had been a month of happiness, of something I thought I’d never get. But things were slowly changing. The more my belly grew the more over the top Sid got. I thought he was just being protective, with him starting a new business, helping his family, trying to be a good husband. But it was more than that. He wouldn’t let me go anywhere unless he approved it. The few friends I had hadn’t heard from me in weeks. The only people I saw were people *he* deemed it okay to see. Business associates. His family. He told me my place was with them. I didn’t know how a real family worked, so I had guessed this was how all husbands were when their wives were pregnant. He was still young, only eighteen, and he had a lot on his mind. So I didn’t say anything, didn’t argue. I instead treasured the time I had with his mother, who treated me like a daughter. I got ready for our baby’s arrival, painting and decorating the nursery, reading baby books. I was excited for our checkup the next day, where they could tell the sex. Sid wanted a boy, but I secretly wanted a little girl.

So this anger, this venom, it caught me off guard. “No, honey I don’t,” I told him honestly. I stirred the food, anxious not to burn it. I was a decent cook, but I wasn’t used to having an entire pantry full of food to cook with. It was exciting, but Sid was getting more and more picky about what I cooked. He was particular, wanted me to be the best wife. I didn’t mind. But it just meant I didn’t want to burn this dinner, especially when he was already like this.

Suddenly, Sid was right in front of me, grabbing my wrist roughly. I dropped the spoon in surprise and cried out from the pain.

“You know exactly who I’m talking about, you little bitch,” he spat, his eyes turning blank, like there was nothing behind them.

I struggled not to cry, the pressure on my wrist coupled with the look in his eyes terrifying me. “I promise I don’t,” I cried. “You’re hurting me.”

Sid yanked me to his chest. “Johnny,” he hissed. “Don’t think I didn’t see you following him with your eyes the whole fuckin’ afternoon.”

My eyes bulged. “But Johnny’s your brother, I was never even...” my protests were cut short with a backhand to the face. The impact, plus the pain caused me to fall to the floor. I cradled my belly with one hand while pressing my palm against my stinging cheek with the other. I stared at him in horror. I had never known violence before. My parents might have been pieces of shit, but they never hurt me. Not with their fists anyway. Now the boy I loved, thought loved me, was responsible for not only the stinging pain in my cheek, but the small crack in my heart.

Sid’s face suddenly changed. He gazed down at me in horror, looking at his hand like it didn’t belong to him. He knelt beside me and I flinched. “Button, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to. Jesus,” he muttered in despair. “Is the baby okay?” he asked urgently, gently pulling me to my feet, pressing lightly on my belly with both hands.

And that’s what it was like; he would turn, without warning. Over silly things, sometimes things he imagined, like me laughing at one of his friend’s jokes too hard. Or putting capers in a meal when he hated them. Using the wrong fabric softener. It could be anything. Sometimes it was only words. Yelling, screaming, horrible, vile insults. Other times it was his fists. He was careful to only hit my face, and when he marked it he wouldn’t let me leave the house until the evidence was gone. Slowly, with poisonous words and physical abuse, he battered me into a shell. I had been a vulnerable teenager, desperate for a family, for love. He capitalized on that and turned me into a shell of whatever I had been before. I have no idea how I didn’t lose Lexie; he seemed to avoid hitting my torso, even in his rage. That gave me stupid teenage hope, hope that he still loved me. Might stop hurting me. Or that he’d never hurt our daughter. That was the only thought I clung to. Leaving was not an option for me. I had nothing. No one. No family, no money and no friends thanks to Sid. So I just had to pray that it was temporary. Had to send all my love to the only thing that got me through that horrible time, the little girl in my belly.

Then one night, his rage went beyond anything I had ever seen. I can’t even remember what set him off, but his eyes turned black and he came at me. He didn’t stop after one punch, one slap, like normal. There was no desperate pleas for forgiveness or promises. Only more violence. Only more pain. I was terrified not for my life, but for my baby’s. I loved her with all

of my heart, all of my soul. She was all I had and I couldn't lose her. That's where my desperate thoughts were on, not the pain, then terror that coursed through me as darkness claimed me.



“Said she fell down the stairs.” A voice penetrated my foggy mind. “She’s almost nine months,” the voice continued in disgust. “How someone could do that to a kid, a pregnant kid no less—” It petered off.

I quickly opened my eyes. Two people were standing by my bed, glancing at a chart and peering down at me. Everything hurt. I felt like I had been hit by a truck. I struggled to remember what got me here, where I was. My thoughts moved to my belly and fear replaced everything. My belly, the thing that had kept me going for the last four months, the thing I loved more than anything was gone. I was empty. I knew it. Hatred, hotter than I’d ever felt, burned through my veins...hatred for Sid. My eyes opened properly this time and I clutched the hand of a surprised doctor.

“My baby,” I croaked in despair. “Where is she?”

The woman’s hand covered mine, her face soft. “Your baby is in the NICU. She needs some special attention, but she’s going to be fine.” She paused. “You just focus on getting yourself better.” Her voice sounded like a dismissal but I wouldn’t let go.

“My husband?” I continued, hating the fact I was tied to him through marriage. “Does he know? Does he know she’s okay?” I asked with desperation.

The doctor jolted slightly and gave me a searching look. “No, we were on our way to inform him of you and your daughter’s condition now.” Her voice had turned hard, and I knew she knew he did this.

“Don’t,” I pleaded. “Don’t tell him she’s alive.”

Her face turned carefully blank and she moved closer to me. “Miss Gregory, I’m obligated by law to let your husband know of his child’s condition.”

I battled to keep my eyes clear, steady. “That is *not* his child,” I declared passionately. “She isn’t his. No father would beat the mother of his child for

months while a helpless baby tried to grow. No *human being* would do that. Only a monster,” I spoke quickly, quietly. “Please, you have to help me,” I wasn’t above begging. Not for my daughter’s life. I knew we couldn’t go back to Sid. He’d kill us. Kill me. I would not bring a defenseless child into that Hell. My child. He thought I didn’t know what he was. What he did. I knew. He underestimated me because he thought he’d broken me completely. But a part of me was still whole, for our daughter. So I knew that he hurt people, killed people. That he was part of something to do with drugs. I had to get out. If he knew she was alive, he’d never stop hunting us. This was my only chance.

The woman seemed to be battling with something while she looked at me. I knew I must have looked bad. I felt it.

“Okay,” she whispered quietly.

I sagged in relief, even though the battle was far from won. “Thank you,” I breathed, looking down at her nametag. “Alexis.”

So somehow she had made Sid think that the baby he had named Hillary was dead. He’d come into my room, sat at my bedside sobbing, begging for my forgiveness. I had sat stoically, doing my best to ignore him, to breathe through the way his hand clutched mine. I somehow made it. Made it through the stifling poison of his presence before he disappeared, promising to come back as soon as he could. Someone was looking out for me, because I caught a break. He didn’t come back, not for three days. Long enough for me to recover just enough to walk. To get out. Alexis, the doctor who saved our lives, organized for us to stay at a sort of rehab facility owned by a friend, just until I was well enough to travel. I hadn’t wanted to stick around, I had wanted to get as far away as quickly as possible, but Alexis convinced me to stay, to get stronger.

So I did, the whole time expecting Sid to burst in the doors and find me. Find us. He never did. Alexis gave me enough money and baby stuff for me to get far away. She also got both of us new identities. She had connections, experience dealing with women on the run, so she knew how to make us disappear. The odds were against us. A scared teenage mom and a newborn baby on the run. I had sixteen years of never catching a break, living life with no one looking out for me, but in the first weeks of Lexie’s life I was sure I had a guardian angel looking out for me. One that sent me Alexis. One that led me to a small hotel, and two wonderful people grieving the loss of their daughter.



I awoke with a jolt. The memories had come rushing back with the appearance of Sid's face, his sickening presence. My eyes searched the room and I sat up, scuttling to the other edge of the bed when I saw Sid sitting on an armchair across the room, his leg crossed over his thigh, watching me.

"You were a pretty teenager, Button," he said musingly. "But you've grown into a beautiful woman." His eyes flitted over my face. "Even with the temporary imperfections," he delicately described my injuries.

I managed to push myself off the bed, standing as far away as humanly possible. Sid pretended not to notice this. "I'll admit," he continued. "That I was," he seemed to search for a word, "displeased when you ran from me. Even more so when you eluded me for sixteen years," he said tightly, getting up, buttoning his jacket. "Then—" He stalked toward me and I pressed myself against a wall, nowhere else to go. "I finally caught a break. See, I've never stopped searching." He paused. "My break was when I learned our daughter didn't die that day," he spoke softly as he approached me. "I learn that my little Button only let me *think* my child was dead." His soft tone turned hard now, and his hand circled my neck. It was the same way Zane had so many times. But there wasn't passion, tenderness, love beneath this touch. Only brutality. His hand tightened to pain and I gripped it, struggling to breathe.

"So, of course I doubled my efforts to get my family back together," he told me as if he wasn't strangling the life from me. "I caught another break. Found the people who took you in. Hid you from me." He tilted his head, regarding me. "They didn't sell you out, no matter how much pain I put them through. In the end, I had to dispose of them. Thankfully, I managed to get enough information from them once they were gone," he said blandly, as if he wasn't talking about murdering the only people who had given me love.

He seemed to realize that he was choking the life out of me and let go of my neck. I struggled to stay on my feet and doubled over, coughing,

spluttering for air.

“You bastard,” I croaked when I was able to get enough air in my lungs. I straightened. “You bastard!” I repeated, louder this time and charged at him, lashing out with my nails, my fists, anything to cause him pain. My attack was laughable and he subdued me in a manner of seconds, his hands securing mine.

“They wouldn’t have had to die if you hadn’t forced my hand,” he informed me calmly as I struggled in his grip.

“You’re a monster,” I spat at him.

He shook his head. “Seems you’ve forgotten yourself after all these years, Abigail,” he said releasing my hands.

I didn’t try and fight this time, knowing there was no use. “I grew a spine,” I hissed at him. “I grew up. I realized you’re nothing but a sick coward who gets off on hurting those weaker than him.”

Sid’s face turned stormy. I held my head up high, willing myself not to give in to the fear coursing through my veins. “I don’t want to hurt you, Button,” he said, his emotional state as volatile as an active volcano. “You force me. You know that. All I want is my family back together.”

“We are not your family,” I answered with venom.

Sid smiled. “That’s where you’re wrong, Abby. You’re my wife. Hillary is my daughter. You’re mine.” His words held such a promise I had to remind myself he didn’t have her. She was safe.

“Her name is Lexie,” I corrected him, hating the name he had chosen days before he nearly killed her in my belly. “And she will never lay her eyes on the slime that sired her,” I promised him.

Sid stepped forward. “You might become more obedient once our daughter is under this roof,” he murmured. “Or she might find herself without a mother altogether,” he threatened softly, squeezing my chin between his thumb and forefinger. He looked at me a second longer, doing a quick sweep of my body. I flinched at the hunger that lay beneath his eyes.

“Get yourself cleaned up,” he ordered, stepping back. “I expect you ready in half an hour. Someone will be up to fetch you.” He spun on his heel and made for the door. He stopped with his hand on the knob. “It’s good to have you home, Abby,” he said over his shoulder. “I’ll make sure this time you don’t ever leave me again.”

With that firm promise he was gone.



“What’ve we got?” Bull barked at Wire, whose eyes were glued to multiple computer screens.

Bull didn’t know what half the shit on them even said, but he knew he was searching for evidence on Mia and Lexie. On who they really were.

Wire didn’t move his eyes from the screen. “Would have a hell of a lot more if I didn’t have the Incredible Hulk threatening to green up and wreck all my shit every five seconds,” he replied blandly.

Bull clenched his fists, restraining the urge to thump the wiry little fucker.

He felt someone clap him on the shoulder.

“Come on, brother, let him work,” Cade muttered firmly.

Bull gave the screens one more look before turning to leave the room.

“We know anything more?” he grunted at his friend after they left the dark room, emerging in the hallway that led off to the rooms and the living area.

Cade shook his head. “Went over to Mia’s—place is trashed.” He gave Bull an uneasy look before continuing. “Signs of a struggle, ‘specially in her bedroom,” he went on carefully.

Bull couldn’t do it. Couldn’t restrain his monster anymore, so he turned and plowed his fist through the wall. When he had calmed slightly, he turned back to Cade.

“We got the pigs in on this?” he asked as if he hadn’t just decorated the clubhouse’s walls with the blood from knuckles.

They walked toward the bar, moving into Church. “Yep, Bill and his deputies are over there now,” he answered, moving to a bottle of whisky and two glasses.

“They know it all?” Bull asked, pacing the room.

“As much as we do, which is fuck all,” Cade handed him the glass.

Bull took it. He had no other choice. He needed something to stop him from crawling out of his own skin.

“Know armed guys broke into Mia’s, shot Kill, tried to take Lexie. Got Mia,” Cade sat at the head of the table. Bull remained standing as he continued.

“They’re working through their databases, trying to find out who they really are, but Wire’s got more of a chance of getting there first. Got her pic up on missing persons, all that shit.” Cade paused. “You sure you want them in on this, brother?”

“Fuckin’ sure,” Bull clipped.

“But...”

Bull narrowed his eyes at his friend. “When Gwen was taken, did you not want as many fuckin’ eyes as possible looking for her?” He didn’t wait for a response. “Went down the road of shutting out the law—you know how that went down, brother,” he finished, trying his best not to let his demons in, but it was no use. They were there. Taunting him, presenting him with images of a broken lifeless body. The same one he saw in his dreams. But this time the face changed. It was Mia’s beautiful face that was lifeless and battered. A soft knock at the door barely penetrated the cloud of rage threatening to overwhelm him.

“Baby, not now,” Cade called softly.

Bull directed his gaze to Gwen, who was standing in the doorway, a grim look on her face.

“I’ve got something that might help.” Her eyes were on Bull.

Bull stepped forward, and before he even knew it he was clutching Gwen’s shoulders.

She looked up at him softly. “We’ll get her back,” she promised, sensing his desperation.

He felt Cade’s heat at his back. “Know your hurting, brother—know exactly how you feel. But gonna have to ask you to get your hands off my wife,” he requested in a hard tone.

Bull looked down at his hands, which he was sure were biting into Gwen’s shoulders. He quickly let go, stepping aside so Cade could pull her into his side, his hand resting on the swell of her bump.

“What you got, baby?” he asked quietly.

She looked to Cade a moment, then focused on Bull. “It isn’t much. Hardly anything, actually. More of an inkling,” she explained. “I don’t think

the club has anything to do with Mia being taken,” she began, telling them something they already knew. Bull stiffened anyway, knowing Cade wouldn’t have told her this, which meant she knew something.

“Babe?” Cade questioned urgently.

“It was more something Mia said in passing, something I knew we couldn’t probe her too hard about. About Lexie’s dad,” she explained softly.

Bull’s fists clenched. He fuckin’ *knew* there was more to the story than Mia was letting on. He had meant to get down to the details later, when her grief wasn’t so fresh, when they had time. When he had time to hunt down the motherfucker. Now his time had run out.

“What about him?” Bull clipped. His tone was vicious, laced with fury. He knew he should have locked it down, ‘specially with Gwen. But he couldn’t. She knew him, knew he didn’t rein it in.

“Not much—she just alluded to the fact she had to get away from him. And the way she had to do it. By running,” she said quietly.

There was silence as Bull chewed on what this meant. Chewed on the fact she hadn’t told him this shit.

“Maybe you should talk to Lexie, see what she knows,” Gwen suggested. “She’s pretty shaken up and will only really talk to Killian and you.” She looked at Bull.

Bull didn’t say anything; shit was swirling in his head at an alarming rate. Cade turned Gwen in his arms. “Thanks, baby. Go get Lexie,” he ordered, kissing her lightly.

Gwen reached out and squeezed Bull’s hand after her husband released her. “We’ll find her,” she promised again, before leaving the room.

Cade turned to him. “Gotta rein it in around Lexie, brother. She can’t see you like this,” he told him.

Bull glared at him. “Fuckin’ know that,” he clipped.

Cade didn’t say anything, just nodded. The room was silent until Lexie came bursting through the door. The moment her eyes landed on Bull she ran over to him, colliding with his body and throwing her arms around him.

“Zane!” she cried.

He kissed her head, reveling in the peace that came with her presence. He put his arms around her.

She pulled back, leaving her arms around his waist. “You found Mom yet?” she asked hopefully.

Bull clasped her neck. “Not yet, darlin,’ but we’ll get her home soon,” he promised.

Her face fell but she nodded. “I know you will.” The utter faith in her tone socked him in the gut.

“Gotta ask you a coupla questions Lex,” he said softly, directing her to sit.

She reluctantly let him go to sit beside him at the table. Her gaze darted to Cade who gave her a small grin. She grinned shyly back.

“You holding up okay?” Bull asked for a start, his desperation for information taking a temporary back seat.

She nodded slowly. “Gwen’s got me sorted. And Kill’s going to be okay,” she said by answer.

The strength in her tone gave Bull pause. “You’re as strong as your mom is,” he observed with pride. “Need to ask you about your dad,” he continued.

Lexie’s face paled slightly. “My dad? What does he have to do with this?” she asked.

Bull had to tread carefully. “Not sure yet, maybe nothing. Just need to get hold of him in case he knows something that will help,” he explained.

Lexie chewed her lip. The gesture pierced through Bull, it was so much like her mother. He prayed to fuckin’ God he would see Mia chewing her lip like that again soon. Yes, to *God*. He wasn’t above getting on his knees and worshipping any fuckin’ deity that would get Mia back where she belonged. With him. With Lexie.

“I don’t know my dad,” she said quietly. “Mom never told me much about him, apart from he wasn’t someone we needed in our lives,” she told him, eyes glistening. “We had a fight not that long ago. About him. I wanted to know more, to know why he didn’t want to know me.” Her voice was low and full of vulnerability. Bull reached out and squeezed her hand, not letting go.

“We never fight, Zane, but we fought about him.” She paused, her eyes watering slightly. Bull put pressure on her hand. She took a deep breath, “She finally told me that we left for our own safety. That he isn’t a good guy. That’s all she said.” Her eyes sparkled with despair and fuck if it pierced through Bull’s heart. “Do you think it was him?” she whispered, barely audible. “Do you think my father would actually do something like this, shoot Killian, try and kidnap me?”

Bull cupped her face, unable to see his girl in so much pain. She'd lost her mother, possibly at the hands of her father whom she had never met. It was enough to fuck up anyone. "Don't know, doll," he told her honestly. "But we'll find your mom. I'll find her, I promise."

Lexie's eyes hardened slightly. Blinking away the tears, she regarded him with a maturity beyond her years. She nodded. Her faith, her utter trust in him, went to the depths of him.

Bull kissed her head. "How' bout you go and check on Kill," he suggested when he saw Wire in the doorway, looking antsy. His brothers had filtered in without him even noticing.

She nodded, standing. She turned to leave and he couldn't help it.

"Lex," he called softly. She turned.

"Love you," he murmured, not giving a fuck that his brothers were there, that Cade jolted slightly. He just needed this kid to know she wasn't alone, that he was there. He'd always be there.

She smiled a sad smile. "Love you to the moon," she said quietly, like he heard her say to her mom.

When she was gone Wire anxiously approached the table, an iPad in his hands. They found something. Finally.

"Speak," Bull barked at the apprehensive expression on the fucker's face. All gentleness was gone. That was for Lex, for Mia. Only them.

"Well, digging into the people in Mia's life had me looking at the Thorndons. Hacked into DCPD, got the coroner's report," he started, eyes on the device.

Bull gritted his teeth. Ava and Steve. This didn't seem like it was going any place good. He had tried to speak with the cops after they interviewed Mia, but the fuckers weren't exactly hot on providing someone like him with info. Merely said it was a robbery gone wrong.

"They were tortured," Wire stated blankly. "In a way that someone was trying to get information out of them. It wasn't pretty, man," he addressed Bull.

The rage that filtered through him at that moment caused him to still. He didn't know these people, but they were Mia and Lexie's family.

Wire took his silence as a cue to go on. "Their place was also ransacked. Someone was looking for something." He was scrolling through shit on the screen.

Cade sat at the head of the table, face grim. Bull knew he was feeling fury at an old couple getting tortured and murdered. Not only that, they were connected to the club, however loosely. “They find it?” his prez bit out.

“Don’t know,” Wire looked up. “But hacking into their shit got me what I was looking for. Connection to Mia’s old life.” He grinned slightly, then when he met Bull’s eyes the grin left his face left quickly. “This is heavy shit, brother,” he warned.

Bull felt the room tense. “Spit it the fuck out,” he growled.

“Mia Spencer is actually Abigail Locke,” he started. “From Atlanta, Georgia. Born to two worthless, alcoholic, drug addicts. Lived in a trailer park until the age of fifteen, till she met Sid Gregory.” He spoke carefully.

Bull didn’t recognize the name but he didn’t miss how Steg’s mouth turned tight and his eyes narrowed.

“Got pregnant, married him soon after,” Wire went on quickly. “Moved into the family home. Fucker was only eighteen—somehow moved quickly up the ranks in a lucrative drug dealing syndicate.” There were curses around the table at this little gem. “Family ties, you see,” Wire added.

Bull clenched his fists but otherwise stayed silent.

“Got a reputation quickly. Had certain *talents*,” Wire spat the word. “Specially good at extracting money out of people that owed his bosses. Can’t say how much Mia—or Abigail—knew. No fuckin’ intel on her for that period of time.” He paused. “Until the hospital record. She was admitted, nine months pregnant, beaten within an inch of her life.” He glanced at Bull again, his usually unflappable demeanor visibly shaken. “Not going to repeat the laundry list of injuries, bro. Found evidence of older shit too, to say this wasn’t the first time. Will say it was a fuckin’ miracle the kid survived. Emergency delivery. Three days after, Abigail Gregory and her newborn baby dropped off the face of the earth,” he finished, his voice hard.

There was silence after Wire stopped talking. The entire room pulsed with fury; Lucky had banged his fist down on the table somewhere in the middle. It was nothing compared to the utter rage pulsating through every part of Bull. Mia, his gentle, goofy fuckin’ beautiful Mia. Pregnant. Almost dying. Lexie, almost fuckin’ dying. Now the sick fuck had her again.

Bull stared at Wire a moment then turned, hurling his glass so it shattered against the wall. “Fuck!” he roared.

The men all watched him, as if waiting for him to go further, like he had those years ago. So much so they had to lock him down. He wasn't fuckin' doing it this time. He made a promise to his girl. He was finding his woman. Then he was killing the fuck that had her. Slowly.

"I'm good," he grunted.

Cade gave him a long look then turned his attention to Wire. "You find the piece of shit?"

"There's more."

Cade stiffened and then cursed.

"The past sixteen years Gregory's been through two more wives." Wire turned the screen to face the table, Bull's highly strung body turned even tighter. Wire pulled up two pictures side by side and there were muttered profanities around the table. Lucky's normally easy face was granite; a murderous expression replaced what was usually an easy smile. Asher had stuck his knife into the wood of the table, as if he was planning on stabbing someone right there.

That was because these two women looked exactly like Mia. Could've been sisters. Both had golden blonde hair, curly. Heart-shaped faces. Delicate features. Didn't have the sunshine behind the eyes Mia had.

"Both have disappeared. Filed for dissolution of marriages, both of them. Obviously he's got a judge in his pocket that pushed this shit through," he muttered.

"Okay, so this sick fuck is beyond dead. He's gonna die bloody," Gage declared icily. "Tell us where to find him so we can tear the fucker limb for fuckin' limb," There was a strange glint on his face, almost excitement at the prospect of it.

"You got a lock? How many men he has?" Steg asked, thinking pragmatically.

Wire grinned. "Not e-fucking-nough to stop us," he said, the first piece of good news the hacker had uttered since he walked in. "Hasn't even left the state." His eyes darted to Bull. "Think he still plans on getting the kid."

Over his dead fucking body.

"Good for us, thinking the fucker's bat shit nutso. It'll be cake to get there, to end him," Wire told the group.

The tension dissipated slightly. But Bull was still coiled tight as anything. Didn't matter how easy it was to get him. He'd still had Mia over

twenty-four hours. A fuckin' day. A lot could happen in a day. He knew only too well.

A beeping on Wire's tablet drew his attention. "Fuck," Wire muttered. "We've got company." He showed the screen once more; this time it was the security footage of the gate. Crawford filled the screen.

"Fuck!" Cade half roared. "When will that piece of shit get transferred to fuckin' traffic patrol and get out of our shit?"

The positive atmosphere that had swirled within the room not seconds ago dissipated with the appearance of that fucker. They weren't going anywhere without a goddamned tail.



CHAPTER TWENTY

I showered, mostly because I had to wash off the filth that came with Sid's touch. Also, because I had to have some self-preservation. There was no reason to needlessly provoke him. However much I despised him, I had to stay on his good side, at least until Zane came. And he would come. I didn't have illusions over the fact I had any chance of getting out of here alone. As much as I would have liked to be some badass female, underneath all my girly clothes and makeup obsession, I wasn't. I didn't even do anything productive like become a black belt in karate after I escaped Sid. I was too busy dealing with a newborn and figuring out how to feed her. How to survive. So I knew I had two options. Zane would save me or Sid would kill me. It might take days, months, years...I didn't know how long, but the coldness in his eyes, the evil, wasn't fleeting as it had been years before. It was permanent. Which meant bad things for me. So I was hoping for the first option. I couldn't imagine never seeing my daughter again. Never seeing Zane again. I would fight with every inch of me until my last breath, but I was realistic of my chances without my dark protector.

I was reluctantly dressed in the clothes from the closet. My own were filthy and stained with blood. I defiantly chose an all-white outfit. If, or more likely when Sid decided to lay a hand on me, he would see his expensive shit soiled with the results of his temper. As much as he loved inflicting pain, he hated mess. Something I had learned the hard way.

The door opened and the same goon who had given me the towel stepped into the room. "Ready, miss?" he asked as if he was a butler escorting me to dinner with the queen, not breakfast with a psychopath. He didn't even flinch at my battered face, which I had glimpsed in the mirror.

Getting thrown around in the trunk of a car didn't do much for the complexion. Neither did getting clocked with the butt of a gun, the knot in the back of my head communicating this to me.

I jutted out my chin and followed the goon.

"So, you don't mind working for a woman beating-monster?" I asked his back. "Bet your mother's proud of you," I shot at him. Not the best idea, provoking the steroid freak, but I was transforming from terrified to pissed. It was the only way to survive. And right now, I was pissed that my fucking *husband* thought he could come in and fuck up my life. Lexie's life.

The goon stayed silent. He was trained well. We soon entered a dining room. The house was smaller than I originally thought, but still opulent. The room was empty, I expected Sid to be sitting there eating breakfast, but Goon One continued out to a patio. I restrained my surprise at the familiar landscape. We were still in California. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Sid sat at a wicker outdoor table. He was drinking coffee. His gaze flickered over me and down my body. His expression was carefully blank. I couldn't say he didn't look good. He did. He'd grown up from the attractive teenager with the boyish face. That face had hardened at the sides, becoming more manly. He was clean shaven with a tan that looked suspiciously fake. His black hair was slicked back in that sophisticated way businessmen seemed to prefer. Me? I learned I liked my men rougher. A lot rougher. He was wearing a white button down, the collar open. The body underneath it was lean, but still muscly. He didn't look intimidating right then. His muscles didn't look like they could inflict pain, break bones. I knew only too well they could.

"Sit, Button," he commanded softly.

I paused before complying. I had originally chosen to sit at the seat farthest away from the reptile in the expensive shirt, but Goon One directed me beside him. I scowled up at the blank face. As soon as I sat down, Sid clutched my hand, kissing it. My skin crawled at the touch of his vile lips on any part of me. I quickly snatched it away.

"Don't you touch me," I hissed.

Sid was unfazed. "I see it might take a while to get used to me," he said blandly. "Especially," he looked out at the landscape, "since you've been lowering yourself into the gutter by sleeping with bikers." His voice was still bland but his jaw was hard.

I stiffened. “The only time I lowered myself into the gutter was when I let you lay your filthy hands on me,” I spat with hatred.

My mind didn’t let me regret it. How could I? I got Lexie. I’d go through it all again, a hundred more times for her.

Sid’s eyes turned to me. “My, with beauty has come insolence,” he commented. He tilted his head slightly. “I can’t say it doesn’t appeal.” He regarded me with his empty eyes. “It just means it’ll be interesting getting you back in line.”

My skin crawled.

He sighed and leaned back in his chair, his head moving to glance at the hills in the distance. “I’m sure you’ve noticed we aren’t home yet. I’m obviously waiting for Hillary,” he said as if she was off on Spring Break, not running from her sicko father whom she’d thankfully never met. “I thought she might want to stay somewhere familiar, that you both would. So I bought this place.” He held his hands out. “More modest than I’m used to, and obviously a touch more opulent than what you’ve been able to provide, but it’ll serve as a good transition home,” he said, moving his eyes back to me.

I glared at him with hatred, not speaking.

“Maybe it was a good thing I haven’t been reunited with my daughter just yet,” he continued. “Gives me time to make sure I have her mother setting a good example,” he mused.

My blood curdled. “She’s not your daughter,” I informed him icily. “You lost any claim on her the moment you laid a hand on me when she was growing inside me. When you almost killed her,” I sneered.

Sid banged his fist down on the table, his calm façade shattering. “I said I was sorry, didn’t I?” he bellowed. “When you made me believe she was dead, I was fucking sorry! It haunted me for years,” he screamed, spittle flying out his mouth. “It gave you no right to run, to hide from me.”

I laughed without humor. “You are fucking insane,” I informed him. “When you beat me while I had my daughter inside me, you gave me *every* fucking right to get as far away from you as humanely possible, you sick fuck,” I yelled, pushing back from my chair.

Quick as a flash, Sid was up and had plowed his fist through my face before I even had time to react. My body was thrown back into the glass door behind me. The impact sent pain vibrating through my body, up my spine. I was lucky it didn’t smash. Pain erupted not only in my jaw but in

my wrist, which I had thrown out to break my fall. I lay there holding my jaw, cradling my other arm to my stomach. I bit my lip to stop the tears from falling. I was in a lot of fucking pain but I wouldn't give him my tears. My eyes didn't leave Sid, the hatred I felt for the man increasing by the second.

He walked over to me slowly, his Gucci loafers stopping at my prone body. He knelt down, his eyes blank.

“Why do you make me do this?” he asked, shaking his head. His hand went to brush a hair out of my face. I flinched.

“Maybe you'll be different when Hillary's here, when we can be a real family,” he mused thoughtfully.

In my pain-drenched haze I still realized that Sid had well and truly gone off the deep end, if he had ever been swimming in the shallow waters of sanity. Maybe he had always been this crazy, but my naïve teenage eyes had been blinded by affection and the illusion of love. Of being wanted. Now that I knew what real love was, I saw him for the monster he was.

“But while we wait for her I think you need some time—time to mull over what being a good wife means,” he continued, his voice flat, as if he hadn't just plowed a fist into my face and potentially broken my arm. “And you think while you have that time, that if when Hillary gets here you put a foot out of line, it will be in front of our daughter that you get taught your lesson.”



It was dark. And cold. Wherever I was wasn't intended by the decorator to see the light of day. There was a weird metallic tang in the air and a dripping sound that seemed to echo in the small room. The floor was concrete and the only furniture was the chain that was connected to the wall and my ankle. Yes, I was chained up to the freaking wall. Like an animal. If I had been awake while they were doing this, I would have struggled and screamed like a banshee. But instead, like the coward that he was, Sid had once again plowed his fist through my face to knock me out. Didn't the fuckhead ever hear of a sleeping pill? Or a friggin' tranquilizer? If I had to

be knocked out, I much would have preferred those options. I doubted they would come with the ear splitting headache that made it hard to think straight. And the only thoughts whirring through my pounding head were of my daughter. Of the chances of Sid actually getting his hands on her. I would happily stay chained here for the rest of my life, however long that may be, if it meant Lexie never had to breathe her father's air. I really didn't want to die here, though. And never see my kid graduate high school. Become a world famous rock star. Get married. Have a baby of her own. The thought of her doing all that, without me, made me taste bile. The thought of Zane, the pain he must be in. If something happened to me like it had to Laurie, I didn't think he'd ever recover. A man could only take so much before being broken completely. With one fell swoop, Sid had stomped on three lives, wearing Gucci loafers.

Time moves slowly when you're chained up in the darkness. Or quickly. Maybe time didn't mean a thing. I was left with only my thoughts, and in the dark came the darkest of thoughts. I jumped slightly when I thought I heard faint sounds of gunshots. I listened hard, but I heard nothing else. I reasoned I imagined it. Wishful thinking and all that. I jostled slightly and it sent pain vibrating up my arm. Yep, definitely broken. I struggled not to let my mind be overrun with the demons that preyed in the darkness. The dark thoughts. Like I was going to die here. Like I was never going to see my daughter again. I'd never get to feel Zane's arms around me again. I fought against those dark thoughts. Zane's words after Ava and Steve died came into my head. "You need to bring the light in before the darkness settles."

So instead of focusing on how alone I was in the dark, I thought of how happy I had been.



I stroked the three-day stubble that prickled against my fingers, slightly obscuring his dark goatee. "Please don't grow a beard," I requested quietly.

Zane glanced down at me with a guarded look on his face. He didn't speak but he was using his usual nonverbal communication. I was becoming very fluent in this Zane speak. As was Lexie.

“If you grew a beard, it would make you...” I paused to calculate in my head. “About ten times hotter. And not only is that not fair to your fellow average Joe who barely stands a chance against goatee Zane, it also means that I’ll have to get acrylic nails.” I met his eyes. “For defensive purposes. I’ll have to scratch bitches who get all hypnotized by the hotness of you, and with the beard—” I shook my head gravely. “It’ll cause hysteria.” I glanced down at my hands. “Plus, I hate acrylic nails. I can never do menial tasks because of the plastic talons stuck to my fingers. I envy women who can conquer the day with them. I am not one of those women.”

Zane looked at me for a long moment. His face was carefully blank. Then, without warning, he roared with laughter.

I blinked.

Zane. Laughing. I didn’t even know he was humanly capable of it. But here he was, his chuckles vibrating through his chest. And I made him do it. A warm feeling settled in my stomach.

Once he was finished he shook his head, eyes dancing as they regarded me.

“I’ve never seen you do that,” I whispered quietly. “Laugh,” I added for clarity.

His face turned suddenly serious, his hand moving to cup my jaw. “Didn’t have a reason to. Didn’t have a reason to smile, barely had a reason to get up in the morning, except the club.” He gave me a look. “Got a reason now. Got two, actually,” he added in a low voice.

That warm feeling settled in my stomach and spread to my toes and my eyes prickled.

“You can’t do that,” I said in a broken tone. “Hit me with a beautiful laugh and beautiful words without fair warning. I need time to build some emotional shields so I don’t burst into ugly tears.”

Zane’s hand tightened on my chin. “That’s the whole point, baby. Don’t want you building any walls for me to get to the core of you. Want to get into every part of you. Break down all those walls. ‘Cause you and Lex, you’ve bulldozed through all of mine.” He kissed me lightly but firmly. “And there’s no part of you that could be ugly,” he said before silencing me with a totally not light, open-mouthed kiss.



I jolted when I heard something. Definitely a gunshot. Yelling. My heart leapt. Zane was here.

“I’m in here!” I screamed, my voice croaky. I didn’t even know why I screamed. I doubted whoever was out there could hear me screaming over gunshots and in what I guessed was the basement. But I did it anyway, kept screaming, needing someone to hear me. They wouldn’t miss me, would they? It would be a pretty shitty rescue attempt if they didn’t even search the house properly for the person they were meant to be rescuing. The door opened, bringing a shaft of light into the room, illuminating the stairs. A horrible thought hit me. What if something happened and my guys didn’t win what sounded like a huge freaking gunfight? What if I wasn’t saved? My eyes were glued to the spot where my rescuer—or killer—would appear, my heart beating a million beats a minute. Then boots appeared at the stairs. Not boots I recognized. Nor was the form that made its way over to me. But I breathed a sigh of relief to see the uniform. He crouched in front of me, gently pushing hair out of my face. His flashlight illuminated his face. His familiar face. The hot cop I saw fighting with Rosie...Luke was his name. I sagged in relief. His expression was gentle and non-threatening.

“You okay, darlin’?” he asked in a soft tone, his eyes moving over me with the beam. I flinched when the light reached my face, not used to it after being bathed in darkness.

“Yeah,” I croaked, “Will be better when I’m out of here.”

His face was hard when he got a look at my face, then he shone the light lower, frowning at the way I was holding my injured arm. The soft face turned to granite when he found the chain on my ankle.

He paused, took a breath and met my eyes. “You’re safe now,” he promised.

I nodded. But he was wrong. I was only safe when I had Zane’s arms around me, when I could touch my daughter. Then I was safe.

Luke leaned into his radio, his face hard. “Got her, she’s pretty banged up. Think her arm’s broken—need a paramedic in here, stat,” he barked.

“Also need bolt cutters. She’s fuckin’ chained to the wall.”

I tilted my head at him. “Are you allowed to talk into a walkie-talkie thing like that?” I asked curiously. “Aren’t you meant to be all professional and talk in codes like ‘Whisky Bravo Six radioing in’? Plus, I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to say ‘over’ when you’re finished talking,” I told him, my movie knowledge making me practically an expert.

He looked at me, his face expressionless. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

“Didn’t think it would be possible, darlin,’” he said when he finished laughing. “That the woman chained to the wall, beaten to shit, would be the one making me laugh,” he said disbelievingly.

I shrugged my shoulders, flinching at the pain. “I’m just glad I’m alive to be my hilarious self,” I informed him with a grin. That and my only other option was bursting into tears.



Moment the pigs turned up, they were fucked. They all knew it. They were all furious. Bull was so furious he ended up in a weird state of calm. He didn’t shoot anyone like every fiber of his being was screaming at him to do. Instead he calmly walked around, a thin layer of red over his vision.

“Shouldn’t you be out catching fuckin’ criminals, Crawford?” Cade spat at the deputy who was standing in their clubroom.

He looked around in distaste. “Funny,” he said. “That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

Cade looked about to explode. “Can you drop your fuckin’ shit toward the club for one fucking second?” he half roared. “A woman is missing. A mother. An innocent. Fucking do your job and look for her!”

Bull knew this shit was going nowhere fast and he had to do something if he wanted Mia back. So that’s why he walked up to a man he hated only

slightly less than his fuckwit father and offered a deal that had Cade's eyes near popping out of his head.



“Can’t believe we’re fuckin’ doing this,” Lucky muttered, fingering his knife as he leaned against his bike.

“Workin’ with fuckin’ pigs,” Asher spat out in disgust, saying it loud enough for the uniform in the cruiser to hear. He scowled at Asher but didn’t move.

“Shut the fuck up, fuckwits,” Cade barked, eyes on the same place Bull’s were. “We’re doing the only fuckin’ thing we can do to get Mia back, without getting ourselves locked up.”

Bull hated it as much as his brothers did. Hated that he was standing behind fucking police tape while the brothers in blue charged into the fancy fucking house not two hours away from Amber. *Two hours.*

He had immediately given Crawford the details on where Mia was. Not because he wanted to; saying that shit went against everything inside him. Because he had no other choice. He knew Crawford would put a tail on them, so there was no way they could storm the place themselves and murder every fucker inside like they originally planned. Well, not without disabling a cop. Which each one of them would have loved to do, but that came with complications. And took time. Which he didn’t have. So he made a deal with the Devil. Or more likely, the one who thought they were the Devil. He’d given him not only Mia’s location, but the location of a major player in the heroin trade on the proviso the club was coming. Crawford’s jaw had gone tight at this, but he agreed, as long as they kept their distance and let the police do their job. He had felt conflicted, giving information to the one man who had vowed to find a way to destroy his club, his family. Then he had caught a glimpse of Lexie, red-rimmed eyes but still looking strong, looking like she had hope. Then that conflict melted away.

Bull’s entire frame tightened at the sounds of gunfire. They had better not fuck up their job. If they did, even their pissant uniforms wouldn’t stop

him from ending every last one of them. His hands itched to be in there, doing something, killing someone. Saving his woman. Instead he was standing here like a loser. A quick glance at the tight faces of his brothers told him he wasn't alone. Then the gunfire stopped. Everything went silent. That was worse.

Bull stormed over to the uniform left watching them. "What the fuck is going on?" he growled.

The uniform paled and he seriously looked like he was going to piss himself. Pussy. Bull was about to do something that may or may not get him arrested when the radio crackled.

"Got her, she's pretty banged up. Think her arm's broken—need a paramedic in here, stat," Crawford's voice clipped. "Also need bolt cutters. She's fuckin' chained to the wall."

Bull froze for a split second, then his monster roared to life. He did not give a fuck about uniforms or deals. He was going to his woman. As he strode towards the police tape, a uniform stood in his way.

"You can't go in there—"

He didn't even think; he just plowed his fist through the fucker's face and kept walking.

He heard the sounds of a struggle behind him and he was pretty sure his brothers were doing similar shit to what he'd done. If it had been any other day, he might've almost grinned. But Crawford's voice repeated in his head. "Chained to the wall. Broken arm." He broke into a run toward the house.

He didn't take in the carnage, the uniforms cuffing various well-dressed scum. Nor did he move slow enough for any of the fuckers to act on the questioning looks that were sent his way. His eyes darted around the living room, aiming for where a basement would be. They fell on Bill, the sheriff, who upon making eye contact with Bull merely shook his head like a disapproving father. The old cop was a lot less high strung than his piece of shit son and was the only reason they had some form of relationship with the local PD, which was necessary when the Sons needed them to look the other way. Not often, but on occasion. Bill was usually down with that, on the provision shit didn't hit his jurisdiction and they lined his pockets every now and then. Despite that, he was a good man. Bull didn't think too much of him though, more on the man who was in front of him, his hands cuffed behind his back.

Slightly younger than him he guessed, well dressed, in a white shirt and ridiculous fuckin' shoes. Hair all slicked back like a greasy piece of shit. The eyes. That's how Bull knew who he was. What lay behind them. The eyes of a killer. Empty. Devoid of anything that could be construed as human. Bull knew that look because it was what he used to see in the mirror after he went to work for the club. After he drained the life out of whatever fucker that deserved to be taken off this earth.

That look wasn't permanent. It was like the effects of a drug. A while after the killing it drained away, back into the darkest recesses of his mind. After spending time with Mia, with Lexie, that look became a memory. The dark corner where it retreated to was bathed in light. The look in this man's eyes was permanent. Bull's entire frame tightened. This was the man. Responsible for taking Mia. Shooting Killian. Trying to take Lexie. Almost killing her sixteen years ago. Almost killing Mia. Thank fuck Lexie didn't look a thing like him. He found himself stepping toward the man who was staring at him. Involuntarily reaching for his piece in order to put a bullet through his brain. Didn't give a shit he'd be killing an unarmed man in a room full of cops. Not in that moment.

Bill stepped forward, jerking the man behind him roughly.

"Not the time, son," he told him firmly, meeting his eyes.

Bull stared at him, struggling not to pummel the old man from getting in the way of justice. Of revenge.

"Go to your woman," he continued, not backing down at the no doubt murderous look on Bull's face.

That jolted Bull out of his haze. The monster took a backseat and Bull realized what was most important in that moment.

"Basement," he barked.

Bill nodded at him, a look of relief flooding the old man's face. He jerked his head to the hallway behind him. "In the kitchen, first door to your left." His voice held a note of something; couldn't be respect, but as sure as shit sounded like it.

A meaningful look was communicated between the two before Bull moved past them both in search of his woman. Bull didn't look at the maggot, because if he did, he wouldn't have been able to control himself.

When he found the basement, he struggled not to take the stairs two at a time. He got to the bottom, not fully prepared for what he would see. His entire frame locked in place.

Mia on the ground, Crawford crouching beside her, gently moving her arm in his hands. Bull gritted his teeth at the fucker's hands on her. But he didn't focus on that, not for long. He focused on her face. Her beautiful peaches and cream face. It was now covered in purplish bruising. Both of her eyes were darkened with evidence of the brutality she withstood, one almost swollen shut. There were rings around her neck. Hand marks. Someone had tried to strangle her. Tried to squeeze the life out of her. Unbidden, the memories assaulted him. A surprise attack.



Four Years Ago

His eyes watched the monitor that measured the beats of her heart. That showed him that she was still alive. Barely. Barely holding on, he knew that. His eyes moved to the bandage that covered half her face. He knew what was underneath it, what that tattoo meant. Meant he'd failed. Failed his most basic job. Protecting his girl. Shielding her from the horrors that came with being connected with him. Shielding her from the darkness. The evidence of his failure was everywhere. The burn marks decorating her delicate arms. The cuts and bruises covering almost her entire body. Couldn't even let himself think of what else they'd done to her. Not in this moment. But that was his failure too.

"Brother." He heard his best friend's voice, felt his hand on his shoulder. He didn't look up. Didn't move his eyes from that machine.

"Don't fuckin' touch me right now, Cade," he ordered quietly, his voice dead.

The hand left, but the presence didn't. There was silence for a moment, the beeping the only sound in the room.

"This isn't your fault," Cade began.

"The fuck it isn't," Bull snapped. "This shit," he nodded to the bed. To his broken angel. "Is *all* on me."

"Bull," Cade's voice was stronger, ready to fight him on this.

Bull whipped his head around to meet his friend's eyes. "They fucking *raped* her," he yelled, the ugly word seeming to echo in his brain, slice him

up inside. “Repeatedly,” he continued quieter and he watched his friend flinch. “She’s scared of mice,” he told him. “Laurie’s fuckin’ terrified of the tiny things.” His eyes moved back to the machine. “She’s afraid of *mice*. How do you think she felt when they were doing, *that*,” he spat the word, “to her?” He paused, choking on his breath. “Yeah, that’s on me,” he repeated. “Girl who lived her life in sunshine, losing it in the blackest, ugliest depths of hell,” he choked out. And as if she heard him, as if she couldn’t keep it up any longer, the beeping stopped.

A single tear trickled down Bull’s cheek.



“Zane?” A small voice shocked him out of his own head. His own horrors.

He realized he had been locked in the spot. His eyes glued on Mia, his mind straying to someone else entirely.

That voice, that very alive, very strong voice got him moving. He managed to make his feet move and in a moment he was in front of her, kneeling. He managed not to kick Crawford in the face, who merely released Mia and moved slightly away with a hard glare.

Bull cupped Mia’s face with his hands gently, aware of the pain she must be in. But he had to touch her. To feel her warm skin under his. She met his eyes. He flinched, but not out of pain. Out of relief.

Her good hand stroked his jaw. “You’re here,” she said.

“I’m here,” he repeated, his voice sounding rough, even to his own ears.

“Lexie?” she asked, her voice tight with worry.

He stroked her face. “She’s good, baby,” he muttered. “Killian too,” he added when he saw her mouth open again.

Her entire body sagged. She searched his face. “I’m okay now,” she promised him.

His eyes ran over every inch of her body. The clothes weren’t hers but they weren’t ripped. They weren’t betraying signs of an unspeakable assault. That didn’t mean it didn’t happen. Bull swallowed the fire tickling at the base of his throat. His eyes worked their way back up to his face. It was covered in bruises. Bruises that made his own fists clench, and made

him want to neuter the coward who thought he could lay hands on a woman. His woman. The eyes that met his once more made him calm. Because even though her face was battered, those bruises bringing the worst kind of déjà vu, the eyes were what held him together. They weren't broken, weren't empty. They were full, whole, strong.

"Marry me," he whispered.

Her entire frame jerked. "What?" she whispered back.

"Marry me," he clipped.

She regarded him. "You're asking me to marry you, while I'm assuming I'm a delightful shade of purple?" she asked, half teasing.

Bull didn't react. Outwardly, at least. Only Mia. Only his Mia would find a way to make a joke at this moment.

She took his silence as affirmation of his seriousness. Her own face turned serious. "Of course I'll marry you," she whispered with tears in her voice.

Bull didn't hesitate. As gently as he could, he claimed her mouth. He had needed to since the moment he laid eyes on her. Once he was done he pulled back slightly. She was smiling. Almost laughing. Bull didn't know how the fuck this was possible. She had just agreed to become his forever. He was happy. Ecstatic. But she was still sitting in front of him, injured. Battered, but not broken. And somehow smiling.

"What?" he clipped.

Her eyes twinkled and flickered to Crawford, who had been watching the entire exchange with a blank expression. Bull had decided to ignore him.

"We totally have to make up a 'how did he propose' story," she informed him in a light tone. "The whole 'he did it in a basement where I was chained up after being kidnapped,' might not be appropriate for the grandchildren," she finished on a smile.

The tightening of his form went unnoticed at the mention of their grandchildren as paramedics and more cops arrived. Bull was gently pushed to the side and he struggled not punch the fucker that suggested he move farther away. The look he gave the paramedic seemed to communicate something because no one uttered such a suggestion again.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

One Year Later

“Mom!” a familiar voice screamed at me from downstairs.

I jerked slightly, my eyes focusing on the thing in front of me. The thing I was both crazy happy about and equally shitting myself about.

“Mom!” the voice repeated with impatience.

I sighed.

Once I got to the hallway I came face to face with my beautiful girl. Usually in a year, a teenage girl’s style changes about fifty times, as did her room decoration choices, makeup application, and boyfriends. As mentioned many times before, Lexie was not a normal teenage girl. Had I not birthed and raised her myself I wouldn’t have believed such a creature existed. Her style had not changed, evidenced by her faux leather shorts with a silky tank tucked in, a printed kimono layered over top. A single braid with a feather hanging off it was almost buried in her ringlets, which reached the small of her back when they were out, like they were now. Even at seventeen—nearly eighteen as she loved reminding me—she wore little makeup. Not that she needed any, the little minx; her freckles were still prominent under the little dusting of powder on her face. And the boyfriend? Still the same. I would be surprised if that ever changed. Killian started prospecting for the Sons six months ago when he turned eighteen. All of his time was either spent at the clubhouse or with Lexie. He still adored her with that furious intensity that had worried me up until the day he saved her life. Then there was the day he took a bullet for her. So yeah, it was safe to say the fact that the kid loved my daughter more than anything wasn’t the problem. The problem was Lexie was heading for somewhere

bigger, better, and more glittery than Amber, evidenced by the success of her band in the past year. It seemed every weekend I was dragging Zane and more than likely Amy and or Rosie to gigs. They had just started putting their songs on YouTube and were getting crazy amounts of attention already. Keeping his promise, Clay had invited a record exec friend of his to the band's latest gig. They had called the next day for a meeting, which was tomorrow. It was safe to say Lexie and the boys utterly lost their shit and were rehearsing non-stop to make sure they were flawless for the meeting. I wasn't even sure they'd need to play; actually I didn't know anything about the ins and outs of a meeting with record industry big wigs. As a momager I so needed to brush up on that stuff. I'd planned on doing Googling or something today, but what I'd held in my hands moments before had made me reevaluate the day's plans.

"Mom," Lexie repeated for the third time in disapproval.

"No one here resides by that name. I'm sorry, young girl," I told her airily. "Have you tried the house next door? I'm sure I heard that very name, called in that very same tone, by a bratty six-year-old."

Her eyes narrowed. "Have you seen my guitar?"

"It's big and roundish, kind of hard to miss. How'd you lose it, young Padawan?" I asked, directing her into my—no, wait—*our* room. Almost a year of being married and I still forgot sometimes. Though the mingling of the clothes with mine and the various pairs of manlike footwear scattered about the place should have served as a reminder. Oh, and the impossibly handsome and hulking man who made my life amazing every single day. And made my nights full of passion every single night. And made my daughter and I safe and protected with every breath we took. So don't ask me how I forgot.

"Why is it in here?" she asked, rushing to snatch her guitar from the spot where it was resting.

I leaned against the doorway. My kid was frazzled, which hardly ever happened. Only once on her very first gig did she get nerves. Apart from that, she was as cool as a cucumber. But now, on the eve of possibly the most important meeting of her life, she was understandably shaken. Which was why, I reasoned, she hadn't noticed Killian's decidedly odd behavior since she had announced said meeting. I had noticed it, because even though I too was beside myself with excitement, I was also super vigilant in anything to do with my kid. And Killian was practically an extension of

Lexie. He was, apart from music, her world. And she, apart from the club, was his. But the look he got when she told him of the meeting that would possibly take her on the road to superstardom worried me.

“You don’t remember asking Zane to tune it for you before the meeting?” I asked, leaving my thoughts behind for now. “Even though it’s been in tune all of your life, thanks to the fact it’s like an extension of your hand,” I added.

She wandered toward me, her face uncertain. “Yeah. I’m just—”

“It’s okay to be nervous, doll. I’d think you were weird and possibly a cyborg if you weren’t,” I told her teasingly.

“It’s just, this could be huge,” she said in a small voice. “Like, life changing huge.”

I nodded. “Could be,” I agreed. “Knowing you and the boys. Your talent? The chances are high. I believe in you, you know. Anything you want to do, you can do it. You’re capable,” I told her firmly.

She smiled at me. “You think?”

I winked at her. “I know. My entire retirement plan rests on the millions you’re going to make,” I said.

She laughed as we walked together down the stairs. “Is Zane coming to the meeting?”

I stopped walking and stared at her. “Um, is he big, ultra-protective and like a total control freak?” I asked in a voice dripping with sarcasm. “He’ll be there, threatening to disembowel the suits if your deal is anything less than six figures,” I joked.

We made it to the bottom of the stairs and now it was Lexie’s time to stop. She regarded me with a look that was way beyond her years and I knew she was going to say something wise and possibly tear jerking.

“You know, he may have been sixteen years too late, but Zane’s the best dad I could’ve asked for,” she said quietly.

Yep. Totally wise and totally tear jerking.

“And, he’s going to be the most amazing dad ever to my little brother or sister,” she added with a small smile.

I jerked. “How did you know that? Are you a wizard?” I said on reflex, denial not even an option. I did not lie to my kid. Not anymore.

She nodded to my hand.

I glanced down. I was still clutching the positive pregnancy test. Shit.

Lexie kissed me quickly on the cheek. “Happy for you, Mom,” she said quietly. “And proud of you. You’re like, my hero,” she added.

I swallowed my tears. “You stole my line, kid.”

She smiled and straightened. “I’ve got to go and practice. Love you.”



One of the first things to happen after I got rescued was our marriage. The one that was proposed when I was chained in a basement happened about one week after my bruises faded for good. I actually had to convince Zane not to get a priest into my hospital room and marry us the second I’d been patched up. He’d relented. Barely. And only after I told him about how my first marriage had been devoid of family, and how I wanted our whole family, the club to be there when we were married. To witness their brother finally getting his happy ending.

So, on a sunny day in the same patch of grass where we had survived a nightmare, we created a new memory. I walked down a hastily put together aisle, wearing a simple ivory dress and flowers weaved through my curls. Lexie walked by my side.

I only had eyes for Zane as I walked past all of the people who I considered family. He smiled. Actually *smiled* a sexy smile as his eyes followed Lexie and I until we made it to him. When we made it, he gently pulled Lexie into his arms and kissed her head. “Love you, Lex,” he murmured softly.

She beamed up at him. “To the moon,” she whispered, her eyes slightly watery. She winked at me then moved to join Laura Maye and Gwen.

Zane grasped my chin. “Prettiest thing I’ve ever seen,” he told me in a low voice.

For once, I didn’t have a single word to say. Luckily, since it was our wedding, Steg, our officiator, said a lot of stuff to actually get us married. Zane wasn’t through rendering me speechless, as I learned when it came time for the vows.

His hands gripped my waist tightly. “A wise woman once said that the first eclipse that blocks out the light, makes it seem like the sun will never

shine again,” he said softly, eyes never leaving mine. “My mistake was thinking that eclipse was a destruction of light. Something permanent. You and Lexie made me see that I wasn’t condemned to live in that darkness forever. That I’d get to live in that brightest fuckin’ light that emits from the both of you. Something I’m gonna hold onto and treasure for the rest of my fuckin’ life,” he finished with passion.

I didn’t think there had ever been such a beautiful set of wedding vows ever, especially with the word fuck used in them. A set of vows uttered from the lips of a man whose silence was a feature people had come to expect, evidenced by the multitude of dumbstruck and tearful faces throughout the crowd. I didn’t have eyes for any of them, only my husband, who I grabbed by the neck and kissed the shit out of.



It had been an amazing year. After I had been rescued from the clutches of my psychotic and decidedly evil ex-husband, things hadn’t exactly been happy ever after. It worked well for the Disney princesses, but not in real life. Things like nightmares and flashbacks plagued me for quite a while, even though every night I was safe in Zane’s arms. Zane was battling with wounds that weren’t visible like my broken bones. He spent every moment he could making sure I was okay, I think to remind himself. His eyes were tortured more often than not, and his clipped phrases and silence came back from a time. But I knew something that never wavered were his feelings for me. For Lexie. I knew he had to fight the rest of his demons off, once and for all, so I just gave him time. Tried not to get pissed off when he treated me like a doll about to break and damn near put a tracking device in Lexie’s car. The one he bought for her.

“You bought her a car?” I said in the quiet, dangerous voice Zane should have realized meant he had to tread carefully. Very carefully.

We were standing in the driveway of our house, watching Lexie and of course Killian, drive away in her new Ford Focus. That was after she let out a little squeal, hugged Zane, kissed my cheek and ran off to go for a test drive.

“Yep,” was all he answered, following the car with his eyes.

I turned to him. “And you think buying my daughter a car without telling me is okay?” I asked in the same tone, since he didn’t seem to catch it before.

Now that the car was out of sight, he turned to me, his face blank.

“Yep,” was all he responded.

“Yep?” I repeated in disbelief. “You cannot speak in monosyllables in order to provide an explanation,” I informed him, putting my hands on my hips. “Buying Lexie something like, I don’t know, a new pair of shoes without talking to me is fine. Go for it. Only if you get some for me too—size nine, by the way,” I sidetracked myself. “A car, however, or anything that has a motor or a price tag over a couple hundred bucks, *that* denotes a discussion. You can’t just prance around and go on a car buying spree,” I proclaimed, waving my hands. My fresh, new, cast-less hands.

Zane’s hands went to my hips, pushing my hands from them. Even when we were arguing, which wasn’t often, he needed full contact. I both loved and hated this. I hated it, because more often than not, it distracted me and I lost my train of thought. I loved it because it was Zane touching me. What’s not to love? “Wildcat,” he started with an even tone. “Buying one car does not constitute a spree. Lex needed a car. A safe, reliable car. So I got her one,” he said, no nonsense. “And when in fuck’s name have I set foot in any place that would sell shoes for you and Lexie?” he grumbled, eyes twinkling slightly. “’cept maybe the Harley store, and tell you what, Wildcat,” he murmured, pulling me tighter to his body. “Wouldn’t mind seeing you in motorcycle boots. Nothing but the boots,” he continued, nuzzling my neck.

I let out a little breath, my hands involuntarily going around his neck. His mouth moved closer to mine, and his hand squeezed the cheek of my ass. Right on the doorstep for the world to see. And I didn’t even care. But I knew the moment he made it to my mouth it would be over. My mind would be overcome by his body on mine and I’d let him buy Lexie a thousand cars.

I pulled back slightly, frowning. “Don’t distract me like that,” I scolded, slightly breathless. “I need to finish.”

Zane sighed. “Nothing to finish, babe. Car’s bought. It’s done. Can’t undo it,” he declared.

I pursed my lips. He was right.

“You are mine,” he continued, tracing my jaw lightly. “Lexie is mine. I take care of both my girls.”

As much as such a statement warmed my heart, I couldn't help but protest. “But I can afford it now, with Steve and Ava's money. That's what they would have wanted,” I told him, ignoring the stab of hurt that came with mentioning their names.

“For years, babe, I've had nothing to spend my money on. No one to take care of. So I've amassed a bit of it,” he explained.

I knew he wasn't destitute, considering he had demanded to take over the mortgage when he moved in. I had already paid off the mortgage with a chunk of Steve and Ava's money, along with a good amount of my student loan. I had foiled him at that turn. But he did insist on paying for pretty much everything, much to my disdain.

“Imagine how good it feels to not only have someone to take care of,” he paused. “Two someones. When I didn't think I'd have anyone ever again. Let me buy Lexie a fuckin' car,” he demanded. “I'll spend every dime I have on the two of you and be the happiest mother fucker in the world. Don't need something as trivial as dollars and cents when I'm a goddamn billionaire, holding half my fortune in my arms right now. Other half just drove away,” he near growled.

I didn't say anything; I was too busy trying not to cry from his words. He may not speak much, but he knew exactly what to say when he did.

He searched my face, obviously realizing he had won the argument. “Now that's sorted, can I fuck you now?” he did growl this time.



It was safe to say our sex life hadn't suffered at all. It took him a while to understand that he didn't have to make careful love to me, like he had when I was recovering from my wounds, courtesy of Sid. Not that I didn't like the soft, gentle touches of a man who completely owned my entire soul. My whole, unbroken, unfractured soul. But I wanted the rough, brutal sex back in addition to the new beautiful, gentle stuff. I was tracing lines on the colorful tattoos that decorated his chest and arms, ones I had free rein to

look at any time I wanted. And now I got to do it in the daylight, considering Lexie was at school. I could skivvy off work from some afternoon delight since I owned the joint, and Zane had flexible hours. Plus, he liked not having to be quiet when he made love to me. Or more accurately, he liked me not having to be quiet.

“What made you get them all in color?” I asked quietly, my eyes on the phoenix on his chest, emerging out of bright red and orange flames.

I felt Zane’s head move as he turned his gaze to me. There was a small pause. “Had enough dark on the inside of my body, didn’t need it covering my outside too,” he said by explanation.

My heart hurt just a tiny bit at this declaration. At the pain the man I loved lived with. He survived through. Right from being a kid whose dad beat him up, to a man who lost everything. Then found it.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured. My eyes moved to him. “You’re beautiful. This,” I trailed again with my fingers. “Is a reflection of what’s inside. Beauty,” I told him sincerely. “I love the outside of you almost as much as I love the inside of you. The light and the dark,” I clarified.

I put my finger to his mouth when he moved me and made to speak. “Not done, big guy,” I told him. “I may not have shown it with the mastery of a withering glare and near muteness—I kind of went the other way—but I was broken too. In a way I didn’t think anyone could ever fix. Except Lexie, who gave me a reason to smile every day. To love every day.” I grinned at him. “Then a burly biker came into my life and scorched me with his withering glare. Little did I know he’d take every broken piece out of the ashes and put me back together,” I whispered on the end.

Zane yanked me fully on top of him, my naked body brushing his in a delightful way.

“You do not,” he clipped, holding me tightly, “get to say shit like that when I can’t fuck you senseless afterwards.”

Despite the fact he had just made love to me and given me two orgasms, getting “fucked senseless” sounded pretty damned good to me.

I kissed his chest. “Honey, I’m healed.” I waved my cast-free hand to help my point. “In more ways than one,” I continued quietly. He seemed to have a battle of the wills. Then, thankfully, he decided on the best option. He flipped me over; it was rough, but nothing like he would have done had my arm not been in a cast. His body hovered over mine.

“You do know,” he said, lips inches from mine. “I love you more than anything on this fuckin’ earth.”

I gazed into the bottomless depths of his now unshuttered eyes. “Yeah, honey. To the moon,” I whispered.

Then there were no more words, on the account of being fucked senseless.



Despite being married, living together, and kind of raising Lexie together, we hadn't talked kids. I say kind of, because she was pretty much done being raised. She was done at fricking *twelve*. Unicorn kid. What can I say? She was like a reliable car. Just needed to keep it gassed, keep an eye on it and maintain it once in a while. The raising part was done. She was grown, much to my horror.

So we more than anything just enjoyed the family we had created. I basked in true unconditional happiness for once in my life, without the shadow of Sid haunting me. He had mysteriously disappeared when the police transported him from the house to the jail. When I had questioned Zane on this while in the hospital, he had given me a hard look. “He’s gone,” was his answer.

“Gone? Like sunning himself on a beach in Mexico type gone or resting in a shallow grave off an abandoned highway type gone?” I asked in an even tone.

Zane had looked at me for a long while after I asked this. His eyes roved over my arm and my face in silence.

I had resigned myself to the fact I'd never get an answer until I had reasonable motor skills and could sex torture him out of it. It was a thing. Gwen had informed me of its effectiveness.

“Gone in a way that you and Lexie never have to live on the same earth he wastes oxygen on ever again,” he told my eyes finally, his tone flat.

His voice was slightly guarded, as if I would have some sort of hysterical reaction to the man I loved basically informing me he had killed the father

of my child, who had beaten and almost killed me and haunted my life for sixteen years.

“Okay,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow. It was the most animated surprised reaction I had ever seen on him.

So kids hadn’t reached the table yet. Not that I didn’t want them. I did. Having Lexie was the most beautiful thing to ever happen to me. Having Zane’s child, I knew would be nothing short of amazing. I wasn’t exactly a spring chicken so I couldn’t wait forever. I also knew I had to give my husband time. Time to adjust to having us permanently without the prospect of losing us. Which I knew haunted him still. So I waited until it seemed like Mother Nature had other plans. I didn’t want to go informing him just yet—although Lexie and her big mouth would do it for me if I wasn’t careful—which was how I found myself at the doctor. Just to be sure.

Then that was how I found myself leaving the doctors with a little picture of that looked like weird modern art, but was one of the most important little pictures I had ever held. The one of the six-week-old little peanut growing in my stomach. One I loved as much as I did Lexie already.

I had been studying the picture so intently on my way to the car I didn’t even hear my phone ring the first time.

“Mia.” Zane’s voice was weird when I answered on the second ring, like he knew something. It wasn’t possible. I knew he was hot and the enforcer of whatever for the club, which made him a crazy bad ass with many abilities. I did not think those abilities came with pregnancy sensing powers. I did know they came with crazy sperm though, considering I was not the only Old Lady to get preggers while on the pill.

“In addition to O Luscious One, that is one of the titles I answer to,” I said with false seriousness, ignoring the potential baby sensing ability.

He did not find my phone humor amusing on this day. “Where are you?” he clipped with impatience.

“Where am I?” I repeated, trying to stall. I didn’t want to lie to my husband but I didn’t exactly want to tell him over the phone where I was. Because then he’d get all alpha and demand to know why I was at the doctor, and I was having trouble finding believable alternatives. Hence the stall.

“Mia,” he said in warning.

I sighed. “Jeez Louise, calm down. I’m just getting into my car,” I told him truthfully.

“Where’s the car?” he continued.

“In a parking lot,” I hedged.

“Fuck’s sake, Mia. Tell me why you’re at the fuckin’ doctor.” His voice broke with impatience, and also worry.

I straightened. “Why did you waste all that time asking me where I was if you already knew?” I asked on a sharp tone. “Furthermore, how did you know where I was? Do you have a bug in my car?” I bent down and felt below the seat, beginning my search. I so wouldn’t put it past him.

“One of the boys saw your car. Wanted to know why you wouldn’t tell me you were going. Now I wanna know why you were lying.” His voice was hard. “You okay?” he added softly.

I straightened and abandoned my search. “Damn you, Betty, for being so gosh darned cute and memorable,” I chastised my car.

“Fuck,” Zane muttered with impatience. “I can never have any conversation of importance with you over the phone,” he declared. “Get your ass to the club. Now,” he commanded.

To many his voice may have sounded brutal, scary even. To me I knew it was something else. Love and concern, wrapped in his usual alpha and biker speak.

“Um, maybe we should have this conversation at home,” I told him, not big on declaring the bun in my oven to the entirety of the club just yet.

There was a loaded pause. “I’ll be there in two,” he declared.

“Okay, try not to trample any prospects on your way out the clubhouse,” I half teased before clicking off.



I tried not to worry over the fact Zane said he’d be there in “two” even though the clubhouse was a good fifteen minutes away.

Due to the fact I was actually only five minutes away from home, I arrived before Zane. Which kind of sucked, ’cause in the five minutes it took to drive home, I worked myself into a slight panic over Zane’s possible

reaction to his bun in my oven. Yes, we were married. Yes, we were in love. Yes, we were more than old enough to reproduce. I may have tamed Zane slightly, but he was still wild. He still spoke in monosyllables apart from with Lexie and I. We had got him up to smiling in public, and one time he even laughed. But most of the time he kept his scary macho man mask on. So maybe he didn't want a little baby. Despite the fact he was amazing with Belle, and so gentle with Cade and Gwen's newest kid, Kingston. It made my womb squeeze every time I saw it. Totally kick ass name, by the way. Then I got sidetracked with names. Our kid's name would obviously have to be something to reflect the bad assedness of its father, and also the general awesomeness of its mother. Then genders. I already had a girl, so a boy would be nice to round it out. Though at the end of the day I wouldn't care, as long as it was healthy.

The rumble of a Harley shocked me out of my thoughts and I realized I was still sitting in the car, seatbelt on and everything, staring into space. My door was wrenched open and Zane knelt at my door, eyes hard. He looked like he was bracing.

Shit. Maybe I should have told him on the phone this was actually good news—at least I thought it was—and not sat in the car like a crazy person wondering what Zane would think of the name Arden.

“Mia?” His hand went to my thigh.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and turned to him. “What do you think of the name Arden?” I asked.

His entire frame froze.

Maybe he wasn't too happy.

“Not bad ass enough,” I muttered, and reached to retrieve the picture of Peanut. I thrust it in his face. “I'm knocked up,” I declared unceremoniously. I probably should've tried to be more delicate and announce it in some soft, throaty voice, but I went for the quickest way to calm his freak out.

Zane's body unlocked and he slowly plucked the picture out of my hand, staring at it like it held the secrets to the universe. He then looked at my belly. Then my eyes.

“How pregnant?” he asked weirdly.

I chewed my lip nervously. “Um, how pregnant can someone be?” I paused. “Considering your general level of bad assedness and assuming that translates to your swimmers, I'd say a lot pregnant. Like the most pregnant

you can be. Pregnant to my throat,” I joked, trying to lighten the mood and to disguise the fact I was terrified of the fact his face was betraying nothing.

Zane twisted me so my torso faced his and his hands rested on either of my thighs. “How far along?” he clarified, not finding me hilarious.

“Six weeks,” I informed him in a small voice.

He stared at me a long time before uttering something weird. “Not far enough.”

I frowned at him. “Not far enough for what?”

His hand moved to cup my face. “To fuckin’ tell every one of my brothers the woman I love is having my baby,” he said fiercely. “To inform the whole world I’m the happiest mother fucker on the planet.”

And with that he lifted me out of the car. My legs wrapped around him automatically. His hands squeezed my ass. “You’re having my baby,” he muttered against my mouth, walking us inside.

I smiled and a warm feeling settled in my belly. “I’m having your baby,” I repeated.

“Sunshine,” he murmured between kisses. “Just given me eternal sunshine with that, Wildcat.”



EPILOGUE

 Lexie

Seven Months Later

“*Rolling Stone*. Are you fucking KIDDING me?” Sam shouted into the phone. He paced around the hotel room. No, you could safely say he skipped. Noah lounged on the sofa eating Cheetos. Wyatt was doing sit-ups on the floor. Lexie was curled up in an armchair, scribbling their latest song into her notebook. It was about heartbreak. Shocker. Considering most of the songs she wrote were filled with pain and suffering, nothing that mirrored what she felt in her own heart, of course, but a fraction. And that fraction made for good music. The best, actually. Good enough to get them noticed in a big way. Well on their way to becoming famous. They had almost finished their album. Already released a single that made it to the top freaking ten within a week of being released. They were making money. Not a little, but a lot. They had fans. Not a little either. *A lot*. The boys had girls. Groupies, you might call them. A sickening amount of them. Lexie had her own group of guys who tried to sleaze onto her whenever they were out partying. She barely noticed them. How could she? They didn’t know her. Didn’t want to know her. Only one person knew her down to the depths of her soul, *owned* her soul. That person also ripped her heart out and stomped over it with motorcycle boots. It was a mangled mess, one that only beat for music, one she feared would never be repaired enough to give to someone else.

“Did you hear that, Lex?” Sam shook her by the shoulders. “The cover of fucking *Rolling Stone*! What did I tell you fuckers?” he addressed the room.

Everyone was laughing and grinning. Lexie played along, even had a sip of the champagne that appeared out of nowhere. She was only eighteen, so strictly not allowed to be having it, but she found, being in a moderately successful band made things like the legal drinking age insignificant.

When her phone rang she did her best to sound cheerful and not full of pain like she normally did. Except when she was on stage. That’s when she let it all go. Put all that hurt and suffering into her music. Her version of therapy. Unquiet Minds’—the name that had finally decided on two years ago—pathway to success.

“I have no idea how you actually know this fast, since Sam literally got off the phone with our actual *manager*, but yes, you can totally be behind the scenes and be my stylist,” Lexie greeted her mother’s call, knowing she would already be losing the plot. Though she didn’t know how she’d be behind the scenes of their shoot with her water being about to burst and all, but she’d find a way. She’d have the baby between shots, knowing her. She’d found a way to spend huge amounts of time with them in LA when they were there, and more often than not that meant Zane. Which Lexie loved. Some people would hate having their mom and crazy protective biker stepfather around when they were trying to make it as a band. Lexie didn’t. She wished they would come on tour. Her mom was her best friend. Zane was her...dad. Maybe not in blood, but she knew that’s how he thought of her. How he treated her. His silence was what she needed sometimes. Just to be around him, play songs with him.

So when he instead of her mom spoke through the phone, she knew something was wrong. She knew it the minute he spoke.



Lexie was pretty sure Sam broke the land speed record in the drive from San Francisco to Amber. It definitely shouldn’t have taken them just over an hour. Regardless of that fact, Lexie was glad Sam drove like a madman.

And she launched herself out of the car the minute he pulled up. The band followed. When it became apparent she couldn't drive herself due to the fact she was freaking out, Sam insisted he drive. When the rest of the boys heard what happened, they would not hear of them being left behind. Lexie's mom was like a second mom to them all. The band was a family. They stuck together.

When Lexie raced through the doors to the hospital, she laid eyes on her other family. The club. She tried not to flinch at the sight of Killian and the way he stood when he saw her. The way his eyes on her gave her strength at the same time as sending a bullet through her fractured heart. She tried to ignore him. She mostly succeeded because she saw Zane, and everyone else fell away. She ran into his arms. He squeezed her tight and she relaxed slightly at how strong they were.

"Mom?" she asked quietly when he had pulled back.

She did flinch when she saw the look on Zane's face. The one that told her he was slipping back into that man she met changing a tire over two years ago. That couldn't happen.

"Don't know anything yet, Lex," his voice was rough and he seemed to be barely holding on.

She put a hand on his arm. "The baby?" she asked in an even smaller voice.

Zane's eyes turned solid and he seemed to be unable to speak a moment. "Don't know 'bout him either, doll," he said with resignation in his tone. Like he had already mentally prepared for the loss.

Lexie wasn't having that. "They're going to be fine," she told him firmly, not letting herself believe anything less.

She moved to grasp his hand in hers and squeezed it tightly, to reassure him. His eyes softened just a tad and he moved to put his arm around her.

They stood like that for half an hour, not speaking, Lexie actively ignoring the concerned gaze of the man who ripped her to pieces. She was too busy focusing on holding her dad together. On praying for her mom.

The only time Zane spoke was when he quickly and flatly described what had happened. Lexie knew his tone wasn't due to lack of feeling, but instead too much of it. He had found her mom bleeding and unconscious. She was eight and a half months pregnant. Zane looked like he was going to snatch one of the doctors who kept hurrying through the waiting room. She had to physically stop him from striding through the doors marked "medical

personnel only” at one point. She reckoned that wasn’t the first time either, because when he made the move Brock, Cade and Lucky all got up quickly.

Finally, a doctor came through the doors and his eyes settled on the club, who had taken over the entire waiting room.

“Mia Williams?”

Lexie and Mia had both taken Zane’s name. As of two weeks ago, Zane was officially Lexie’s dad, with adoption papers sealing it. Adoption papers that were framed in their living room at home.

Zane stepped forward quickly, right in the doctor’s grill. Inches away. Lexie was at his side, which meant she went with him. Not that she minded. She needed to know what was going on with her mom and her little brother. She needed it to be good news.

“That’s my wife,” he barked and the doctor jumped slightly. “How is she?”

The doctor’s eyes softened slightly. “She’s fine.” Lexie felt Zane’s entire form relax. “She was suffering from placental abruption, which cause the bleeding and slight complications with the delivery, which is why we have kept you waiting so long.” His face was sympathetic, but didn’t look like a mask he wore when delivering bad news. Lexie felt warmth creep back into her belly.

“The baby?” Zane ground out, his face still blank.

The doctor smiled. “You have a healthy baby boy, congratulations.”

Lexie heard a cheer from behind her, and she was pretty sure most of it came from her boys. Everything in her relaxed and she finally let herself breathe properly. She turned to Zane. He was smiling. Like full on grinning, ear to ear.

“Want to meet your son?” the doctor asked him.

Zane squeezed Lexie’s shoulder. “Yeah, my daughter’s coming too,” he said softly.

And with that Lexie’s already huge, dysfunctional and loving family got a whole lot bigger. And what she had told her mom the day she found out she was pregnant was further cemented. Zane was the best dad in the world.



The End



AUTHOR'S NOTE

I want to thank everyone who has taken the time to read my novels. I'm so grateful to all of my readers for their support and the kind messages I get showing love for the Sons of Templar. I'm especially happy to have been able to give Bull his HEA, since he not only deserved it, but so many of you have been asking for it. He was someone always special to my heart when I started The Sons of Templar, and I knew he'd need not one but two amazing ladies to bring him out of the darkness.

Once again, my betas have been amazing and helped to ensure *Out Of The Ashes* was the best it could be. Sarah, Jennifer, Amy and Judy, you ladies are amazing!

If you liked this book, I would love it if you could take then time to leave a review. I'm an indie author who does all of this on my own, so reviews help to share the Sons of Templar with the world.

If you want to check out what I'm up to or get the lowdown on my upcoming books, head over to my Facebook page:

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Anne
xxx



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Anne Malcom has been an avid reader since before she can remember, her mother responsible for her book addiction. It started with magical journeys into the world of Hogwarts and Middle Earth; then as she grew up her reading tastes grew with her. Her obsession with books and romance novels in particular gave Anne the opportunity to find another passion, writing. Finding writing about alpha males and happily ever afters more fun than reading about them, Anne is not about to stop any time soon.

Raised in small town New Zealand, Anne had a truly special childhood, growing up in one of the most beautiful countries in the world. She has backpacked across Europe, ridden camels in the Sahara, eaten her way through Italy, and had all sorts of crazy adventures. For now, she's back at home in New Zealand and quite happy. But who knows when the travel bug will bite her again?