

*A life on the  
road never looked  
so good...*

*The*

**KINGS**



*of*

**KEARNY**

*Navessa Allen*

THE KINGS  
OF KEARNY  
Navessa Allen

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Edited by Victory Editing. All mistakes are my own.

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for everyone who never believed in me ... fuck you.

(that's it. that's the dedication.)



# Chapter One

Jakob Larson was going to be the death of me.

Beneath the dim amber lighting in the bar, he was six feet of sin draped in darkness. The sleeves of his leather jacket hit him at his wrists. A pair of sinuous tattoos slithered out from them like twin snakes, black ink whorling over the back of his hands. He turned his head to the left, and another tantalizing hint of tattoo peeked out above his collar.

I stared at his wide back like I had X-ray vision, wondering how much of his skin was covered. Whoever needled all that ink into him was one lucky bastard. To be bent over him for hours on end, his big body laid out beneath me...

*God, it's hot in the bar tonight,* I thought, wondering how conspicuous it would be if I started fanning myself.

I lifted my gaze, taking in the rest of Jakob. His dark blond hair was cropped close at the sides but was long enough on top that you could dig your fingers into it. A beard obscured the lower half of his face. I'd never been a massive fan of facial hair, but he kept his trimmed and neat, which made me wonder if the rest of him was just as well-groomed.

No one would ever call him a pretty boy; his features were too stark for that. He looked like the by-blow of some cruel Norse god. With cheekbones cut at sharp angles, lips set in a hard line, and heavy brows forever pulled down in a scowl, he had what I liked to call resting *fuck you* face.

Still, he held a kind of carnal appeal. He moved with the intrinsic grace of an athlete, like someone who had pushed his body to the limit, learned just what it was capable of, and now it performed for him in a way that was damn near preternatural compared to the rest of us. Except he wasn't an athlete; he was a fighter. There was a notch halfway down his nose from a past break. His knuckles bore the scars of a man who liked to hit things with his fists. Larger bikers gave him a wide berth as they moved through the crowd, parting around him like a tide for Moses. Even standing still, he projected an aura of something barely contained and half-feral.

I read somewhere that women know within five minutes of meeting someone whether or not they'll sleep with them. With Jakob, you needed all five of those minutes to decide if the risk of fucking him was worth the reward. I couldn't even look at him without picturing him naked, biceps straining as he rose above me, abs contracting as he thrust inside. I usually didn't go for the whole alpha-male vibe—too many guys who projected that aura were possessive, borderline abusive douche nozzles—but Jakob seemed to be the exception to my rule. I blamed my inner cavewoman. He was the kind of man who made her sit up and take notice.

*Him big. Make strong babies. Protect cave.*

It made me feel marginally better that I wasn't the only one staring. Three women about my age at a nearby table kept cutting glances at him. A few more on the dance floor sent him come-hither looks.

The sound of an angry voice rose above the bar's music. I forced my gaze away from Jakob, searching it out. In the far corner, two men faced off over a pool table. Like the rest of our patrons, they were members of the local biker gang, the Kings of Kearny. Both of them were older, one a dark-skinned black man, the other a redheaded white dude wearing sleeveless leathers that left his prison tattoos on full display. It was too loud in here to catch their words, but their body language told me they were about a heartbeat away from coming to blows.

Nina, my fellow bartender and good friend, stepped beside me and stood on her tiptoes, trying to get a better look. At five-foot-nothing, it wasn't going to happen. She swayed a little to the left,



searching for a different angle. Her dark hair was loose tonight, and it fell in a cascade over her shoulder with the movement. Like me, she wore all black: the standard uniform at Charley's Bar and Grill.

Because it hid the bloodstains, we joked.

"Who's yelling?" Nina asked. It was a testament to her looks that even while frowning, she was stunning. With a whip-sharp sense of humor, light brown skin, cheekbones I would kill for, and full lips that seemed forever on the verge of a smile, it was no wonder she was the highest tip earner on staff.

I laced my fingers together and bent over. "Here, I'll give you a boost, and you can see for yourself."

Anyone else would have told me to shut up or that I wasn't as funny as I thought I was, but Nina grinned and lifted her foot toward my hands, calling my bluff. I unlaced my fingers and took a step back. No way in hell was I actually going to touch the bottom of her shoe. It was past midnight, and the floor behind the bar was sticky with spilled liquor and covered with tiny shards of glass, some of which must have lodged into the soles of her high-tops.

"Coward," she said.

I opened my mouth to fire an insult back at her, but a deep voice tolled out from behind me.

"It's Micky and Rob."

I glanced over my shoulder and saw Tiny, the third bartender on shift tonight, staring out into the crowd. Tiny was one of those ironic nicknames. He was a behemoth of a man. Well over six feet and broad as a barn door, he doubled as a bouncer when we needed him to. The overhead lights gleamed off the top of his bald head. His dark eyes were troubled. A slight flush appeared on his olive skin, but a stillness had settled into his limbs. He looked like a man bracing himself for a fight.

"Hey, man. Can I get another beer?" a woman called to him.

"Yeah," he said, moving toward her, his eyes still on the crowd.

The good thing about our bar was that Charley, the owner, was a biker himself. The Kings of Kearny took care of their own. It was in their self-interest to keep the peace in here, and whenever a fight broke out, it was usually quashed before any lasting damage was done—to the combatants or the bar.

Tonight proved no different. The redhead, Micky, barely had time to shove Rob before three men intervened. Jakob was one of them. Unfortunately for him, Rob was already swinging for Micky, and he got in the way of the punch. I grimaced when the blow landed. It would have laid me out flat, but it only snapped Jakob's head around to the side.

The crowd around me went still as everyone tensed against the threat of more violence.

Jakob's resting *fuck you* face turned murderous. He spat out a wad of blood and looked up at Rob. The bar had gone so quiet that I heard him clear across it. "I'll give you that one for free."

Rob had fifty pounds and several inches on Jakob, but he instantly backed down. "Shit. Sorry, man," he said, hands up like Jakob held him at gunpoint.

"You two done here?" Jakob asked, looking between Rob and Micky.

The men nodded and made a show of going back to their pool game. It was only when Jakob turned away from them that the entire crowd let out the collective breath we'd been holding.

Nina elbowed me. "The Viking strikes again."

"Why is everyone so afraid of him?" I asked.

A guy nearby hailed her, indicating a round of shots.

“One sec, Bill,” she said, grabbing glasses for him and his buddies. She sent me a look as she poured their whiskey. “I keep forgetting you’re new here.”

I frowned. “Three months is new?”

She barked a low, throaty laugh. Several patrons turned to stare at her. I couldn’t blame them. I was mostly heterosexual, but every time she laughed like that, a little shiver of awareness ran through me.

“Honey, three years is still new in this town,” she said. She finished pouring and handed the shots over to Bill with a megawatt smile. “Thanks for being patient, sweetie.”

The grizzled old biker went pink in the cheeks. “No problem, Nina.” He tipped her ten bucks for her trouble, and it made me wonder if maybe I should smile more.

“Can I get some ice?” someone asked from behind me.

I turned and saw Jakob settling his large frame onto one of my empty barstools. His left cheek was red and starting to swell. The scowl on his face made him look even less approachable than usual—not an easy feat. This was only the third time he’d spoken to me, and of course he had to be pissed off when it happened. So much for my harebrained idea to hit on him tonight.

“Sure thing,” I said. We kept stacks of clean towels on a shelf beneath the bar. I snagged one, filled the middle with ice, and tied off the extra cloth. With one final tug on the knot, I handed it over to him. “Here you go.”

He reached out, but instead of taking it from me, he grabbed my wrist, so fast that I barely registered the movement. I sucked in a sharp breath. His skin was warm, grip firm, fingers long enough to wrap all the way around my wrist. Yes, I wanted this man to touch me, but that desire was now warring with my irritation over him laying hands on me without asking first.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I said.

He pushed up the sleeve of my T-shirt with his other hand, callused fingers roughing over my skin, raising goose bumps in their wake, stopping only when he revealed the tattoo on my upper arm. It was a stylized AC-130 gunship flying in front of a skull.

“You’re ex-military?” he asked.

“Yes.” Demonstrating one of the skills I learned when I was in, I wrenched my arm up and around, breaking his hold on me. “And if you ever grab me like that again, I’ll call in a favor and have a Maverick dropped on your house.”

His pale blue eyes rose to mine, glinting like frost in the overhead light. “That’s a big-ass bomb.”

“I don’t fuck around,” I said, a hint of warning in my tone. “You want your ice or what?”

In answer, he snagged it from me. “Air Force?”

I nodded. “Aerial gunner.”

He looked me over like he was trying to picture it. I prepared myself for a sexist comment.

“Sorry for grabbing you,” he said instead.

The tension in my shoulders eased a little. “Don’t do it again.”

“I won’t,” he said, holding my gaze.

Weirdly, I believed him.

Another biker in my section lifted her glass in the universal symbol for *I’ll have another*. I left Jakob to refill it. My shoulder brushed Nina’s as I walked toward the draft beer station.

“You’ll have to show me that move,” she said.

“Soon as our shift is over,” I told her.

Working around rough men and women didn’t come without risk, and I’d been teaching her some basic self-defense. It looked like tonight’s lesson would be on how to break holds.

“Here you go,” I said, passing the beer to the woman who ordered it. “On your tab?”

“Yup. Thanks, Krista.” She left a dollar on the bar for me before turning away.

I scooped it up and went to the register. Because Charley was a King, he let his fellow bikers keep running tabs that they didn’t have to pay off until the end of each month. I didn’t see the wisdom in the practice. Some of our customers ran up astronomical bills, buying rounds of shots they couldn’t afford because they didn’t have to pay for them for another two weeks. Most had the mindset that they’d find the money before then, but they rarely did.

Part of me worried that was what Charley wanted. He was one of the founding members of the Kings, along with Daniel King, the president and man the club was named after. I’d seen Daniel pay off the tabs of his bikers when they couldn’t cover them, telling them he knew they’d find a way to settle their debt. It kept them loyal to him, beholden to him in a way that troubled me. I imagined them doing all sorts of illegal shit to pay him back.

“Krista?”

I turned toward the sound of my name.

Jakob rested a leather-clad elbow on the bar top, the ice I’d given him pressed to his cheek. “Can I get an amber ale?”

“Sure.” I poured it out and set it in front of him, careful not to get too close this time.

“Why haven’t you applied to join the Kings?” he asked.

The Kings of Kearny motorcycle club only admitted members with prior military experience. Every single man and woman who wore their leathers had fought for this country. It was part of why the local cops gave them some leeway, and why a lot of people in town put up with their bullshit. Jakob wasn’t the first person to ask me that question, but he was one of the few I wanted to answer.

“I didn’t come to Kearny for the club,” I said. “My grandmother is in a nursing home in town.”

His eyes were steady on mine, that big body still on his barstool. Most people fidgeted when they sat down, but not him. He was like a wolf sighting a deer. This was one of the things that was so appealing about Jakob. When he spoke to you, it felt like you became his entire world. I could only imagine how well that focus might translate to sex.

“Magnolia Hills?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Let us know if you have any trouble with her there,” he said.

A frisson of unease slithered down my spine. “Why? Has there been trouble there?”

He nodded and cut his gaze to the right, away from me, and I swear to God, it felt like the temperature dropped. Like the sun had just disappeared behind a cloud.

“Uh... you care to elaborate on that?” I asked him.

His gaze came back around, and he shook his head. “What time do you get off?”

“I’m closing.”

Beer in hand, he stood from his seat.

I blinked as he started to turn away. “Dude, seriously, you’re just going to—”

Yup, he was. Without a backward glance, he tossed some cash on the counter and disappeared into the crowd.

I shoved my irritation down and got back to work. My gran was the only person I had left in this world. Oh, my parents were still alive, but they were garbage human beings, and if I never saw them again, I’d count it as a blessing.

Gran was my paternal grandmother. She’d taken me in the first time my parents got busted for drugs—Dad for possession, Mom for driving under the influence with me in the back seat—and never

gave me back. After their first stint behind bars, my parents skipped town, and now the only time we heard from them was when they needed bail money or briefly attempted to sober up.

Not all addicts are assholes. I knew that many of them were good people with a disease that could lead to them doing terrible things, but my parents didn't fall into that category. They were rotten even without the drugs or the booze. I'd learned that firsthand during one of Mom's brushes with sobriety. She hit me for crying. Not a slap or a smack but a full-on punch to the gut. It worked. I stopped crying. Because I couldn't breathe.

I was four at the time. Gran never left me alone with her again.

To say that my grandmother meant the world to me would be a massive understatement. And Jakob just told me that the cognitive care facility it took me months to get her into might be shady.



## Chapter Two

The rest of my shift passed in a blur. I served beers, poured mixed drinks, shot down the people who hit on me, and struggled to stay focused, my thoughts circling like water rushing down a drain. What was up with Jakob's cryptic question about when I got off work? Was it his subtle way of telling me he didn't want to answer me in a packed bar? Was I supposed to wait for him?

I checked my watch. We'd closed at two a.m., but I had to get through my nightly checklist before I could even think about leaving. It was almost three now. My chores were done, and I just finished showing Nina four different ways to break someone's hold when they grabbed your wrist.

I glanced out the front window. There was no sign of Jakob's bike in the parking lot. My coworkers were slipping out the back door one by one, and I wasn't about to stick around and wait for him by myself. This bar wasn't in the best part of town, and even with my years of hand-to-hand combat training, I didn't relish the idea of putting my skills to use against a drunken biker who probably had a knife or a gun on them.

"You coming, Krista?" Tiny asked.

"Yeah," I said.

A few minutes later, I stepped from the air-conditioned bar out into the sultry heat of night. It might have only been early May, but in southern Texas, summer started in April and lasted right through November. Deep heat had descended on the small town of Kearny a few weeks ago, smothering us in its warm embrace. The hum of insects from the nearby trees was deafening. Humidity hung heavy in the air, making my movements feel slow and lethargic. What didn't help was my exhaustion. I hadn't escaped unscathed from my time in the military, and my scarred body felt battered and bruised from being on my feet for so long.

I said goodbye to my coworkers and moved toward my car with halting, pre-arthritic gracelessness. One of the reasons Gran and I chose to settle in this town, aside from the allegedly stellar nursing home, was because of the nearby military hospital. I had an appointment with my physical therapist there in a few days, and it couldn't come soon enough.

I slipped inside my car, locked the doors, and headed home. Visiting hours at the nursing home were from ten to five. After what Jakob said, I wanted to get there when the doors opened, which meant I'd be lucky if I got five hours of shut-eye. At least I never had trouble falling asleep. Combat vets are known for their ability to pass out anywhere, and I was no exception.

I eased to a stop at a red light two blocks from the bar. An engine thundered to life nearby and roared into the night like a lion claiming its kill. A few seconds later, a motorcycle pulled up next to me. It was loud enough to be a Harley, but when I glanced over at it, I saw the word Victory splashed across the side of the gas tank. Its driver wore a skullcap helmet and goggles, but I knew from the beard alone that it was Jakob. He turned toward me and then jerked his head to the left in a distinct command to follow him.

Okay then.

The light flashed green. No one else was on the road, so I threw my blinker on and turned, trailing the bike as Jakob wound up a side street.

I wasn't an idiot. Yes, I lusted after Jakob's body and magnetic sexual energy, but the truth was I knew nothing about the guy. He could be a complete psychopath.

I kept one hand on the wheel and popped open my center console with the other. Inside was a 9mm I'd purchased when I was still in the service. As an aerial gunner, I didn't go for the bells and

whistles of flashier handguns; I went for sturdy design and a robust reputation. This brand wasn't super popular, but the reviews for it were stellar. The people over at *Guns & Ammo* had buried one in the mud for a day, froze another in a solid block of ice, then defrosted it beneath the blazing sun and tossed another from a ten-story building. All three guns fired over a thousand rounds without failing afterward. No, it wasn't pretty, but it got the job done. I stashed it in my purse as I pulled into a small residential parking lot behind Jakob.

He cut his engine and slipped his goggles and helmet off. One long leg swung over the back of the bike, and then he was moving toward me with quick, sure strides.

I left my car running and kept the doors locked as I rolled my window down. "Well, this isn't weird or anything."

Jakob leaned forward and rested his elbows on my window frame. The smell of him hit my nose: leather and motor oil and a hint of dark cologne. This close, his eyes were startlingly blue, like he'd captured an arctic sky in his gaze.

"I didn't want anyone overhearing at the bar," he said. "Wanna cut the engine and follow me up? Better if anyone watching us thinks we're fucking instead of trading secrets."

And there went my thoughts, straight into the gutter.

He took my momentary breathlessness as hesitation. "I'm not a threat to you," he said. "That'd be like hurting a family member."

I shook my head to clear the fog of lust from my mind. Did he just say something about us being related? "What?"

He pulled up his right jacket sleeve just enough to reveal a length of corded forearm. The whorls of ink I'd spotted earlier were the tattered edges of a stylized specter's cloak. Over the grim creature, the words *Death Waits in the Dark* were written in stark black font.

I lifted my eyes to his. "You were a Night Stalker?"

He held my gaze and nodded.

Well, I'll be damned. Jakob was airborne, like me, only from a special operations Army helicopter regiment that flew into enemy territory at night, low and fast. I was stationed with a unit of Night Stalkers in Syria. They were some of the craziest motherfuckers in spec-ops. And *that* was saying something.

It didn't make me instantly trust him, but I no longer worried I'd have to shoot him. Only one percent of Americans serve their country. It does make you family, in a way, part of a small percentage of the population that's been joined together with others from all walks of life, ready to fight and die to keep everyone else free. The fact that we were both airborne combat meant we belonged to an even smaller group of individuals. It was a tight-knit community, and word got around in it. If he hurt me, he'd be excised from it like a cancerous growth at best. At worst, someone might really do a flyover and drop a bellyful of iron onto his head.

Something in my face must have given my thoughts away because he straightened and took a step back, hands loose at his sides, waiting. I rolled the window up, turned my car off, grabbed my purse, and got out. His hands landed on the roof on either side of me, caging me in, and I barely had enough room to turn and face him after shutting my door.

I stared up at him from inches away. A nearby streetlight cast its anemic glow over us, and the dim illumination did nothing to make him look less dangerous. His brows shaded his eyes, turning them into twin pools of cerulean. Suddenly the nickname the Viking made a whole lot of sense. Shave the sides of his head to the scalp, add a few bloodstains and smear some stylized runes across his skin, and he'd be all set to go terrorize a sixth-century English village.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“We need to sell the lie,” he said, leaning closer.

Right. The lie that we were fucking.

Oh boy.

“Sure,” I said, settling back against my door.

Approval lit his eyes, like he was impressed that instead of arguing with him, I chose to go along with this weirdness. Little did he know that I was all for anything that brought his big body closer to mine.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder, why all the deception? And why did he think he was being watched in the first place? Was he some sort of undercover agent who had infiltrated the club? I looked him over, taking my time. He didn't seem like a narc. In fact, from everything I knew about him, he was all too happy in his role as an enforcer for the Kings. Was it something else? A rival gang or a rift inside the club?

My questions cut off when he closed the distance between us. At five ten I was pretty tall, but I still had to look up at him. His beard tickled my cheek as he leaned in. I shivered when his lips brushed the shell of my ear. I'd wanted to be close to him all night. Hell, if I was honest, I'd been dreaming about this since the first time I laid eyes on him, and who knew when I might get another shot?

*Screw it.*

I turned my head and nuzzled his neck. The smell of his cologne was stronger here, dark, heady, spice and musk and the slight tang of citrus. It paired well with leather.

“Why do you walk with a limp?” he asked.

I blinked, surprised out of my dirty thoughts for the second time in less than five minutes. “You ever heard of small talk, Jakob?”

His breath warmed my neck when he answered. “Never saw the point of small talk. It's just useless words people throw around while they wait for someone to say something meaningful.”

Well, shit, when he put it like that...

“My right leg is basically bionic,” I said. “Hip replacement, pins holding my knee together, steel grafted to my shin and femur, you get the drift. I was medically discharged because of it.”

“Combat wound?” he asked.

I nodded, knowing he would feel my answer because of our proximity.

This was the part where he would pull back and look at me with pity. I'd had other soldiers do it, and I knew they weren't really seeing me anymore but thinking of people they'd served with, feeling that terrible tug of survivor's guilt for making it out of some hellhole unscathed when so many others hadn't.

Jakob didn't pull away, and he didn't look at me with pity. He put a hand on my injured hip, gently, and leaned in instead. “What happened?”

For some reason our forced intimacy made talking about it easier than usual. Maybe that was because with his nose buried in my hair, I didn't have to look at him as I spoke or because he hadn't reacted the way I anticipated, or maybe it was because as a Night Stalker, I knew he'd seen worse shit than I had and could understand what I was about to say.

“We took heavy fire during the siege of Kolomyia,” I told him.

“Ukraine?” he asked, his voice low enough that it had a little bit of growl to it.

I nodded again, thinking back to the brief but bloody shadow war the US had fought with Russia after they'd claimed the Crimean Peninsula and then tried to drag the rest of Ukraine back into the fold



of the new USSR.

“The landing gear was damaged during the battle,” I said. “Our pilot was forced to execute a controlled crash on a dirt road outside the city. Engine number four hit the ground. Its casing cracked, and the oil lines broke, spewing jet fuel everywhere. Something must have sparked because the right wing caught fire.”

“That doesn’t explain your leg,” he all but purred into my ear.

I took a deep breath. “Our equipment broke loose during the crash. My leg got pinned as I was trying to jump clear. It took four of my crewmates to free me. They almost burned to death in the process.”

“The pilot?” he asked.

“It wasn’t a flat road,” I said. “The nose caved after we hit. He was crushed.”

Those were the facts. Straightforward, no-nonsense, clinical. It was the standard story I told. If I didn’t let myself think about it, sometimes that’s all it was. Sometimes I didn’t see the ground rushing up at us through the open bay doors. I didn’t feel our youngest crewmate squeezing my hand for dear life. I forgot how scared I was when she and I were ripped apart during that first jarring impact. I didn’t hear the metal screaming over dirt and rocks or the wrenching groan of steel as it buckled under an immense pressure it was never designed to take. I didn’t feel my body broken under an impossible weight. Hear my crewmates screaming over me as I dipped in and out of consciousness. Feel the unbearable heat of the nearby flames or my terror of being left behind and burned alive.

“I remember that crash,” Jakob said. “I was maybe fifty miles away.”

A swell of surprise put a swift end to the tears that threatened. He’d been there? And near enough that he might have seen our plane if he’d looked up at the right time?

It was bizarre to think that he was in the same place as me on the worst day of my life, and yet it made me feel even closer to him somehow, our intimacy losing its forced edge and turning into something far more dangerous.

I didn’t ask him where exactly he’d been or what he’d been doing on the outskirts of Kolomyia. The answers might be classified, which meant we’d both go to jail if he told me, and I didn’t relish the idea of spending the rest of my days in Leavenworth.

He squeezed my hip again, oh so gently, and stepped back. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

My head swam. Maybe he wasn’t an alpha douche after all. Maybe I was the asshole for judging him too soon.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Ready to go up?”

I nodded, still trying to get my shit together.

He led me to the back door of a small brownstone. We were in an older section of downtown where the buildings ran into each other like row houses and gentrification had yet to move in.

“How many flights of stairs?” I asked.

He held the door open for me, letting me go first. “Two.”

I looked up at the first set and sighed. I could go down stairs just fine, but going up could be a struggle sometimes, like right now when I was already tired and my entire leg throbbed with sharp flashes of pain.

Jakob stayed behind me, letting me take the lead and set our pace. I put my left foot on the bottom step, took a deep breath, and started the climb. My hip joint protested. My lower leg ached like one giant shin splint. The bones of my knee felt like they were grinding to dust against the metal that held them in place. I grit my jaw and kept going, hand on the rail to help me push off.

After what felt like a small eternity, we made it to the final landing. I paused outside Jakob's door and caught my breath. There better be one hell of a comfortable couch on the other side of this.

"Please tell me you have aspirin," I said.

Jakob slipped past me and slid his key into the lock. Or he tried to. At the slight press of his hand, the door opened with a *whoosh*. I looked down and saw the now obvious signs of forced entry.

So did Jakob. He spun away from the doorway, pulling a gun from inside his jacket. I yanked mine free at the same time, dropping my handbag to the floor beside me. Thanks to our military training, we held our weapons in identical fashion: muzzle turned toward the floor, right hand around the grip stock, left hand cupped underneath, pointer finger along the barrel.

Our eyes met across the divide. He let go with his left hand and made some weird gestures at me.

"I don't speak Army," I whispered.

He sent me an unreadable look and squatted down, ready to take point. Most people holding a gun aim at chest height by default. If Jakob went in lower, he had a better chance of catching whoever was inside off guard. The problem was, there weren't any lights on. Darkness radiated out of the maw of the apartment like a beast waiting to bite.

I signaled for Jakob to wait a second and then pulled my phone from my purse. Fingers shaking, I hit the flashlight button, ground my teeth against the pain of crouching down, and whipped the phone across his floor. It spun over the hardwood, lighting up the room like a disco ball. Jakob waited half a second and ducked around the corner, gun aimed. When he didn't immediately fire or jump back into the hallway, I assumed no one was inside.

He rose from his crouch. "Clear."

I let out a shaky breath and lowered my gun.

"Hi, Daniel," Jakob said.

*Wait. What?*

I peered around the doorframe. My eyes adjusted to the weak light of my phone, and Daniel King materialized in front of me. The meanest son of a bitch in Kearny sat in the middle of the apartment on the couch I had so recently lusted after. No one else was in sight, so he must have been the one to bust the door open.

What the hell was going on here?



# Chapter Three

Jakob flicked the lights on as he strode into his apartment. I scooped my purse from the floor and followed a few steps behind him.

The Kings of Kearny were a rowdy bunch, the kind of men and women who were more concerned with their badass reputations than they were with aesthetics. I figured Jakob's place would be sparse: a couch, mattress in the corner, dirty clothes strewn about the floor, maybe a coffee table with pizza boxes and empty beer cans crowding the top of it.

His place wasn't sparse; it was spartan.

The military affects us all in strange ways. If Jakob wasn't a clean freak before joining, service had turned him into one. His apartment was larger than mine, with an open-concept kitchen and living room. Through a door to the right, I caught sight of a gleaming bathroom. Another door stood farther down on the same wall. Most likely a bedroom. The few pieces of furniture he had weren't new or trendy, but they looked well-made and were visibly spotless. Lord only knew what a black light might reveal. Jakob had a reputation for more than just violence, and I had a feeling his apartment had been painted floor to ceiling by his past sexual encounters.

The only thing that didn't fit was Daniel King. He sat in the middle of the couch with his arms spread over the top of it, taking up as much room as humanly possible. If I uploaded a picture of him to Twitter with the comment "Look at the manspread on this one," I'd get ten thousand responses from fed-up women within an hour. Road dust clung to his riding leathers. He'd propped his dirty boots on the coffee table like he owned the place. Between the break-in and his body language, the message was clear: *I have no respect for you or your shit.*

The man was in his late forties, and damn it if he didn't look good for his age. He wore his raven black hair long enough to show that it had a bit of a curl to it. His face was made to grace wanted posters. Three-day stubble covered his strong jaw. Those dark, piercing eyes landed on me, and I almost shuddered. There was a sardonic set to his lips that made me feel like someone had just told him a dirty joke about me and now he was picturing me naked.

He'd helped himself to one of Jakob's beers, and as we walked in, he lifted it to his lips and took a long swig, watching us over the top of it. Something about his expression reminded me of one of those cats you see on YouTube that just knocked a glass off a table for no apparent reason other than to be an asshole and was now looking at its owner like "The fuck are you going to do about it?"

I moved closer to Jakob and stashed my gun back in my purse.

"I don't speak Army," Daniel said, grinning. "That was funny."

I forced myself to smile at him. "Thanks."

As if it was an everyday occurrence to have your gang leader break into your apartment, Jakob hung his keys by the door and shrugged out of his jacket. The dark T-shirt he wore beneath it clung to his muscles in a way that would have had me drooling if not for our audience. His arms were sleeved in tattoos. My gaze stuck on them for a second. With some heavily tattooed people, you can tell that they didn't plan their ink out in advance but had it slapped together piecemeal. The result can be a jarring mix of styles and patterns. Jakob must have taken meticulous care designing his. They featured a military theme throughout, and each tattoo flowed so seamlessly into the next that it looked like one cohesive masterpiece of ink. It must have taken him years to complete and, judging from the quality, cost nearly as much as his bike.

He paused beside the fridge and turned to Daniel. "Need another beer?"

“Yeah,” Daniel said.

Jakob’s gaze cut to me. His voice softened and dropped half an octave into something low and husky. “Want a beer, babe?”

I stood stock-still, staring at him. *Babe?*

His eyes flashed with some unspoken warning, and I decided to go along with this plot twist like I had all the other insanity of the evening.

“Sure,” I said.

Nothing to see here, folks. Just three rational adults having a normal conversation after one of said adults broke into another of said adult’s apartment without explanation.

I snagged the beer from Jakob and twisted the top off, happy to have something to do with my hands. It cut down on the temptation to reach for my gun again. This whole situation was off. Why had Daniel kicked in Jakob’s door? And why wasn’t Jakob calling him out on it? There were so many undercurrents running between the two men that it felt like I was about to be caught in the riptide and dragged out to sea with them.

Jakob’s paranoia in the parking lot suddenly seemed a lot more understandable.

“How was your shift, Krista?” Daniel asked.

A shiver of dread ran through me when he said my name. “It was good, Mr. King.”

“No trouble?”

“No trouble.”

He nodded like all was as it should be in his realm.

I took a deep pull of my beer. He’d made a point to use my name. It set my teeth on edge because I’d never spoken to the man before and didn’t think he even knew I existed. Whenever he came into Charley’s, he sat in a special booth in the back that we kept permanently reserved for him. He was too important to come to the bar for his drinks. Instead, he had his flunkies fetch them for him.

I wasn’t naive; this wasn’t just some casual inquiry into my night. He wanted me to know that he knew who I was. For some reason it felt like a threat. Why? Because I was here with Jakob? Was there a rift in the Kings after all, and these were the two men causing it? If so, I had just unintentionally placed myself on Jakob’s side.

The wheels in my head started spinning. If Jakob’s paranoia was warranted and someone had been watching us in the parking lot, then they were probably loyal to Daniel, which meant that word would get back to him about how close we’d been. I was willing to bet that was why Jakob called me babe. That’s what his warning look was about; he wanted me to continue to play along with what we’d started downstairs.

It put me in an uncomfortable position. Charley’s name might be on my paychecks, but I knew who I really worked for. If I did anything to piss Daniel off or make him distrust me, I’d be out of a job and out on my ass. But what if I was reading the situation wrong? What if there was something else going on? Some other reason Jakob wanted to keep up this ruse?

I leaned against the kitchen counter and took another long sip of my beer, my mind working on overdrive. Jakob grabbed two more beers out of the fridge and headed toward his gang leader. He handed one over, and the two men clinked glasses. Then he came back and leaned against the counter beside me, so close our hips touched. He took a sip from his beer and casually draped a heavy arm over my shoulder like he did this all the time, like he *owned me* or something, and even though part of me wanted to shrug free from the embrace, I stayed where I was.

I might not know Jakob very well, but I believed him when he said he wouldn’t hurt me. Daniel, on the other hand, I didn’t know at all, and if he’d said those same words to me, I never would have

believed them.

Guess that made me Team Jakob.

I adopted a dopey expression and smiled up at him like a woman deep into the infatuation phase of a crush. He looked down and met my eyes, and his resting *fuck you* face turned into something more like *I Am Going to Fuck You and You Are Going to Come Screaming My Name*. This close, there was no way he could miss the way I shivered in response.

His eyes still locked on mine, he lifted his beer and took a sip. I shouldn't have been so turned on by the sight—I watched a bar full of bikers repeat this same motion ad nauseam night after night—but as Jakob pulled the beer away and wiped his thumb across his full lower lip, my gaze drifted down and latched onto the movement. Those lips twitched, just once, and I caught a flash of what might have been amusement in his eyes before he blinked, and suddenly I was staring up at a man with as much expression as a block of ice.

As if he hadn't just set my blood on fire, he broke our gaze and turned back to the man on the couch. "What's up?"

Goddamn it, I'd completely forgotten about Daniel for a second there.

I shook my head to clear it and took another pull from my beer. This is what I got for standing so close to my own personal thirst trap.

"That thing with Mike didn't pan out," Daniel said.

"Mike who?" Jakob asked.

"Mike Kaschak," Daniel said, glancing around the apartment. "I thought he might be here."

Jakob's face remained neutral, but his arm stiffened around me, and I knew the words hit him harder than he let on. My Spidey sense tingled. Was this why Daniel had done a bit of B & E?

"Haven't seen him," Jakob said.

Daniel drained his first beer and started in on the second. "You'll let me know if you do?"

"Of course."

Daniel's lips twitched up in a lopsided smile. His white teeth flashed against the sun-darkened skin of his face. He really was a handsome bastard, but I didn't need five minutes to figure out whether or not I would sleep with him. With Jakob, my inner cavewoman had weighed the safety of a one-night stand and decided it would be worth the risk. Daniel, on the other hand, sent her screaming back into her cave.

He looked between Jakob and me. "So. You two."

"Us two," Jakob said.

Bikers, loquacious people.

"Must be new," Daniel said. "Hadn't heard anything about you."

Jakob shrugged. "Krista's a private person."

Which implied that this wasn't a new thing and that we wanted to keep it a secret. And Jakob just told the man with the most power in town about it. If I knew anything about people in power, it's that they reveled in lording it over the rest of us. It made them terrible secret keepers because, in their need to put themselves above others, they'd often use people they deemed as inferior to them as stepping-stones. It was all too easy to see Daniel telling his other enforcers about this just to show off the fact that he, the king, had known about us while they had no idea. I had a sinking feeling that come this time tomorrow, everyone in Kearny would be gossiping about Jakob and me.

Daniel's grin gained a sharp edge, like a shark smelling blood in the water. His dark eyes shifted to mine. "You should come by sometime for dinner. Eva would love to have another set of hands in the kitchen."

Eva was his wife—a tall, striking woman of Armenian and Mexican descent that I'd only ever glimpsed through a crowd. I was tempted to tell him I didn't cook even though I was a whiz around a stove. Offhand comments like his always drove me bugfuck, an assumption of “womanly duties” that men like him were prone to making. The subliminal message was: come to my house and cook me dinner while I sit on my ass and do nothing. Because penis.

*Don't be an idiot*, I told myself. I needed to be in this man's good graces if I wanted to keep my job, and even though it killed a small part of me to do it, I smiled at him. “I'd like that.”

It was only when Jakob's arm relaxed around me that I realized it had stiffened again.

Daniel's gaze shifted to his enforcer. “What happened to your face?”

I looked up. Jakob had taken Rob's punch to the left cheek, and even though he'd iced it, it looked more swollen than it had outside and was starting to take on a sickly-looking puce hue.

“Micky and Rob got into it again,” Jakob said.

Daniel swore. “They trash the place?”

Jakob shook his head. “It broke up before anything started.”

His face evidence to the contrary.

“Good,” Daniel said, rising from his throne. He drained the rest of his beer and set it down on the table. “I'll leave you two lovebirds alone.”

He shot me a wink as he left that made me want to puke.

I tried to step away from Jakob when the door closed behind Daniel, but his arm tightened around me, holding me in place. We stayed there for several minutes, listening to Daniel's boots echo in the stairwell. Only when the door to the building slammed behind him did Jakob drop his arm from my shoulder and push off the counter.

I watched him as he moved toward the door, quieter than a man his size had any right to be. The frame was cracked like Daniel had barged in with brute force, but there was a series of locks higher up that could only be latched from the inside, and those were still intact. Jakob flicked them into place. For good measure, he wedged a chair against the knob.

“Get comfortable,” he said, turning back to me. “You're staying here tonight.”





## Chapter Four

“Excuse me?” I said, setting my beer down. “No way in hell am I staying here tonight. I need to go home and feed my dog.”

Lie. I didn't have a dog, but he didn't know that. This was just a desperate bid to escape. I couldn't stay here with him. He wasn't safe from me. Clearly there was some deeply disturbing shit going on in his life. Someone in his position probably wasn't thinking about sex; they were more concerned with survival. I'd always had an issue with being a little too blunt, and I didn't trust myself not to proposition him if I couch-crashed.

Jakob frowned. “You don't have a dog.”

I froze. *Danger. Danger, Will Robinson.* “Uh, yes, I do.”

He prowled over to me, stopping close enough that the toes of our shoes touched. If he was trying to intimidate me, he failed spectacularly. His broad shoulders filled my sight, and I had to physically restrain myself from reaching out to touch his chest just to see if it was as hard as it looked.

“No, you don't,” he said, low and insistent. “You live in a tiny studio apartment in a building that doesn't allow pets.”

I forced myself to step away from him. *Lusting after a potential stalker isn't mentally healthy, Krista.* “How do you know where I live?”

“Charley asked me to check you out when you applied for the bartender position.”

An image of him rummaging through my underwear drawer flashed through my mind. I found it far less disturbing than I should have. “And you were going to tell me about the fact that you've stalked me when?”

He sent me a flat look. “I didn't stalk you. We check out every new arrival to Kearny, especially people who will have access to the club. You think we haven't had undercover feds try to slip into town? We had to know you weren't law enforcement before letting you into our bar.”

Okay, fine, that made sense.

“I'm still not staying here,” I said.

He picked his beer up, but instead of taking another sip, he turned and dumped it down the kitchen drain. He set the empty bottle in the sink and faced me, crossing his arms over his chest. My gaze dropped to where his biceps strained against the sleeves of his shirt. Just one good flex and they might rip.

*Flex, damn you.*

“Daniel thinks we're fucking,” he said, unaware of my mental gutter dive. “How would it look if you slunk out of here five seconds after he left? He'd know something was up.”

“Then I'll stay long enough to convince him.” I looked Jakob over. Between his spartan apartment and no-nonsense persona, sex with him would probably be both mind-blowing *and* time-friendly. “What should we say, half an hour?”

He dropped his gaze and looked me over in return, the ice in his eyes melting. “Two, at least.”

My mouth went dry. *Focus, Krista, we're just talking hypotheticals here.* “Why the need for so much deception?”

A muscle along his jaw jumped out in sharp relief. “You don't need to know.”

From the look on his face, there was nothing else I could say to make him talk. Both of us had been through SERE school—survive, evade, resist, and escape. The military had trained us to endure interrogation and keep our mouths shut. I wasn't going to get anything out of him about why Daniel

broke in or any revelations about who Mike might be. At least not without duct tape, a set of pliers, and a soundproof room.

This was MC business. Since I didn't wear their leathers, I didn't get to know. And really, it was probably best I didn't. The answer might reference the Kings' illegal activities, and I had no desire to be an accomplice to any of their crimes.

I took another swig of beer. "Well, this isn't how I saw my night going."

"How did you see your night going?" he asked, his voice gaining a rough edge.

I blinked, caught off guard. Daniel wasn't here anymore. There was no one to perform for, but Jakob's hardcore persona was slipping away in front of my eyes, replaced by something much more tempting. His pale gaze took me in slowly, languidly, his focus lingering over my breasts and the swell of my hips.

Holy shit, maybe he *was* thinking about sex.

I saw an open challenge in his eyes when they lifted back to mine, like he didn't expect me to answer him honestly. I'd never backed away from a fight in my life, and I'd be damned if I started now. He wanted to know how I saw my night going? Fine. I'd tell him.

"Worst-case scenario, I went to bed alone and horny," I said.

His eyes bored into mine. "What was best case?"

I set my beer down and sent him a sly smile. "Best case was us breaking my bedframe."

In a blink, my butt landed on top of the kitchen island. He'd lifted me onto it like I weighed nothing. It was sexy as fuck, but I winced when I hit, my battle scars reminding me that I couldn't have a single pain-free moment to myself.

His hands stilled and fell to my waist. He must have seen me flinch.

"It's my goddamn leg," I said. "Ignore it. I'm trying to."

Instead of kissing me, like I hoped he was about to, he turned away.

I reached out and snagged the back of his shirt. "Where do you think you're going?"

He sent me a look over his shoulder that had no right to be so devastating. "I'm getting you that aspirin you asked for."

I released him. "I'll allow it."

He chuckled, a low rumbling sound like distant thunder, and pulled open a kitchen drawer.

I took the aspirin from him a minute later and popped two in my mouth, swallowing with a sip of beer. "You know, I think I can count on one hand how many times I've seen you laugh."

He stepped between my legs and planted his hands on either side of my hips, crowding in close. A little line appeared between his brows as he stared down at me, and I got an up close and personal view of his *fuck you* face. The intimidation tactic was only slightly ruined by the way his eyes shone like he was secretly amused.

"And you were going to tell me about the fact that you've been stalking me when?" he asked, throwing my own words back in my face.

"Ha ha," I said, but I was struggling not to smile. "It's not that. I'm just... aware of you when you're in the bar."

"I don't laugh much in the bar," he said.

"No, you don't."

There was a story there as to why, I could *feel* it, but if two minutes ago had taught me anything, it was that I wasn't going to get answers from him that he didn't want to give me. Fine. I didn't need them. It's not like I wanted his whole life story or had planned our marriage vows out in my head. I didn't even want to be his girlfriend. I just wanted to strip him naked and do terrible, debauched

things with him over the course of a marathon weekend that made both of us walk funny for the next week.

I reached out and grabbed his shirt again, this time using it to pull him closer. He braced his hands on the counter, biceps straining, and came to a full stop with his mouth an inch away from mine. I growled in frustration and tried to close the distance, but he straightened away.

“Wouldn’t want to touch you without permission,” he said.

I gave him a flat look. “You just picked me up and put me on your counter.”

“I was getting a crick in my neck looking down at you,” he said. “This is different.”

From the small grin he wore, I could tell he was at least partially joking, but the fact that he remembered what I said to him in the bar and was subtly telling me that I was now in charge of any contact between us was hot as hell. If I told him to stop, I had no doubt that he would back away and wouldn’t try anything with me again.

The thing was, I wanted him to try *everything* with me.

My focus fell to his lips. “Consider this permission granted to touch me as much as you want for the rest of the night.”

It was like I’d thrown a switch. The words barely left my mouth before he was on me. His lips crashed into mine. Our chests bumped together, my breasts flattened against the hard planes of his pectoral muscles. I reached up, desperate to grab hold of something, and wrapped my arms around his neck. He leaned into me harder, and my butt slid a little over the marble counter, away from him. From his low growl, he didn’t like that. One big hand landed on my ass, and he dragged me back to him, the motion an inaudible command of, “*Get the fuck back here.*”

He might have looked like some half-frozen Viking raider, but he kissed like he was on fire. His lips were hot and demanding on mine. My head spun as I tried to keep up with him. This wasn’t foreplay; he’d gone straight to fucking me with his mouth.

I nearly moaned when he broke away.

He stayed there, lips tantalizingly close, the warmth of his breath rushing over my skin. “Will it hurt if I pick you up?”

It took me a second to remember how to speak. “Yeah, but walking will hurt more.”

I tightened my arms around his neck and hooked my feet behind his back, and he dropped his hands to my ass and lifted me off the counter. The apartment blurred around me as he turned toward his room. I took full advantage of the position I was in and pressed my nose to his neck, breathing in his cologne. On instinct, I parted my lips and gently bit him. He made a low sound of masculine approval and pulled me closer, dick straining between us.

The world tilted as he set me down on the bed. I sank into the mattress, his added weight pushing me deeper. God, I’d missed this. The feel of warm skin beneath my hands. The sight of a man rising above me. I hadn’t had sex since before I’d moved to town, and four months of abstinence had left me hypersensitive to touch.

I shivered as his hands slid up my arms, his calluses deliciously rough against my skin. I’d braided my long hair to keep it out of my face while I worked, and he coiled it around his wrist and then clamped his fingers down on a section close to the base of my neck, using his grip to tug my head sideways. His beard tickled when his lips hit my neck.

I shivered again, harder this time, a familiar ache building between my thighs. This wasn’t enough. There were too many layers between us, and I wanted to be skin to skin with him. I reached down and tugged at the hem of his T-shirt. He let me go and pushed off the mattress, kneeling between my legs as he pulled his shirt over his head.

I was torn between wanting to launch myself at him and wanting to stay right where I was and stare at him for a while. The man was absolutely jacked, but he didn't look like one of those testosterone-fueled monstrosities you sometimes see in weight rooms. He was leaner, meaner. *Dense*. There wasn't an ounce of fat on him. His was the kind of physique that came from constant exertion. I knew through the grapevine that he belonged to a local mixed martial arts gym. He must have been in the dojo six days a week to look like this.

The tattoos didn't stop at his arms. They marched right up his shoulders and down his chest, covering his pecs. The contrast between the dark ink and his pale skin was striking in the dim light of his bedroom, and because he was so fair, it was impossible to miss the scars. On his lower right side, the telltale mark of a gunshot wound stood out. The tattoos covered it, but I saw a similar indentation on his right pec that might have been another one. There was a dark line across his left ribs from the kind of slicing wound a knife would make. It was still pink and angry-looking, like the stitches hadn't come out that long ago. Several more scars dotted his torso, varying in color because of their age.

The Kings of Kearny weren't what I would call a peaceful bunch, and with other gangs and motorcycle clubs within striking distance, violence was always in the cards. It was impossible to tell if Jakob had earned the majority of his scars while still in the military or after he was discharged. I wasn't going to ask. Ultimately, the answer to that question didn't matter right now, and it would ruin the mood.

Instead of interrogating him, I pulled my shirt off. Thank God I'd gone into tonight hoping to end it beneath him. I'd shaved before leaving my house and had the foresight to slip on one of my nicer bra-and-panty sets. Nina and I had been spending our days off loitering at my apartment complex's pool, and the red lace popped against my suntan.

Jakob's gaze drifted from my bra down over my stomach and landed on the waistband of my jeans. He reached out and unbuttoned them with a practiced flick of his fingers. "Tell me it's a matching set."

I stretched beneath him like a cat. "It's a matching set."

He let out a low grunt and slid my zipper down. This was usually the part of the night where I stopped my potential partner and warned them about my leg. The kind of injuries I'd sustained, paired with the surgeries that followed it, left gnarly scars. And not just thin slashes of red running across my skin like the worst of what Jakob seemed to have. I had chunks missing where metal had cleaved through muscle, permanent mesh patterns from the skin grafts I'd needed, and Frankensteinian marks where my body had been held together by staples.

I didn't think I needed to warn Jakob. He had his own litany of past injuries, and as a King and fellow vet, he must have seen his fair share of life-threatening wounds, both fresh and healed. Still, I couldn't stomach the thought of watching his face twist in disgust as he took my leg in for the first time, like one of my past, aborted one-night stands had.

"The leg is pretty bad," I said.

He gripped the top of my jeans and tugged, shucking them down over my ass. His eyes came up to mine slowly, like he didn't want to look away from my panties. "So?"

I let out a sharp exhale.

So.

Bless the man for sounding like he gave absolutely no fucks.

"I thought I'd warn you in case you were squeamish," I said.

He didn't say anything to that, just tugged my jeans down lower, pausing when he realized I was still wearing my shoes. I swore and started to kick them off. Several heartbeats later, we were both

naked. Neither of us had the patience to strip each other down and slowly savor every inch of freshly revealed skin. That wasn't what this was. Instead, we ripped our own clothes off in quick, jerky movements.

He pulled a condom from the pocket of his jeans before dropping them to the floor. I was neither offended at the assumption nor surprised he had one so readily available. If I looked like Jakob Larson, I'd keep all four pockets stuffed full of them at all times with a spare pack strapped to my ankle like a backup gun.

I braced myself up on my elbows so I could see more of him. He tore the condom open, and I dropped my gaze and watched him roll the rubber on. His dick was big like the rest of him and thick enough that I'd worry about having to take things slow if I wasn't already soaked.

Jakob chucked the wrapper aside and then paused, his gaze running over my right leg. One shoulder rose in a lazy shrug. "I've seen worse."

I dropped my eyes to his left thigh where a noticeable divot in his flesh and thick, ropey scarring showed me that he was missing a small chunk of muscle himself.

He paused, noticing my line of sight. "Still want to fuck me?"

I let out a shaky breath. "God, yes."

"Good."

He slapped my left knee and then jerked his head in a silent command to roll away from him. I might have been irritated if I didn't realize what he was doing. He wanted to take me from behind with me lying on my right side because that position would require the least amount of movement from my aching leg.

Great. Just when I'd convinced myself that this would be a one-time-only thing, Jakob had to go and be sneaky nice.

I shifted onto my side. The mattress dipped behind me. I glanced over my shoulder and nearly stopped breathing. The sight of Jakob stalking toward me across the bed was something I knew I would never, ever forget. The graceful, almost lazy way his huge, muscular body moved was damn near inhuman, all rolling sinew and languorous power. Somehow the reality of being with him was already better than the hundreds of fantasies I'd had of us together, and we hadn't even done more than kiss.

My inner muscles clenched in anticipation as he slid into place behind me. He gripped my shoulder and turned me a little, just enough that he could sear his mouth over mine like a brand.

*"You are mine,"* his kiss said.

I gave myself over to him wholeheartedly. It might only be for a night, but while I was here, I *was* his. He could have whatever part of me he wanted, and I would happily claim him in return.

He wrapped my braid around his wrist again and gripped my hair, holding me in place as he slid his dick between my thighs. I lifted my left leg a little to ease his way and felt him slick through my wetness. Even with the condom between us, I could feel the heat rolling off his skin.

I braced myself for the feel of him shoving into me from this angle, but he surprised me by pushing farther until his tip stroked over my clit. A moan slipped from my mouth, and he drank it down as his tongue continued to ply my own. His free hand stroked up my side and landed on my breast. He palmed it, my C cup filling his grip before he eased his hold just enough to run his fingers over my nipple. I ground my ass back in response, and the head of his dick slid over my clit again.

He rolled my nipple, plied my tongue, and thrust once more, harder this time. I knew he could tell from the wetness gathering between us what he was doing to me, and as my moans gained a pleading edge, he must have realized that I wanted more.

He broke the kiss and chuckled. The sound was despotically.

Goddamn it. He was denying me on purpose.

The kicker was, it turned me on.

Letting someone else take charge in the bedroom was something I could get behind when that someone was Jakob. Another partner or, hell, another mood, and I might be the one calling the shots.

An image of me rising above him, his hands tied to the bedrail while I rode him, flitted through my mind, and I knew I wanted to do this again. And again.

*And again.*

“Don’t make me say it,” I ground out.

He thrust again, so slow that my back arched as the ribs of the condom danced over my hyperstimulated skin. His lips ghosted the shell of my ear, all the warning I had before he bit my earlobe, harder than I had bitten him.

“Say it,” he growled.

*Oh. My. God.*

“Please, Jakob,” I rasped.

His hand slid from my breast down over my belly. It dipped between my thighs, and he used his fingers to guide himself to my entrance. I shifted my hips toward him, and a small stab of pain sliced into my right one. Thank God he couldn’t see me grimace. With so much steel holding my bones in place, sex was never a pain-free experience. Some days it got close to it if I’d taken it easy, but on a night like tonight, after I’d been on my feet for hours, there was no escaping a fair amount of discomfort with my pleasure. At least I’d learned how to trick my brain into enjoying a little pain during sex. I had a nice Army therapist with a kink for B&D to thank for that hot tip.

Another hot tip nudged inside me, and my pain was drowned beneath a wave of pleasure.

*Yes. God, yes.* I needed this.

The angle made me tighter than normal, and despite the slickness of my arousal, Jakob had to work his way in and out of me a few times before the condom was coated enough that he could thrust deeper. Even then, he took his goddamn time pushing in.

I let out a huff of annoyance. “If you go easy on me, so help me God, I’ll tell every woman I know that Jakob Larson made slow, passionate love to me.”

His chest shuddered against my back as he chuckled, the sound filled with dark amusement. “I knew you’d be impatient.”

I craned my head around, trying to see his face. He *knew* I’d be impatient? Meaning he’d thought about this too? In the dim light of the bedroom, I had just enough time to catch the white flash of his teeth before he speared into me.

I nearly screamed. And not in pain. “Oh God, Jakob.”

His hand was still between my legs, and the next time he thrust into me, the pad of a finger landed on my clit. Words lost all meaning then, and I gave myself over to the desire racing through my veins and the feel of his thick, rigid cock filling me up. It was somehow too much and not enough at the same time.

Jakob must have felt the same way. He made a sound of frustration and then tightened his grip on my braid. “Roll,” he said, tugging my hair to get me moving.

I rolled forward a little, and another tug signaled I was right where he wanted me. He slid one leg between mine, rose up on his elbow, and started *fucking me sideways*. My body stretched around him, pulsing in time with his thrusts like I was trying to draw him deeper. I didn’t know if I could

comfortably take much more of him, but if it felt this good, I was willing to risk it. Conscious of my injured hip, I carefully tilted my pelvis back. The angle changed, and he rammed fully home.

Both of us moaned.

He thrust again, slaving his fingers and his dick. I reached out and grabbed his ass, urging him on. At this rate, we wouldn't need that whole half hour I'd initially predicted. We'd barely begun, and I was already tipping past the breaking point.

"Jakob," I said, my nails biting into his skin.

Instead of giving me what I wanted, he slowed his movements and leaned over me, bringing his lips back to my ear. "If your leg wasn't bugging you, I would drag this out until you fucking begged me for release."

How was he still talking in complete sentences? I tried to respond, but his fingers rolled over my clit just as his dick hit my cervix, and all I managed to do was slur, "Maabae nest time."

God, I hoped there would be a next time.

He didn't change his pace, knowing I was close. A lot of men thought that meant it was time to jackrabbit you to completion, not realizing that what they had been doing was exactly what you needed. Jakob knew. He kept up a slow but relentless rhythm, playing my body like a string instrument. It sang beneath him, every nerve ending coming alive as he pushed me closer and closer to the edge. My hip ached, even in this position, but it wasn't enough to delay the inevitable.

I dug the fingers of my free hand into his sheets and lost myself to the feel of him driving into me. A heartbeat later, I came screaming his name, my inner muscles clenching around him. He let go of my braid and braced himself up with his hands, changing our angle, prolonging my orgasm even as his thrusts slowed and his dick throbbed inside me with the strength of his release.

"Fuck. Krista."

He dropped his mouth to my shoulder and nipped at me as his movements slowed. I let out a heavy sigh of contentment beneath him, utterly spent.

Afterward, we lay on our backs, boneless, the sweat cooling on our skin as his A/C unit whirred to life.

"I need to take a shower," I said. "I smell like beer and sex."

Jakob leaned toward me and nipped at my shoulder again. "You taste like beer and sex."

Even though I was exhausted, the low rumble of his voice made me want to spread my legs for him and ask if he wanted to check if *all* of me tasted like that, but before I could form the words, he rolled away and stood. I turned my head to take in the view. Damn, the man had a nice ass. There was something about a bubble butt on a man that always drove me wild. The only blemish on his was the four little half-moons my nails had left in his skin.

He strode out of the room, and a minute later, I heard the sound of a shower coming to life. I was just convincing my body that it would be worth the effort of getting up when he padded back into the room and scooped me off the bed.

"I can walk, you know," I said.

His features slid into the same expression he'd given me when I'd warned him about my leg. "So?"





# Chapter Five

“What’s going on with the nursing home?” I asked Jakob.

We’d showered and were back in his bed. He’d lent me a shirt to sleep in. It had a clean lime scent and absolutely swamped my smaller frame. Outside, darkness bled from the night sky, a corona of red gold rising in the east. It was five a.m. My eyelids were so heavy I needed matchsticks to hold them open, but I had to know if Gran was in danger.

Jakob met my gaze. “There are drugs coming into Kearny.”

“I thought you guys didn’t sell here,” I said, frowning.

“We don’t. They’re not ours. It’s mostly high-end prescription stuff, and we think someone on staff at Magnolia is switching out the old people’s meds with placebos and selling the real deal on the side.”

I rolled onto my back and pressed the heels of my hands to my eyes. “God- *fucking* -damn it. Do you know how much research I did before choosing Magnolia Hills? They had the best reputation for Alzheimer’s treatment in the state.”

“This is a recent development,” Jakob said. “And we haven’t been able to prove it yet. It’s just a suspicion.”

I pulled my hands away and looked at him. “Why haven’t you been able to prove it? Haven’t you talked to their management?”

He shook his head. “They wouldn’t listen even if we tried. The Kings aren’t welcome at Magnolia Hills.”

“I thought all the local businesses here worshipped you guys.”

The Kings had a habit of helping out struggling mom-and-pop shops, frequenting them when business was slow or giving them low APR loans out of the club’s funds when banks denied them financial assistance. It was part of why so many people put up with all their other garbage, aside from the whole ex-military thing. For all their faults, the Kings cared about this town, and they did more to keep its citizens safe and happy than our elected officials did.

Did that make a gang full of gunrunners the good guys? No. But my time in the military had taught me that not everything was as black and white as some people would have you believe.

“A few club members have parents or grandparents there,” Jakob said. “So do some guys from the Jokers. Their paths crossed during visiting hours once.”

He didn’t have to say anything else. The Jokers were a motorcycle club with territory to the west of Kearny and were the Kings’ biggest rivals. No doubt a brawl had broken out. Hopefully none of the residents were hurt during it.

“What can I do?” I asked. I couldn’t move Gran again. She’d just gotten settled in, and she really seemed to like Magnolia Hills.

“Do you have power of attorney over her?” Jakob asked.

“Yeah.”

“For medical shit too?”

I nodded.

“Ask to have her drug tested,” he said.

“Won’t her doctor be pissed if I do that?” Magnolia Hills had several on staff. Gran’s was a middle-aged Latina woman named Dr. Perez, and she’d been excellent so far. I didn’t want her to think that I questioned her care of my grandmother.

“Tell her doctor why you want it,” he said. “That you heard someone there might be shady. Management might not want to listen to the Kings, but when family members of their patients start complaining, that’s different.”

“I can do that,” I said. “What else? Want me to take sneaky pictures of staff members?”

He sent me an amused look. “It’d be better if you take me with you next time you go. Say I’m your boyfriend and you want to introduce me to your grandmother. They’ll have to let me in then, and I’ll get a chance to look around for myself.”

I stared at him. “Only if you promise not to do anything to get me banned.”

He somehow managed to shrug while lying down. “I promise.”

“I wanted to go see her today.”

His gaze slid past me to the alarm clock. “Then we need to shut up and go to sleep.”



THE THING ABOUT ONE-night stands is that they’re only supposed to last *one* night. If you got carried away and stayed over, the next morning could be awkward as hell. Did you have sex again? Making it a one-night/morning stand? Offer to cook breakfast as some sort of weird thank-you for the orgasm? Or did you try to slip out of there before your hookup woke up, making you look like a complete douchebag?

I preferred to avoid those conflicts altogether. In the past, I’d gotten my rocks off and gone home with a smile on my face. That wasn’t possible when someone ordered you to stay with them and then barred their apartment door.

Jakob and I had been on opposite sides of the bed when we fell asleep, with a wide gap between us, but when I woke up several hours later, a heavy arm pinned my waist to the mattress. My left leg was draped over one of Jakob’s. He’d nuzzled his head into the crook of my neck sometime during the wee hours, and now we lay there, sharing a pillow, his breath heating my shoulder as the sun peeked around the edges of his curtains, brightening the room with its midday glow. His clock read 11:06. So much for getting to the nursing home right when they opened.

I nudged him with my shoulder. “Jakob.”

He jerked awake, rearing above me like a snake ready to strike.

I threw my hands up between us. “Whoa!”

“Krista?” he asked, voice rough with sleep.

“Yep. Still here.”

“Sorry,” he said, rubbing a hand over his face.

“No problem.”

Note to self: don’t try to wake Jakob Larson out of a dead sleep ever again. I should have known better than to do that to a combat vet, but with only six hours of sleep myself, my brain was still sluggish.

Now that the threat of violence had passed, I pulled my hands away from him and struggled upright. My leg was stiff, but last night made it well worth it.

“I need to go back to my place and get changed before heading over to see Gran,” I said. “Want to meet at Magnolia Hills around twelve thirty?”

He nodded and sat back against the headboard. “Sure.”

His hair was disheveled from sleeping with it wet. He looked tired and sated, at ease in a way I had never seen. The blankets pooled around his waist, revealing the full glory of his chiseled upper body.

I pulled my eyes away from him and rolled out of bed. My right knee buckled, and I had to grab the headrail for support.

Jakob's hands landed on my hips, bracing me up. "You got it?" he asked.

"I got it, just a little sore."

The hands disappeared. "I have that effect on women."

I shot him a look over my shoulder. His smug grin matched his smarmy, goading tone. I narrowed my eyes at him, and his grin widened. Well, damn. Jakob Larson had a sense of humor.

"I meant my leg. Not my vagina," I said, trying to let some air out of his giant ego.

His shirt fit me with all the flattery of a potato sack, but from the way he looked me over, I might as well have been standing there stark naked. "I knew I should have dragged it out for longer," he drawled.

"My God, you are full of yourself," I said, scooping my clothes up. I had to pee so bad. The weight of his arm had been crushing my bladder.

He leaned back, bracing his hands behind his head, biceps flexing in a way that tempted my gaze, and sent me a dark grin made of pure masculine smugness. "Said the woman who practically begged me for a next time."

I snapped my mouth shut and shambled out of there to go hide in his bathroom. I really had said that, hadn't I? Lord help me, I'd meant it. Even now, the sight of his big body leaned up against the headboard filled my mind with dirty thoughts, and I imagined myself doing all sorts of things to him that would wipe that smug look from his face.

We didn't have time for any of them. Gran came first. I needed to get the hell out of here, get changed, and make sure she wasn't being fed Tic Tacs instead of the cholinesterase inhibitors that were supposed to help with her memory loss.

I saw to business and then changed back into my clothes from last night. There was no avoiding the mirror over Jakob's bathroom sink, and I tried my best to set myself to rights in it. My dark brown eyes were a little bloodshot, and my already full lips looked even fuller, evidence of how well they'd been used last night. Between them and my hair, which had gone into full revolt while I'd slept, I looked like I'd been well and truly fucked.

By the time I reemerged, Jakob was in his kitchen, wearing a pair of faded jeans that sat low on his hips. He was shirtless, and my breath whooshed out of me in a low "*Oof*." It was different, seeing all that muscle in broad daylight. In the soft glow last night, shadows had played over his skin, softening his hard lines, making him seem less massive, more pliable. And looking down on him while he sat in bed this morning had badly skewed my perspective, made me momentarily forget the sheer size of him. Now he seemed unbreakable. Now there was no ignoring the fact that he looked like some sort of weaponized version of a human. His biceps were as big as my thighs. I could have swung from his trapezius muscles. He didn't have abs so much as he had bricks stacked over his torso.

He paused at the counter and turned toward me, and the smell of freshly brewed coffee hit my nose. "How do you take it?"

*However you want to give it to me*, I almost blurted.

Most people were repelled by things that intimidated them. I'd always been drawn to them instead. It must have been some sick need to prove myself. To convince myself that I could be just as bad, just as mean, just as dangerous. Or that nothing frightened the great Krista Evans. Whatever the reason, Jakob drew me like a magnet. He was half-feral, had a horrible reputation for violence, and yet all I could think about right now was how to convince this big bad man to let me tie him to the

nearest piece of furniture. The fact that I was fantasizing about someone so dangerous choosing to submit themselves to me was another topic entirely, one it would take my therapist to untangle.

“Krista?”

I blinked.

Jakob stood holding the coffee carafe, staring at me. Amusement and arrogance spread over his features. “Thought you were stroking out for a second there. Need me to go put a shirt on, or are you okay now?”

My face burned with the strength of my embarrassment. I wasn’t someone who blushed easily, but goddamn it if he hadn’t just caught me drooling over him.

*Well done, Krista.* Instead of deflating his ego, I’d hooked it up to a tank of helium. From the shit-eating grin on his face, I would never live this down.

“I’m fine,” I bit out.

“How do you take your coffee?” he repeated.

“Just cream if you have it,” I said, trying to act as normal as possible. The military had taught me that responding to this kind of teasing only made it worse.

He pulled a to-go mug out of a cupboard, filled it for me, and met me by the door as I stepped into my shoes. “Here you go.”

I took the mug from him as I straightened, touched but slightly confused. Jakob didn’t seem like that bad of a guy. Maybe he was a little arrogant, but let’s face it, he’d earned that self-assurance. And he might have been blunt, cagey about details of his life, and borderline domineering at times, but then there were little things, like not being the least bit put off by my leg, carrying me to the shower, those dark hints of humor, and now this thing with the coffee, that made me think he didn’t quite deserve his black reputation.

“Thanks,” I said.

“You’re welcome.” He pulled the chair away from the doorknob, unlatched the locks, and then turned away and strode into the kitchen without a backward glance. “See you in a while.”

I shoved my frustration down and left his apartment. I had *not* been hoping for a goodbye kiss. Not one bit.

I almost convinced myself that was true by the time I pulled out of the parking lot, sipping some of the best homemade coffee I’d had in years.



## Chapter Six

Magnolia Hills Nursing Home sat on ten well-manicured acres of rolling Texas hills. Most of it was cultivated into parkland, with vast stretches of mowed lawns dotted here and there with towering live oaks that provided a much-needed bit of shade. Quaint, split-rail fences separated one area from the next. Paths wound lazily throughout the grounds, and the staff regularly encouraged their residents to get out and get some exercise on the days we didn't have black-flag warnings.

Gran and I liked to slip out through the back doors when I visited and while away the hours walking. Or we'd head to our favorite bench. It stood beneath a namesake magnolia on the crest of the tallest hill on the property. Together, we'd sit and gossip as white, fluffy clouds marched past overhead. This was Big Sky Country, and the view from up there stretched from horizon to horizon in all directions.

I pulled into the parking lot of the nursing home and turned the car off. The building itself was less inspiring than its surroundings. It was only three stories tall, and instead of being built to impress, it was made to withstand the tornadoes that ripped through here every spring.

At twelve thirty on the dot, the thunder of a revving motorcycle reached my ears. I looked over just as Jakob pulled into the parking space beside me. I should have known he'd be punctual. He cut his engine and stood from the bike, pulling off his helmet. Dressed in his King leathers, he looked as unapproachable and dangerous as he had in the bar last night.

Maybe this was a mistake.

He left his helmet on the bike seat, knowing no one would be stupid enough to steal it, and ambled over to my door. His sunglasses hid his eyes from me, and I had no idea if his gaze was still as warm as it had been this morning or if it had frosted over again.

"You gonna sit in there all day, or are we doing this?" he asked, voice muffled through the glass.

This was definitely a mistake.

I sighed and got out of the car. Jakob tugged off his motorcycle gloves as we headed toward the front door. He tucked them into the pocket of his jacket and reached out to thread his fingers through mine, playing the part of my boyfriend.

The bullshit started the second we stepped inside.

A large man in a security uniform rose from a chair in the entryway and blocked our path, his feet braced wide like he was facing down a charge. He had light black skin, a shaved head, and the kind of build that made me think that he could literally throw us out of there. His name was Hank. I'd chatted with him on several occasions, usually when there was a line of visitors waiting to get checked in. He was an ex-cop who worked the security detail here. Magnolia Hills mostly kept him and a few other officers around to help out with unruly patients. It wasn't uncommon for people with dementia to become violent, and sometimes even the large male orderlies on staff needed another helping set of hands.

Hank had only ever been kind to me, but now he did nothing to mask his open look of disgust as he stared Jakob down.

I squeezed Jakob's hand, praying that he'd let me deal with this. "Hi, Hank."

"You can't come in here," he said, still staring at Jakob.

The biker tensed beside me, his grip tightening.

*Shit.*

I pulled my hand free before he bruised my fingers and stepped in front of him, hoping to defuse the situation. “Hank, this is my boyfriend. He’s not here to start any trouble. I only wanted him to meet my gran.”

Hank’s gaze finally dropped to me, and I saw recognition in his eyes. “You’re dating a King, Krista?”

I nodded. “I work at Charley’s, remember?”

He frowned. “You’re not one of them, are you?”

“No. Look, I promise he won’t be a problem. I just want him to meet Gran while she’s still”—I took a deep breath and put a little wobble into my voice—“you know, my gran.”

His expression softened. He knew my grandmother had Alzheimer’s and that her short-term memory was already slipping. I might have felt like an asshole for playing this card and intentionally manipulating him, but if it kept Gran and her new friends safe from some wannabe drug dealer, I’d do this and worse and pray for forgiveness later.

Hank’s gaze lifted back to Jakob. His expression hardened. “You step a toe out of line, and I’ll shoot you,” he said, resting his palm on the butt of the gun strapped to his waist.

Jakob didn’t say anything, but the hard jerk of his chin could have been a nod of assent.

I waited for a tense moment as Hank eyed him, then let out a shaky breath when he finally stepped aside and let us in. I could tell from the look on his face that our days of friendly banter while I waited to see Gran were over. As an ex-cop, it made sense that he hated the Kings—they got away with murder in this town, if some of the uglier rumors I’d heard were true—but I couldn’t keep a little pang of regret from darkening my mood as we left the entryway behind us.

Thankfully the reception area was relatively clear. There were only two other sets of visitors ahead of us, waiting to get in: three older Latino men, and a young couple that looked to be of eastern Asian descent with two rambunctious kids running circles around them. The woman turned when she heard Jakob’s boots clomping over the marble, and the friendly smile fled from her face when she caught sight of him. She leaned in and whispered something to her husband as we approached. He glanced back and then grabbed his kids, keeping them close.

If Jakob’s feelings were hurt, it didn’t show. He stared at the room around us with a look of utter boredom, like he didn’t want to be here. No one watching from a distance would notice the focus in his eyes, the way they seemed to take in every detail. A door opened to our right, and he turned to track the man who strode out of it. Something about how focused Jakob was on him had me turning my head too.

The man was white and looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties. The navy suit he wore fit him like a glove, revealing broad shoulders and a narrow waist. He had the kind of good looks that reminded me of an old-school Abercrombie poster. His brown hair was styled into a crew cut. The deep golden color of his skin spoke of a life led outside. He looked young, successful, and supremely confident.

His dark gaze scanned the room as he walked, pausing over Jakob briefly and then landing on me. I was an attractive woman. I was used to being checked out. God, the first week I worked at Charley’s, I got hit on more times than I could count. This man looked at me with interest, but it was different than idle appreciation. His gaze roved over me almost clinically, as if checking my features against some sort of internal database. He must have been a doctor.

A heartbeat later, he pulled his gaze off me and disappeared into another door. He didn’t reemerge, but Jakob kept his attention fixed in that direction like a sight hound. Had he recognized that guy? There was no way to ask him without someone overhearing. Between the cavernous space and

the marble beneath our feet, this room had the kind of acoustics most theaters would kill for. Every sound was amplified, even the hushed whispers of the couple ahead of us.

Several awkward minutes later, we stepped up to the front desk. The white woman behind it was even taller than me and sturdily built. In her early forties, her mousy brown hair was pulled up into the same no-nonsense bun she always wore it in. Her hazel eyes were sharp behind her thick-framed glasses as she looked between Jakob and me.

I placed my hands on the counter and smiled, trying to look nonthreatening. "Hey, Annie."

She jerked her head at Jakob. "He can't come in here."

I repeated the same sob story that I'd told Hank, but unfortunately, she was immune to my pretty face and crocodile tears.

"Last time we let one of them in, we ended up with twenty thousand dollars' worth of damage," she said, her chin set in a stubborn line.

Okay, why the hell hadn't that shown up in my Google search? Had Daniel King done something to smooth it over or cover it up?

Jakob stepped beside me and slid two crisp hundred-dollar bills over the counter toward Annie. "I won't be a problem."

She eyed his hand for a second and then darted a glance around the room. No one else was in line behind us, thank God, or she might not have been tempted to take the bribe. Finally, looking for all the world like she didn't want to, she reached out and grabbed the bills.

"You better not be," she said.

I signed us in and led Jakob away, praying that no one else tried to stop us. His *fuck you* face was back in full force, and from the way his jaw was clenched, I worried he might hit the next person to look at him funny.

This right here was why I wasn't looking for anything more than a one-night stand with him. This was why I didn't want to be his girlfriend. I didn't want to worry about his moods. I didn't want to smooth the way for him, and I didn't want to be annoyed when people treated him like he had rabies. They had every right to be afraid of him. He was in a gang, for fuck's sake. Try to dress it up however you wanted, but regardless of the fact that every King was a veteran, every King was also part of a criminal organization.

I strode toward Gran's room, wearing my own *fuck you* face, regretting my decision to let him come. This was why I shouldn't agree to anything right after sex; the hormones left my brain dick-addled and incapable of making good choices.

The hallway was empty around us, the sound of our shoes loud on the tile floor. Suddenly there was a jerk on my arm, and I found myself pressed against the wall, Jakob looming up in front of me. Here, in broad daylight and when I was already annoyed with him, it wasn't nearly as hot as it had been last night. I put my hands on his chest and shoved. My leg might give me hell, but I still made it to the gym four times a week, and I had enough muscle and knowledge to move someone even as big as Jakob when I put my mind to it. He stumbled back a few steps, caught off guard. Surprise lit his eyes before he locked his expression down.

"What's the problem?" he growled.

"We're not in your apartment anymore," I said, voice low so it wouldn't carry. "You do not have permission to grab me whenever you want."

The look he gave me was pure King. "Fine. But what the fuck is the *actual* problem?"

"I shouldn't have agreed to this," I said. "Everyone here is going to treat me differently from now on because they'll think we're dating."



Once the words were out, I realized how much they made me sound like an asshole. Like I was ashamed of him. That wasn't it. I couldn't give a shit what anyone thought; I just didn't want to listen to everyone's judgment. My blunt mouth meant that I would call them on it at some point and make the situation even worse.

"Jakob, I—"

"Of fucking course," he said, cutting me off before I could apologize. "Wouldn't want anyone to think America's sweetheart was slumming it with a King."

I stared at him. "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

He waved a hand at me. "You look like you're ready to go to church."

I glanced down at myself. I wore a high-waisted, ankle-length flowy skirt with a fitted tank top tucked into it that made my boobs look amazing. I thought I looked pretty good, and part of the reason I chose this outfit was because of how I thought Jakob might react to it. This was not the response I hoped for. His words left me cold, and now I felt like an idiot for wanting to impress him.

"You're one to talk about clothing choices," I said, my temper flaring to life. "You're wearing head-to-toe black leather in eighty-degree weather."

"To keep me safe if I wreck the bike," he bit out.

I spread my arms. "We're inside. No threat of a fall here. Yet you keep that jacket on twenty-four seven because heaven forbid people not recognize you as a King."

He stepped in close, voice low with anger. "I am a fucking King whether I wear the jacket or not."

I opened my mouth to snap at him and realized it wasn't worth it. "You should go," I said instead. His eyes bored into mine like a subarctic drill. "No."

"I don't need you here to get Gran tested, and the thought of playacting like you're my boyfriend in front of her after this makes me want to puke."

He dropped his voice even lower. "You need me, and you know it. You're poking your nose into some shit here. Get over your pissiness with me and think about it, Krista. You say anything to your doctor about a drug dealer on staff without a King to back you up, and you'll make a huge target out of yourself. Anyone stupid enough to fuck with the Kings will have no problem silencing one nosy woman."

"I can take care of myself," I said.

He snorted. "The fuck you can. Any fighter worth their salt could spot that bum leg from a mile away. It's the first thing I'd hit, and you know if a man my size landed one good kick, you'd be fucked."

I curled my fingers into fists, nails digging into my palms. Goddamn him. "You are *such* an asshole."

His answering grin was as cold as his eyes. "I never claimed to be anything else."

No, he hadn't. I was the idiot who'd misinterpreted a few moments of basic human decency as evidence that there was more to Jakob Larson than met the eye.

I wouldn't make that mistake again.



# Chapter Seven

I paused outside Gran's door and took several deep breaths. Jakob stood just behind me. I'd agreed to let him come, even after our spat in the downstairs hallway, because he was right about the fact that I would make myself a target without him. I was less concerned with that, despite his insistence that I couldn't take care of myself, and more concerned with the fact that by consequence, I'd make a target out of Gran too. If someone working here was corrupt, it'd be all too easy for them to strike out at her to get back at me, and I would never forgive myself if that happened.

My one stipulation was that we didn't lie to Gran. I couldn't play the part of Jakob's girlfriend in front of her. Not now. Judging by the way he'd shut down, he wasn't ready to fake being all loved up either.

I took one last steadying breath and turned toward him. The leathers he wore were matte black like his bike, and the light seemed to bend around his frame as if it were allergic to him. His blue eyes lacked any hint of warmth. He stood there like a sliver of night, projecting an aura of stygian violence. Thanks to the Kevlar padding in his jacket, he looked even larger than he was. If I didn't know him, I would have given him a wide berth. As it was, I still wanted to take a step back.

His gaze fixed on me as I faced him, as intense and unyielding as it always was.

"No bullshit with her, right?" I said. "We tell her what's really going on so she can agree to help us on her own terms."

"No bullshit," he said.

"She's here because she has Alzheimer's," I told him. I'd hinted at it back at his apartment, but I hadn't flat out said it, and I needed to prepare him for this visit.

He said nothing in response. Unlike Hank downstairs, I didn't even warrant a nod of acknowledgment.

I gritted my teeth against a spark of annoyance and forced my tone to neutral. "I don't know if today is a good day or a bad day, so get ready to repeat yourself a couple of times. She might ask the same question more than once. If she does, just go with it. Don't point out the fact that she's already asked the question. It'll just confuse her and make everything worse."

Again, he just stared at me.

My right hand twitched, itching to slap him. Instead, I turned and took my anger out on the door, knocking hard enough that it hurt my knuckles.

"Come in!" Gran called.

I pushed the door open and walked inside. Gran's place looked like any other middle-class apartment might. To my right was a bright, farmhouse-style kitchen. Straight ahead was her living area, elegantly appointed in furniture from her last home. Opposite the front door was a large bank of windows with a slider set into the middle. Her rooms faced southwest, looking out over the grounds, and now that morning had bled into early afternoon, light flooded in. The slider led to a wide balcony, crowded with deck furniture and the terra-cotta pots that held Gran's little herb garden.

She weaved through the living room and came over to me, arms outspread. "There's my girl."

I hugged her for longer than usual, needing her warmth and her comfort right now.

"Everything okay, sweetie?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, pulling away. "Gran, this is Jakob Larson. Jakob, this is my grandmother, Isabelle Evans."

A small indentation appeared between Jakob's brows as he looked at Gran. Surprise maybe? Gran didn't fit the stereotype of an Alzheimer's patient. She was tall, like me, her spine unbent despite the fact that she was in her midsixties. Her blond hair was loose today, and it flowed down her back in a cascade of waves. She'd been outside a lot this spring, and her skin was flushed with the beginnings of a golden suntan. Her face was youthful, her green eyes sharp as they took Jakob in.

"Nice to meet you, Jakob," Gran said, offering her hand.

I held my breath, praying he'd at least be civil.

He stepped forward and slid his hand into hers. "You too, Mrs. Evans."

"Call me Izzy," Gran said as they released each other. She stepped back and prodded me with her elbow. "Well done, you," she said in an appreciative tone.

I nearly choked. "Gran, he can hear you."

"I know that," she said, still eyeing him like he was a tall drink of water and she was just dying of thirst. "But he looks like he could be a mean son of a bitch under the right circumstances, and I want to get on his good side."

"Gran, I am begging you. Put a lid on it."

Jakob's gaze slid to me. "I see where you get that mouth of yours."

Gran let out a whoop of laughter. "Oh, I think you and I are going to get along famously, Jakob." She stepped up to him, fearless, and slipped her arm through his. "Now, come inside and tell me how you met my baby."

She led him right past me toward the living room. And he let her. I stood rooted to the spot, regretting this entire day more and more with every passing moment.

"At the bar," Jakob said.

"Did you really? You know, I met my late husband at a bar."

Her words snapped me out of it. "Gran, it's not like that," I said, joining them.

She glanced back and forth between Jakob and me and then snorted. "Bullshit. You two look about as prickly as a pair of pissed-off porcupines. If you didn't just have a lovers' quarrel, I'll eat my shoe." She dragged Jakob down onto the couch beside her and gave him a serious look. "What happened?"

Jakob's gaze slid to mine.

I stared at him. *Don't be a dick.*

"I told her a hard truth she didn't want to hear," he said, meeting my gaze.

*Dick!*

Gran patted the leather over his forearm. "Good. She can be stubborn as a mule sometimes. She needs a man with enough gumption to speak up to her."

My face burned, but not with embarrassment. With rage. A hard truth? He'd told me a hard truth I didn't want to hear? As if it was somehow brand-new fucking information that my leg was my weak spot?

There was a huge difference between tough love and being an asshole, and the way he'd told me I couldn't take care of myself in the hallway was pure asshole. He hadn't done it to try to keep me safe or make me face a difficult fact. He'd said it out of anger, and in a shitty tone of voice meant to both belittle and hurt me. Well, he'd succeeded. If Gran wasn't here, I would have laid into him. There were several hard truths that Jakob needed to hear himself.

I sat down on the love seat opposite them. "Gran, it's not like that," I said again. Because it wasn't. Last night was a onetime thing. Of that, I was now one hundred percent certain.

She turned to me with a small, teasing smile on her face, but then she caught sight of my expression. Her smile disappeared. “What’s going on?”

“Jakob is a member of the Kings,” I said.

“Who are the Kings?” she asked.

I’d told her about them before, but it wasn’t surprising that she’d forgotten. Alzheimer’s typically affected short-term memory first. She could recount with perfect detail the dress I wore during a fifth grade recital, but if I asked her what she had for breakfast yesterday, she might not be able to answer me.

“They’re a motorcycle club in town,” I said. “They think that someone working here might be stealing the residents’ medications and replacing them with placebos so they can sell the drugs in town.”

Gran frowned. Hard. “God-*fucking*-damn it, Krista. We looked into this place. It was supposed to be the best.”

I grinned. Yes, I had gotten my mouth from her. Also, she remembered looking into this place with me. Today must have been one of her better days.

“It’s a new problem,” I said.

“What do you need?” She looked from me to Jakob. “Want me to spy on the staff? Be an inside source?”

Jakob shook his head. “No. We want to have you drug tested and make sure your meds aren’t being messed with.”

“I can do that,” she said. “I have an appointment with Dr. Perez in an hour. We can ask her then.”

Jakob turned to me. “I want a tour while we wait.”

Look at him, making demands like I fucking owed him anything after the way he’d been acting.

“Why?” I asked. “Didn’t experience enough tension as we were walking in? Want to intimidate some old folks while you’re at it? Maybe press your luck with Hank and see if he’ll really shoot you?”

“Krista,” Gran said in a scolding tone.

I clenched my jaw and didn’t meet her eyes. I would *not* apologize to him.

“I want to see if I recognize anyone working here,” Jakob ground out. “If I spot some sketchy motherfucker on staff, it might save us a lot of time.”

Damn it. As tempting as it was to shut him down just to be a bitch, logic always had a way of winning out with me. What he said made sense. And there might never be another opportunity for him to check the place out. I was going to have to show him around. I might not like it, but I was going to do it, and that grated. It must be so much easier to be the kind of person who buried their head in the sand and let their emotions blindly dictate their decisions. I envied those people sometimes.

“Fine,” I said. “But you’d better behave.”

“Look who’s talking,” he shot back.

“Oof, the tension between you two,” Gran said, rising from her seat. She sighed, a hint of longing in her expression. “My favorite part of fighting with your grandfather was when we got around to making up.”

*Ewww.* “Gran, I never needed to know that.”

She grinned. “We broke a table once.”

I gagged and plugged my ears to protect myself from further trauma.

She laughed and stood from her seat. I knew her; the danger hadn’t passed. To Gran, the best form of entertainment was embarrassing or shocking those around her, which was why, even though it made

me look like an idiot in front of Jakob, I kept my fingers in my ears and hummed to drown out her voice as I followed her out of her rooms.

Ten minutes later, I gave up on any hope that Jakob and I wouldn't be the talk of the town by nightfall. Gran kept introducing him to everyone as "My granddaughter's handsome beau," and every time I told her to cut it out, she shushed me.

"I'm just keeping up the ruse," she said. "Plus escorting a dangerous criminal around the premises will be great for my popularity. No offense, Jakob."

My grandmother, the prom queen.

Jakob's face darkened as we entered the cafeteria. He swept his icy gaze across the room. "None taken."

Was it my imagination, or had he just put a little more menace into his expression for her benefit?



FROM THE SECOND DR. Perez stepped inside Gran's rooms, it was clear that she was Not A Fan of Jakob. She caught sight of him and came to a dead stop. In her midforties, she was a trim, short woman with deeply tan skin. Her dark hair was cut into a bob. Today she wore a pair of black slacks with a white, scoop-necked silk top tucked into them. Her black jacket was left unbuttoned, the sleeves folded up to reveal a band of the pink silk liner. She looked fashionable and professional, put together in a way that always eluded me, no matter how hard I might try to replicate the look.

Her gaze met mine, and her expression morphed into disappointment. "How did you get him in here?" She held up a hand to forestall my answer. "More importantly, why did you bring him here?"

I caught her up on what we thought was happening at Magnolia.

She frowned as she listened, sinking down between Gran and me on the couch. When I finished, she looked at Jakob, who stood near the slider. "Do you recognize anyone here?"

Jakob hesitated for half a second before shaking his head. I frowned, thinking about the man we'd seen when we first walked in. Jakob had zeroed in on him, but he must not have known him after all. Either that or he was lying.

"How long have you suspected something?" Dr. Perez asked.

"A month," he said.

Her brows shot up. "And you didn't think to tell someone here?"

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug that somehow managed to look like a dismissal. "They wouldn't have listened."

"I would have listened," she said. "I might not have wanted to believe you at first, but I would have looked into it." She turned to Gran. "I take my patients' health very seriously."

Gran smiled and patted her arm, much like she had Jakob earlier. Gran could be blunt and a little inappropriate at times, but deep down, she was a comforter. "I know you do."

"That's great," Jakob said, his tone gaining a rough edge. "But you don't answer phones here, Doc."

"Not helpful," I told him and then turned toward Dr. Perez. "Have you noticed anything? Questionable behavior from a fellow staff member? Residents not responding to meds as they should?"

She sent me a meaningful look. "I couldn't answer your last question even if I had. That's client privilege."

Fine. I'd play it her way. "Has Gran not responded to her meds like you expected her to?"

The gleam in her eye said I'd asked the right question. "She's responded better than expected. To everything but her arthritis prescription."

I frowned. "You think it could have been tampered with?"

"It's a possibility," she said. "Her flare-ups have shown little to no improvement since we started the regiment, and up until now, I was stumped by it. I even called a friend over in Houston who specializes in osteoarthritis to see if he's run into a similar response."

"And has he?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"But isn't it just a generic nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory scrip?" I asked. "Why would anyone want to steal that?" As Gran's power of attorney, I knew every pill she'd been prescribed.

Dr. Perez tucked her hair behind her ear. "When paired with lithium, a simulation of the effects of an opioid can sometimes be achieved. It comes with a huge risk of potentially catastrophic side effects, but..." She shrugged.

I sighed. "But people looking to get high might be willing to risk that."

Gran's expression turned grim. "I want to get drug tested."

Dr. Perez looked to me for confirmation.

"Please drug test my grandmother," I said.

Dr. Perez rose from her seat. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

When she was gone, I turned to Gran. "She better not find pot in your system."

Gran's expression flashed to innocence. "I don't remember smoking any dope."

I eyed her. Gran had told Jakob that I could be stubborn as a mule sometimes, but if I was, it was because I'd learned it from her. "Using your Alzheimer's as a shield is low, even for you."

A glint of steel shone in her eyes. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Have it your way," I said. "But I'll know if you're lying when the results come back."

She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned into the couch. "I guess you will."

She wasn't going to back down, which meant that she'd definitely been smoking pot. Where the hell did she get it from in here?

Over by the slider, Jakob stared out the window like we'd bored him. I followed his gaze, searching through Gran's makeshift herb garden for the distinct leaf pattern of marijuana plants. I didn't see any, but I'd go out there and get a better look before I left today, just to be sure.

Dr. Perez came back a few minutes later, and she and Gran disappeared into Gran's bedroom to collect the samples in some semblance of privacy. Jakob and I were left alone in the living room. I studiously ignored him because every time I looked at him, my irritation flared back to life. Unfortunately, Gran's rooms were swathed in cream and off-white, and he stood in a self-contained spot of darkness that crept into my periphery even when I turned my head away.

This was why it was best to bail after sex. Before things got complicated or the memory of a brain-melting orgasm was tainted when your partner revealed themselves as the world's biggest jackass. The next time my inner cavewoman reared her head, I would club her over it myself.

"All done," Dr. Perez announced when they reemerged. "I should have the lab work back by tomorrow morning if I put a rush on it."

"Thanks," I said, rising from my seat. "You'll call me when you get the results?"

She promised that she would. After that, she hustled out of there. We'd kept her past her appointment time, and she had other patients to see. Before she left, she promised that she'd keep our suspicions to herself until we had Gran's results, and if there were signs of tampering, we'd figure out how to move forward from there.

I told Jakob he could go, but he insisted on staying until I left.

I spent another twenty minutes with Gran, catching up on everything I'd missed since my last visit, the day before yesterday. Gran regaled me with a tale of lunchroom drama—apparently there was a lurid affair happening on the second floor, and it had imploded during the chicken parm course—followed by the game of euchre she'd won last night against her rival from down the hall.

Some weeks were like this. Her memory would seem perfectly fine with a few small slip-ups that were common among anyone advancing in years, like not being able to find her reading glasses when they were right on top of her head. Other weeks, I repeated the same conversation with her three times in one day.

Alzheimer's was brutal. Unpredictable enough that just when you thought your loved one was improving, it flared up and reminded you that there was no getting over this disease. Eventually it would claim everything from her, including me.

Jakob remained a silent bystander throughout most of it, but at least he answered the few questions Gran lobbed at him civilly. If he'd been rude to her, all bets would have been off.

Before we left, I checked the deck plants. No pot out there. Gran must have been buying it from a neighbor. Who would have guessed that nursing homes were such hotbeds of vice and sin?

"I'll see you tomorrow?" Gran asked as she saw us out. "You have it off, right?"

I nodded, both happy and sad that she remembered. "I'll come by around noon."

"Sounds good," she said.

I wanted to be here right when the doors opened, but I was working the late shift again tonight, and I needed to get some sleep afterward, or I'd be no use to anyone.

I hugged Gran goodbye and led Jakob out of the nursing home. We received a few sideways glances, but no one said anything, and I breathed a sigh of relief as we stepped out into the balmy heat of early afternoon.

Jakob stuck to my side like glue as we made our way through the parking lot. I went to get in my car—yes, I was petty enough that I was going to leave without saying goodbye—but his hand landed on top of my door just as I tried to jerk it open.

"Give me your phone," he said.

I turned to look at him. "Why?"

His shades were back on, obscuring his eyes. "I'm going to put my number in it so you can call me when you hear from Perez."

"*Dr. Perez*," I muttered, digging through my purse. I didn't want to give him my phone, but I wanted to get out of there more, so I handed it over. Plus my stupid logical side reminded me that the Kings should know if something was up. I didn't want drugs in Kearny either, especially not if they were stolen from people who really needed them.

He took my phone and punched his number into my contact list. "You notice how the good doc didn't answer your question about someone on staff acting shady?"

I frowned. No, I hadn't, but looking back, she'd moved expertly past that and drew my focus to Gran's meds. "Do you think she was already suspicious about something being off at the nursing home and was afraid to say anything?"

He handed my phone back. "Either that or she's in on it."

With that disturbing comment, he grabbed his helmet off his bike and swung a leg over the seat. "See you tonight."

A heartbeat later, the engine thundered to life, and he roared out of there.





# Chapter Eight

I was ten minutes late to work. After getting home from visiting Gran, I sat down on my couch and promptly fell asleep. I hadn't planned on falling asleep, but the second my head hit the back of the couch, the sleeplessness of last night and the stress of this morning hit me like a ton of bricks.

Now I was paying for it.

I hated being late. I had a drill sergeant in basic training who lived by the phrase "If you're not fifteen minutes early, you're late." Unfortunately, it was one of those things that stuck with me, and knowing I was running behind with no hope of clocking in on time had put me in a foul mood.

Our shift manager for the night was a big Irish bastard named Jimmy O'Keefe. He was a King and one of Charley's buddies. They served in the first Iraq war together. Everyone else on staff hated the guy. He didn't do anything during his shifts other than drink free beer and bullshit with the customers. Every now and then he'd bark a command at one of us from his barstool to make it look like he was in charge, and if we didn't hop to it, he'd jump up and holler in our faces like he was still an active-duty sergeant and we were his knucklehead troops. Come last call, he was the first one to slip out the door, leaving one of us to close up in his place. He was usually so late to work that it was a minor miracle he'd beaten me in.

"You're late," he barked as I rushed past him.

"You're early!" I yelled back.

From the dumb look on his face, he didn't get it. I left him to stew it over some more and headed toward the bar. Nina was already behind it, slinging pint glasses, and she raised a brow and eyed me over the tap. The place was packed even for a Saturday. I was supposed to be replacing a woman named Judy, who was pushing sixty and still bleached her hair with peroxide from the corner store.

"You're fucking late," Judy said.

I stashed my stuff beneath the bar and started logging into the register. "I know. I'm sorry."

"I've been here since noon," she said, coming right up to my elbow. "My feet are fucking killing me."

My temper snapped, and I whirled on her. "I already said I'm sorry. What else do you want from me, Judy? I'm not apologizing again."

The thing about being a five-ten woman with some muscle on my frame was that I could be one intimidating bitch when I put my mind to it. Judy was nearly as short as Nina, and as I loomed over her, I saw a spark of fear light in her rheumy blue eyes.

She took a measured step back, chin held in a hard line, and glanced to her right. The bar was shoulder to shoulder, and we had a crowd of witnesses to this altercation. She had to serve these assholes the same as I did, and if she lost face now, they'd run riot over her during her next shift.

I took a deep breath and shoved my anger down. "Look, I had a shitty day, and nothing I can say will change the fact that I was late. I'm sorry for snapping."

"Just don't do it again," she said before stomping off.

Nina sidled up on my other side and watched her leave. "Nice save."

"Thanks."

I punched a few buttons on our digital register harder than was strictly necessary as I tried to get my temper under control. The speakers chimed, and my server ID flashed across the screen, telling me I was clocked in.

Nina leaned close and dropped her voice. “I thought you’d be in a better mood after the night you had.”

My spine stiffened. I glanced down and saw a lecherous grin on her beautiful face. “Who told you?”

She started counting off her fingers. “First my sister texted me. Then I heard it from Sally when I took over her shift”—she nodded toward the bar behind me—“and then Rob and Steve and Derek asked if I’d known you and Jakob were fucking.”

“What did you tell them?”

“That I’m your best friend, so of course I knew.” She caught sight of my face, and the humor fled from hers. “So you two really...?”

I nodded.

She smacked my arm and leaned in. “Why the hell didn’t you call me?”

“It’s a long story,” I said. “Tell you after we close?”

Her dark eyes sparked. “You better.”

I saw motion out of the corner of my eye. Someone was already flagging me down for a refill. I took a step in their direction, but Nina grabbed my arm. I turned back to her.

“Just tell me if it was as good as we imagined,” she said.

She and I had spent an embarrassing amount of time sitting poolside, talking over which members of the Kings would be the best in the sack. Jakob usually landed in the top five. What sweet summer children we had been.

I lowered my voice and leaned down. “It was better than we thought it would be.”

She blinked. “No way.”

I had a flashback then, not my first of the day, to Jakob fisting my hair as he fucked me sideways. An echo of the orgasm he’d given me rolled through my core, causing a full-body shudder.

Nina noticed and dropped my arm. “Holy shit. That good?”

I nodded, expression grim. “That good.”

Which was why instead of trying to rein my temper in earlier, I’d let it run wild. I was worried that if I forgot even for a second who Jakob really was, I would have ended up in some janitor’s closet at Magnolia, pinned to a wall of shelves as he fucked me brainless for the second time in less than twenty-four hours.

“Are you going to see him again?” Nina asked.

“Not if I can help it,” I said. “It was a onetime thing. Can we stop talking about it?”

She nodded.

I went to refill that drink.

Unfortunately, *everyone* wanted to talk about it. Jakob had told me that several members of the Kings had relatives in Magnolia. It turned out those old busybodies had nothing better to do than to call up their kin the second I walked past with Jakob and say, “You’ll never believe who’s getting a grand tour of the place.”

More than one customer dropped the *boyfriend* word on me. Each time it hit like a bomb. Within the club, people either fucked, meaning you had promiscuous, no-strings-attached sex with whomever you wanted on any given night, or you had an “old lady” or an “old man,” meaning you were bonded for life like some mated pair of werewolves. There was no middle ground as far as I could tell.

It turned out Jakob had never claimed an “old lady” before—I made a mental note to violently murder the first person who tried to call me that—and the fact that he’d made an exception for me was

considered a Big Deal. My customers were treating me with a newfound reverence that made me want to hit something.

One of the younger club members slid me a five-dollar bill after I'd served him a two-dollar shot of the cheapest whiskey we had in the house and then said, "Keep the change, ma'am."

"I work for a living," I snapped.

In the military, sir and ma'am were reserved for people with bars on their shoulders. I'd been salt of the earth enlisted, a ground pounder, and I was proud of it. In the Kings, only enforcers and above earned the right to sir and ma'am, and since I wasn't even in the club, I'd be damned if people started treating me like I was.

It was so backward that just because they thought I was dating one of their enforcers, my value suddenly shot up. Like this was 1600 and I was some scullery maid who'd married a lord. This wasn't 1600. I didn't inherit Jakob's rank just because I slept with him, and the next person to insinuate that I did was going to get an earful.

I would have gone on a feminist rage if I hadn't seen this same thing happen when one of the women who sat on the council for the Kings got serious with a local mechanic. This wasn't sexism; this was classism.

Around ten o'clock, a pretty brunette slid onto one of my barstools. I was working the far end of the bar, and she chose the seat right next to the wall, sitting low in it like she was trying to keep out of sight. I recognized her. Beth. I'd seen her and Jakob getting hot and heavy back when I first started working at Charley's, but they'd drifted apart shortly after, and now she was with a guy everyone called Slim. The two of them seemed pretty happy together, but when I caught sight of her face, a small thread of anxiety wormed through me anyway. She looked like a woman with something to say.

"What can I get you?" I asked.

"Vodka tonic?" She had a nice voice, deep for a woman, melodic, like she could sing. Add a little rasp to it, and she would probably drive men wild with her bedroom talk.

I poured her drink and slid it in front of her.

She bit her lip and glanced around.

"Anything else?" I asked.

She leaned over the bar a little, and her top dipped forward, revealing ample cleavage. Jakob must have been a boob man. I had a fair amount on top too.

"You and Jakob?" she asked.

"What about us?" I said. I'd given everyone vague answers tonight. If growing up in a small town with druggie parents had taught me anything, it was that feeding into rumors, whether you confirmed *or* denied them, would only prolong the rumor and subsequent interest in it.

"Be careful," she said.

A tendril of unease slipped up my spine. "Why?"

"He can be a real asshole sometimes."

"Did he hit you?" I asked.

She shook her head, sending her chocolate curls flying. "God, no. Jakob isn't the sort. He was never even outright mean to me. He just"—she huffed out a breath and glanced around, as if looking for the right words—"I don't know, it's like he doesn't have a filter."

I sighed. "Yeah. I've noticed that."

"And he can be really jealous," she said.

Well, wasn't she just a fountain of information? I might not be in a relationship with the guy, but I wouldn't say no to learning more about him. It might come in handy later... somehow.

“How jealous?” I asked.

“He put Ricky Sloan in the hospital after Ricky grabbed my ass one night.”

I frowned. “So he beat up a man who sexually assaulted you?”

“What?” She let out a nervous giggle. “No. I mean, yes, he put him in the hospital, but Ricky just grabbed my ass is all. He didn’t try to”—she glanced around and lowered her voice—“you know.”

*Rape you?* I almost asked, but didn’t. The town of Kearny hadn’t gotten the memo yet that it wasn’t okay to grope people just because you found them attractive, so I doubted a little grab-ass even registered as assault to most of them. Including Beth, apparently.

I’d served Ricky a few times, and the guy skeeved me out. My gut was rarely wrong about men like him, and part of me had been waiting for him to say something that crossed a line or try to get handsy with me because I would have loved to have been the one to teach him a lifelong lesson about boundaries and consent. The only regret I felt over learning that Jakob had put him in the hospital for grabbing Beth was that Jakob had beaten me to it.

“Anything else I should know?” I asked her.

“No,” came the growling answer.

Beth and I both jumped as Jakob emerged from between two other bikers. I hadn’t seen him coming, because unlike at Gran’s earlier, he blended right into the sea of denim and leather spread out around us.

Beth slapped some bills on the counter and took off with her drink. Smart woman.

Jakob lowered his big frame onto her abandoned stool and rested his elbows on the bar top.

“Enjoy your little gossip session?”

I bared my teeth at him in a look that was too cutting to be a grin. “Immensely.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but a hand landed on his shoulder.

“Hey there, you two,” Daniel King boomed.

Great. Just what this situation needed. Another asshole.

“Hey, boss,” Jakob drawled, rising to offer Daniel his seat.

Daniel waved him back down. “I see word finally got out about you.”

If he talked any louder, he’d be shouting. I was right about him wanting to lord this information over everyone else. The fact that he chose this moment to do it made me want to spit in the next drink he ordered.

Jakob nodded in response.

I tried my best not to scowl.

“Krista, can you help me with this keg?” Nina called.

Bless her.

I made my excuses and went over to help. She was crouched down, hands on the sides of the steel drum. Sometimes the fixtures could be finicky when you tried to switch out kegs, and both of us had gotten a face full of beer foam on several occasions. We’d found the risk was mitigated when two people worked together to get the lines reattached.

I crouched down next to her, my leg protesting. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing,” she hissed. “You looked like you were about to blow a gasket, and I was just trying to give you an excuse to get away from those two.”

I stared at her. “I would hug you if they couldn’t see me.”

She grinned. “Mental hug received. Now let’s frown while we pretend to screw around with this for a few minutes.”

I raised my hands and jiggled the lines, dutifully frowning.

She frowned too, but prettily. "How's the night going?"

"Like shit," I said. "But people have been tipping me really well even though my attitude sucks."

"Perks of screwing a King."

"Screw. Singular. It won't happen again," I told her.

She eyeballed me, her frown replaced by the hint of a smile. "Mm-hmm."

"Don't mm-hmm me. I'm serious."

She glanced over my shoulder, just a quick flick of her dark eyes before they landed back on mine.

"Tell that to the psychopath who's been staring at you all night."

I stiffened. My leg protested, and I nearly fell over. "I thought he just got here."

Her lips lifted into a full-blown smile. "Nope. He's been over at a corner booth with a couple of other enforcers."

"Oh."

She butted her shoulder against mine. "When Rob made you laugh earlier, he half stood out of his seat like he was going to come kill him for it."

Maybe Beth was right about the whole jealousy thing after all.

"I don't know why," I said. "We didn't exactly end things on a good note."

She frowned. "No?"

I shook my head. "I swear I'll tell you later. Now help me up. My leg is starting to cramp."



AS PREDICTED, JIMMY slipped out a side door the second we rang the bell for last call.

"Piece of shit," Nina said.

Our third bartender for the night, a short black man in his early twenties named Kyle, crossed his arms over his chest and glared as the door banged shut. Being barely old enough to drink and having a baby face made the glare more cute than menacing, but I didn't have the heart to tell Kyle that.

"One of these days, I'm going to fuck up my cash-out," he said. "Like short it a grand so that Charley has to get involved and Jimmy will be forced to confess that he bailed early."

"Don't," Nina and I said at the same time.

Kyle frowned at us.

"They're war buddies," I told him. "Even though Charley knows Jimmy's a piece of shit, he'll still take his side if it's his word against yours."

Kyle swore and stalked away.

Nina watched him go. "Kid's got a lot to learn about the world still."

I nodded. "Unlike us grizzled old hags."

She threw a bar towel at me. "Speak for yourself."

An hour later, she and I sat in her car in the parking lot. Tonight had been crazy busy, and even though I'd spent half of it pissed off, I couldn't deny that the energy in the place had been infectious. I was still riding high off of it, like the true extrovert I was, and while I knew a crash was coming, I wasn't ready to go home just yet.

"What happened with you and Jakob?" Nina asked.

"He made this cryptic comment about Magnolia during our shift yesterday that totally freaked me out," I told her. "Afterward, he pulled up next to me at a stoplight and had me follow him home. The Kings think someone on staff there is selling drugs in town."

Her brows shot up. "Only an idiot or a madman would sell drugs in Kearny."

“Agreed,” I said. “When we got to Jakob’s place, Daniel King was sitting on his couch, and the door was busted like he broke in.”

She leaned back in her seat. “What the hell?”

I filled her in on their strange interaction and then told her about Jakob ordering me to stay the night.

She frowned when I was done. “Think there’s bad blood between the two of them?”

“I have no idea,” I said. “That’s what I thought at first, but then they were all buddy-buddy in the bar tonight.”

“Maybe it’s a private squabble and they’re keeping it from the rest of the club.”

I huffed out a laugh. “They’re doing a good job then. Those bikers are the worst gossips in town. I doubt they’ll be able to keep their rift a secret for long.”

“So what do you think is going on?” she asked. “Who was watching Jakob’s place if not someone loyal to Daniel?”

“No clue. I just know that something is off there, and it’s going to bother me until I find out what it is.”

She put a hand on my forearm. “Be careful. People who go poking around in Kings business usually come to regret it.”

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “I’m not dumb enough to go poking around. At this point, I’ve resigned myself to being bothered about it indefinitely.”

She lifted her hand from my arm. “So, Daniel left last night and then what?”

“Then Jakob gave me the most intense orgasm of my entire life.”

She let out a shaky breath. “Details or it didn’t happen.”

I told her the details.

People always make a big deal about men and their locker-room talk, but in my experience, women are just as likely to engage in that kind of banter. We embellish details, wax vainglorious about dick size, and even exaggerate about silly things like the number of positions we attempted, all to make ourselves look like some sort of goddess in the bedroom, with our partners our devoted supplicants of course.

With Jakob, there was no need for embellishment, and as I talked, it was like I relived every glorious, sordid moment of last night. By the time I was done, I was thirsty as fuck and ready for round two even though I was still pissed at the guy.

Nina let out a low whistle. “Goddamn.”

“Yeah. But then he was a complete nightmare today at Gran’s nursing home, so it’ll never happen again.” I gave her a recap of our visit, including why we were there and how we’d convinced Dr. Perez to help us.

Nina’s expression softened. “I’m sorry he said that about your leg.”

“It’s not the fact that he said it but the way that he did.”

She nodded. “I know, but I’m still sorry.”

I sighed. “Thanks.”

She chewed her lip for a second, watching me with a wary expression.

“Out with it,” I said.

“Don’t take this the wrong way or think I’m on his side or anything—I’m not. I’m Team Krista all the way.”

“I know. Now what is it?”

“Do you think maybe he took your comment about people treating you differently as being ashamed of him? And that’s why he was such a dick to you afterward?”

“The thought had crossed my mind, but it doesn’t excuse his behavior.”

She held her hands up. “I’m not excusing his behavior, I’m just saying, even guys like Jakob have to have feelings, and he wouldn’t be the first person to lash out when they were hurt.” She sent me a meaningful look.

I wanted to squirm in my seat. Thinking back on it, I had to admit that I could have handled the situation better myself. That comment about him always having to remind people that he was a King hadn’t been said from the best place or in the nicest tone.

“You ever get sick of being right about things all the time?” I asked Nina.

She flashed me a wide grin. “Never.”

I was on my way home afterward when an engine thundered to life nearby. A headlight flared in my rearview as the bike emerged from a side street and settled into the lane behind me. It followed me all the way home.

My hand was in my purse as I got out of my car, fingers gripping my gun.

The motorcycle pulled up next to me, and I immediately recognized Jakob. He turned the bike off and strode over. The night clung to his large form as if welcoming back a lost son. Crickets chirruped in the nearby trees. Heat hung heavy around us, despite the fact that the sun had set hours ago. A bougainvillea vine wrapped up the wrought iron staircase of my apartment building, and the heady bouquet of its flowers perfumed the air.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Making sure you got home safe,” he said.

I let my gun go and slung my handbag over my shoulder. “I don’t need you to be my bodyguard. You might not think I can defend myself in a fight, but I can sure as shit still fire my weapon without your assistance.”

He stared at me for a long moment. “I didn’t say you can’t defend yourself. I said your knee makes you vulnerable.”

Heat crept up my neck. “Are you serious right now? Verbatim, I said, ‘I can take care of myself,’ and then you said, ‘The fuck you can,’ which made it pretty clear that you think I’m nothing but a helpless victim.”

He gave me a flat look. His tone was just as lifeless. “I don’t think that.”

“All evidence to the contrary,” I said. “And I don’t appreciate you making me out to be hypersensitive to my grandmother.” I dropped my voice in imitation of him. “I told her a hard truth she didn’t want to hear.”

My anger had ahold of me, and when he opened his mouth to try to get a word in, I barreled right over him. “There’s a difference between being straightforward and being an asshole, and telling me in anger that I can’t take care of myself was a dick move, and you know it. And it wasn’t a hard truth, by the way. Trust me, I get reminded twenty times a day that my leg is my weakness, but it doesn’t make me helpless. You’ve never seen me in a fight, Jakob. I’m vicious. Go for my leg, and I will rip out your jugular with my teeth if you come close enough.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“And I also don’t— Wait. What?” I stared up at him, my anger deflated. Did he just apologize to me?

He met my eyes with unflinching focus. “It was a dick move. I’m sorry. I was pissed you were ashamed of me, and I snapped.”



You could have knocked me over with a feather. I had hurt Jakob Larson's feelings. And now he was apologizing for how he reacted. I could never tell Nina about this. Her head would get so big that she wouldn't be able to fit it through doorways anymore.

"I'm not ashamed of you," I said.

He scowled. "You said they were going to treat you differently and you shouldn't have brought me there."

"I know what I said. It came out wrong, and then you snapped at me about my outfit before I could apologize." I took a deep breath and pushed my stupid, stubborn pride aside. "I'm sorry I made you feel like that. I'm really not ashamed of you. I just know that people there will probably get shitty with me about who they think I'm dating, as if it's any of their business, and my big mouth means I'll pop off and make it worse."

"You looked good," he said.

I blinked. "Huh?"

"In the outfit," he clarified, stepping closer. His massive frame momentarily blocked out the nearby streetlight, dropping us into deep shadow. "You might have looked like a church mouse, but you were a highly fuckable one."

My mouth popped open in surprise.

Jakob leaned down like he was going to kiss me but came to a shuddering standstill an inch away from my lips, like he'd stopped himself for some reason.

Fuck that.

I grabbed his jacket and pulled.

Our mouths collided.

My back hit the car door.

Jakob's big body shoved against mine.

I let his jacket go and wrapped my arms around his neck, squeezing hard enough to pull him flat against me. Any tighter and I'd be choking him. One of his hands fisted into my hair and held me in place. His mouth bruised mine. I bit his lip and tasted copper on my tongue. I didn't know if we were about to fuck or fight.

Jakob broke away suddenly, pushing off the car, and I was forced to let him go before I face-planted onto the pavement. I swayed where I stood, head spinning from lack of oxygen. Damn it, I forgot to breathe while he'd been kissing me.

His chest heaved like he'd forgotten to breathe too. "Call me tomorrow after you hear from Perez?"

I didn't trust my voice to answer, didn't trust myself not to invite him up, so I just nodded.

He stood there another minute, gaze raking over me, shoulders held in a stiff line like he was fighting some sort of internal battle. I was half-afraid that if he came at me again, I would tackle him and we'd end up fucking in my car in a well-lit parking lot where anyone might see us.

I opened my mouth.

"Tomorrow," he said and turned away. With his voice gone low like that, it came out sounding like some sort of sinful threat.



# Chapter Nine

I woke to the sound of my phone ringing. I'd been having a strangely lucid dream about paddling around a swimming pool filled with Grand Marnier with my childhood best friend while Mr. Rogers read us a Stephen King novel. The dream unraveled as I glanced at my bedside clock. It was nine in the morning. At least I'd gotten a few good hours of sleep.

I didn't recognize the number on my phone, but it was local, and knowing Dr. Perez might be calling today, I answered. "Hello?"

"Krista? This is Dr. Perez."

I clutched the phone to my ear and scooted up in bed. "Hi. Yeah, it's me."

"I got your grandmother's results back. You were right. Someone's been tampering with her medication."

*Shit.*

Part of me had been holding out hope that this was all some big misunderstanding, but with those words, my last hope went up in flames. This would get ugly, whether Magnolia launched an internal investigation or the Kings caught the person. Hopefully Magnolia sniffed them out, because at least they'd deal with it legally. If the bikers got there first, God help the poor soul. I had a feeling they'd want to make a memorable example out of anyone who disobeyed their orders.

"Krista?" Dr. Perez asked.

"I'm still here. Sorry. Just processing."

"I understand," she said. "I, um, did want to talk to you about something else."

I sighed. "There was pot in her bloodwork, wasn't there?"

"Yes."

"I'll talk to Gran about it," I told her. With all the meds Gran was on, she couldn't just be tossing THC into the mixture. It was a drug, and like all drugs, it had side effects and the potential to interact with her legitimate prescriptions in a bad way.

"Thank you," Dr. Perez said. "Are you coming in to see her today?"

"I plan to, yes."

"Can you bring Jakob with you again? I want to talk to management about this, and it would be good if you two were there to explain where your suspicions came from."

"I'll call him and see if he's available."

"Thank you. I'd really appreciate having you two there."

She sounded nervous. My thoughts circled back around to what Jakob had said about her potential involvement. I didn't think she was in on it. From the slight tremor in her voice, she might have been afraid, which made me think that I was right about her having suspicions that something was going on at Magnolia.

"Are you okay, Dr. Perez?" I asked.

The sound of a harsh exhale came over the line. "I'm all right, thank you. Just a little shaken up."

"You've known something was wrong, haven't you?" I asked.

"I can't discuss that right now," she said, voice low like she was worried about being overheard. "Please call me back on this number after you speak to Jakob, and we can set up a time to meet."

"I will."

We said goodbye and hung up. I immediately dialed Jakob.

He picked up after the third ring, voice rough like he'd just woken up. "Hello?"

“It’s Krista,” I said. “Dr. Perez called. You were right. Someone’s been stealing meds.”

Three hours later, I sat in my idling car in the parking lot of Magnolia Hills. I was going to visit with Gran at noon like we’d planned, and then Jakob and I had a meeting with Dr. Perez at one.

The familiar bellow of a motorcycle reached my ears, distant at first, like a storm brewing over the horizon, but then it roared closer, so loud that I wanted to plug my ears. I’d been waiting for Jakob, expecting his single, matte black bike to roll into the parking lot. Instead, ten motorcycles barreled through the entrance, one after the other. I sank low in my seat, hoping this was just a coincidence and they were driving by the nursing home for some other reason, but then I caught sight of Jakob, dead center in the pack, and I knew that this was his doing.

The bikes circled my car and parked around me, forming a perimeter. My teeth rattled in my skull. The sound of so many idling engines must be shaking the windows of the nearby building. No doubt the residents were getting up from their seats to come have a look at what all the fuss was about, and they were all about to get an eyeful of the hardened criminals surrounding my car. They might wonder why the Kings were here, but the message the bikers sent with this little stunt wasn’t for them. It was for the drug dealer in their midst, who would look out those windows and understand that I was now considered King property, and if they fucked with me, they fucked with the Kings.

Unsure of how I felt about that, I turned my car off and climbed out.

Jakob kicked down the stand of his bike and swung off it, coming to meet me. He stopped a few feet away, head turning a little, gaze going past me. His shoulders stiffened a fraction, just enough for my trained eyes to take note of the movement, and he heaved in a breath. He was looking at my car door, and I knew, I *knew* he was thinking about our kiss last night. Because I was thinking about it too.

I shook my head to clear it and nodded toward the motorcycles behind him. “Subtle.”

He had his shades on, but from the way his brows drew together, I knew he was scowling.

“What?”

I raised my voice over the roar. “Subtle!”

He turned a little and made a slashing gesture, and the engines around us cut off one after another. As they died, he faced me. “I’m not trying to be subtle.”

*No shit, Sherlock.* I eyed the other bikers. “They can’t come in.”

“I know,” he said. “But they’re going to sit their happy asses out here while we talk with management and look mean.”

“Fine,” I said. “Are you ready?”

“One sec.”

He strolled over to a large black man wearing a sleeveless leather vest. The man flipped up the visor of his helmet, and I recognized Rob, the same man who’d given Jakob his still-healing shiner from the other night. The two of them exchanged words for a few minutes. There didn’t seem to be any lingering resentment between them as they talked. Rob nodded one last time, and Jakob came prowling back to me, his long legs eating up the pavement.

“Let’s get this over with,” he said.

“Try not to insult anyone,” I told him as we made our way inside.

He let out a low grunt. “You’re one to talk.”

Ugh. Had I really been ready to throw myself at him last night?

Like yesterday, the bullshit started the second we stepped inside. Today it wasn’t Hank who barred our way but a younger, more heavily muscled white man I’d never seen before. If he were ever cast as a movie extra, the character name that scrolled through the credits would read “Blond meathead.” He looked like a man with more muscles than brains.

“He can’t come in here,” he said, jerking his chin toward Jakob.

“I think there’s been a miscommunication.” I took a step toward him but froze when his hand dropped to his gun. What the hell? “Dr. Perez should have called down to have him cleared ahead of time.”

“Stay right there,” he ordered, lifting a two-way radio from his belt. The radio crackled to life, and he spoke into it. “There’s a young woman here with a King. Says he’s been cleared.”

Static sparked over the line, but the response came through crystal clear, an immediate “Negative.”

How’d they even have time to check?

The guard put the radio back in place and stared at me. “He’s not getting in here.”

“Let me just call Dr. Perez,” I said.

He seemed trigger-happy, so I gestured to my purse. He nodded, and I reached in slowly and pulled my phone out.

The line rang for several moments before going to voice mail. I left a message. “Hi. It’s Krista Evans. The guard downstairs won’t let Jakob in, and it seems like he was never cleared.” I hung up and turned toward the guard again. “She wanted him to come in and speak to management with me about my grandmother.”

The guard crossed his arms over his chest. At least his hand wasn’t on his gun anymore. “Until she calls down here and tells me that herself, he’s not getting in.”

Jakob tugged on my arm and pulled me back outside. “Do you know that guy?”

I shook my head. “I’ve never seen him before.”

He stared past my shoulder through the front door. No doubt the guard was just on the other side, glaring right back at him. “I don’t like this.”

“Me neither,” I said.

“Where the fuck is the good doctor?”

“I don’t know. Let me call her again.”

Just like the first time, it went to voice mail. I didn’t bother leaving another message.

I dropped my phone back in my handbag and faced Jakob, knowing he wasn’t going to like what I was about to say. “Stay out here, and let me see if I can find anything out.”

“You’re not going in there alone,” he said.

I bristled. “Reminder: you’re not the boss of me.”

His jaw flexed, and his nostrils flared like he was pissed, but he seemed to realize he couldn’t bully me and dropped the tone of command from his voice. “I don’t think it’s smart for you to go in there alone right now. This is sketchy as fuck.”

“I’m not going to argue with you about that, but my grandmother is in there, and if something sketchy is going on, she’s more vulnerable than anyone. For all we know, she’s completely forgotten our discussion from yesterday and doesn’t even know she needs to be careful.”

“Fine,” he bit out. “But you call me the second something feels like it’s off.”

I let out an exasperated breath. “What are you going to do, storm the gates?”

His eyes darkened ominously. “Yes.”

“Someone could get hurt, Jakob.”

He stepped closer. “Then you better pray that nothing happens to you inside.”

I didn’t know whether I should be pissed or touched by this level of concern for my welfare. As it stood, I was too worried about Gran to decide.

Without another word, I turned on my heel and went back in.

The new guard detached himself from the wall and followed after me as if he thought I posed a danger to the residents. I figured people would treat me differently after I told them I was dating a King, but I hadn't anticipated this extreme response, and it grated on me.

I finally found a familiar face behind the front desk. Annie was working it again. Her gaze flashed to the guard and then to me, and the look in her eyes almost brought me up short. She didn't like this guy for some reason, or she distrusted him. It was clear from the way she studiously ignored him as I approached, her eyes boring into mine as if she was trying to warn me.

What the hell was going on inside this place today?

I stepped up to the desk. "I'm here to see my gran."

Annie nodded and passed me a sign-in sheet, uncharacteristically quiet.

"Have you seen Dr. Perez?" I asked, picking a pen up.

"Not for a few hours. Want me to call her office?"

"Please," I said. I finished signing in and waited while she dialed.

"Hi," she said a moment later. "This is Annie downstairs. Is Dr. Perez in?" She frowned in response to whatever the person on the other end of the line was saying. "When did she leave?" Her gaze shifted to me. "Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Okay, thanks." She hung up.

"She's not here?" I said.

Annie shook her head. "She took her lunch break early and hasn't come back from it."

I glanced at a nearby wall clock. Thanks to my delayed entry, it was now 12:15. "What time did she leave?"

"Ten," she said.

My stomach knotted with unease. "Does she usually take long lunches?"

"Forty-five minutes, tops," Annie said.

The guard stepped up beside me. "That's enough questions. You're holding up the line."

I looked behind us to see an older couple waiting. As I turned back toward Annie, I glanced at the guard's chest, where his name tag should have been. He wasn't wearing one. The unease in my stomach turned to dread.

I thanked Annie before turning to walk toward the wide bank of elevators set into the far wall. The guard crowded into one with me, and I had a sinking suspicion that something bad was about to happen.

After four years of near-constant deployments to war zones, I'd learned to trust my gut, and right now my instincts were screaming that this man posed a threat to me. Between the immediate response over the walkie-talkie, the lack of a name tag, and the way he'd hustled me away from reception when I started asking questions about Dr. Perez, I was dead sure there was more going on at Magnolia than just a single shady employee.

"Why are you following me up?" I asked the guard, proud that my voice was steady. My pulse pounded in my ears, and adrenaline coursed through my veins, readying me for the fight my body thought was coming.

"I'm making sure you don't cause any trouble," he said. "I heard about the unrest your boy toy caused yesterday, and I'm not as soft as Hank. Just because you got a pretty face, it doesn't mean I'm going to fall for your bullshit."

"Who's going to guard the front door in your absence?" I asked. I did *not* want him in here with me. "My boy toy can just wander in now."

He nodded his head to the right. I looked through the still-open elevator doors and saw two other men in guard uniforms stalking toward the front of the building to take over for him. I didn't recognize

them either. Warning sirens blared inside me. I was friendly by nature, and I asked a lot of questions. Not only could I have told you every person who worked the security detail at Magnolia, but I could tell you who among them was married and which ones didn't like their in-laws. One new security guard, I could buy. But three? Just after finding out something illegal might be going on here? And with Dr. Perez suddenly MIA? Nope. That was too many coincidences for comfort.

The last fly on this shit sandwich was that the guards' uniforms didn't fit them right. Every other guard I'd spoken with in the past had theirs tailored to form. The smaller of the two men heading toward the lobby shifted, his too-tight camel-colored shirtsleeve rising just enough to reveal a dark slash on his arm. I homed in on it, frowning. It was the bottom edge of a tattoo. I couldn't see much of it, just enough to register that it was square. Almost like a... like a playing card.

*Oh God.*

His sleeve shifted again, inching up, and I sucked in a breath. A little *J* peeked out from the bottom right corner.

Fuck. This was so much worse than I could have imagined.

The Kings' biggest rivals, the Jokers, heavily featured playing cards in their club. The gang's emblem was one, with the quintessential joker standing out in base relief in the center of it. The guard had a Joker tattoo. I wanted to be wrong. I wanted it to be anything but what it was, but I'd seen one of these tattoos before, and it was seared into my memory.

The elevator doors started to close. Jakob said some of the Jokers had family members in residence at Magnolia. Had those bikers seen an opening while visiting them? A way to sneak drugs into Kearny through the nursing home and make the Kings look weak?

Even though a large part of me was desperate to get out of the elevator, I stayed where I was. I had to get to Gran. There was something seriously wrong going on here, and I'd be damned if she got caught up in it. This guard was hell-bent on sticking with me, and if I got out, he'd just climb into another elevator with me or follow me up the stairs, and any delay might give someone else time to reach Gran before I did.

I slid to the corner as the doors shut, putting space between me and the "guard." My heart pounded against my rib cage. I was trapped in a tiny enclosed space with a man who not only thought that Jakob was my boyfriend but who might also be in a rival gang. I'd heard all sorts of terrible stories about the violence committed against friends and family members of the Kings as payback or a warning, and as he turned toward me, I worried I was about to be next.

"Jakob Larson, huh?" he said.

I hadn't said Jakob's full name in front of him, yet he knew it. Shit, I really didn't want to be right about this.

"What about him?" I asked.

"Just wondering what you see in the guy."

I shrugged. Maybe if I made it seem like nothing was going on between us, I wouldn't register as important enough to hurt or harass. "Who said I see anything in the guy?"

The guard looked at me, grinning. "You called him your boyfriend."

I held his gaze. "That was only to get him in here."

The smile fled from his face, replaced by a cold, flat expression that raised the hair on the back of my neck. "So you were lying?"

I dropped all pretenses and let my own crazy shine through. I'd faced down a Russian surface-to-air missile and lived to tell the tale. I'd spent four years of my life, flying with the best, raining down death and destruction from the motherfucking sky. One asshole in an elevator was nothing to me.

“I was lying,” I said.

We moved at the same time. I slid left as he shot forward, and instead of taking his fist to the face, I stepped clear of it. He hadn't been expecting it, and before he could stop himself, he rammed his knuckles straight into the unforgiving steel wall of the elevator.

The thing about training in hand-to-hand combat every day for years on end is that you get good at reading people. This guy might have been big, but he wasn't as well trained as I was. I realized that right before he lunged at me, when he dropped his right shoulder, projecting his punch.

I hadn't been lying to Jakob earlier. I was a vicious fighter. Most of the time I kept my temper on a tight leash, but when someone tried to hurt me, I let it run wild, and all those months of pent-up rage usually came roaring out.

The man howled when his fist hit the wall, the sound of his pain echoing around us in the closed space. I slipped past him into the hole that opened up in his wake. I had a split second to make a decision before he recovered. By default, a big meaty bastard like him could take a punch better than most. If he saw the blow coming and flexed just before it hit, there was little hope of doing any real damage to him. All that muscle would act as a shock absorber. I had to hit him where he had the least amount of padding. His joints. His face. Places where skin slicked over bone with very little muscle or cartilage in between. Those were my best bets if I wanted to get out of here unscathed.

I braced myself on my right leg, thanking God when it held, and kicked out at him with my left. Hard. My foot took him in the back of the knee. His leg folded forward, and thanks to the unexpected shift, he crumpled sideways toward the wall. He caught himself on the handrail and tried to pull himself up, but I hammered a kick to his ribs. He rocked toward me, trying to shield them from another blow on instinct. It was an amateur move, proof that he wasn't used to this kind of no-holds-barred fight. I stepped up and kneed him in the face, picturing my leg driving through his skull so that I hit with as much force as I could muster. I felt bone crunch on impact, and when he toppled backward, blood spurted from his ruined nose.

He bounced off the floor, dazed, and didn't get up. Barely five seconds had passed since he first swung at me. I was still fast.

*Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Jakob.*

Overhead, a bell dinged, and the doors slid open. There were metal detectors downstairs, so I hadn't brought my gun inside with me. No fucking way was I leaving this guy his weapon so he could shoot me in the back when he regained consciousness. I freed it from his holster before stepping over him. The gun went into my purse, my phone came out of it, and I took off toward Gran's room at a run. Pain burst through my bad leg from hip to ankle, but I ignored it.

I called Jakob as the hallway flew past me.

“What happened?” he barked.

“That guard just attacked me in the elevator.”

“Are you okay?”

“I'm talking to you, aren't I?”

“Why do you sound like you're dying then?”

Ouch. Guess I was more out of shape than I thought. “I'm running to Gran's room. Dr. Perez isn't here. She went for lunch early and hasn't been heard from.”

A door opened up ahead. I slowed to a walk as an elderly couple emerged from it. I heard another door open behind me. A second later a woman screamed. They'd found the guard.

“What's happening?” Jakob demanded.



I kept to a stately saunter and smiled at the couple as I passed them, pretending I hadn't heard the scream. As soon as they were gone, I picked up speed again. "Sorry, just passed someone. Jakob, I think I saw a Joker tattoo on another guard's arm."

He swore. "Get ready. We're coming in to get you."

"Be careful. They're armed."

"So are we," he said. The line went dead.

I made it to Gran's room and knocked on the door.

"It's open!" she called.

I nearly had an aneurysm. Her door was unlocked. Anyone could have come in here and—*Stop it*, I urged myself. Now wasn't the time to freak out about the what-ifs.

I rushed inside and locked the door behind me. Remembering Jakob's move from the other night, I grabbed one of Gran's kitchen chairs and tried to wedge it beneath the doorknob. It wasn't as easy as it looked, and it took me three tries before I had the thing braced in tight.

"Well, this is some greeting," Gran said.

I strode over to her and pulled her into a hard hug. Thank God she was okay.

Her gaze dropped to my leg as we pulled apart. "Uh, sweetie, you have blood on your jeans."

"It isn't mine."

She sighed. "It never is. Who'd you get into it with this time? Amy again?"

I frowned. Amy? Oh hell, she was talking about Amy Smith—the girl who went after me one day on the bus. That was back in middle school.

I stared at Gran, looking for the telltale faraway look in her eyes that meant today was a bad day. Sure enough, she gazed past me as if listening to a tune only she could hear.

Damn it.

"Hey, Gran. How would you like to stay with me for a day or two?"

She smiled. "That sounds lovely. As long as it isn't an inconvenience."

"It's not."

I led her into her bedroom, and together we quickly packed an overnight bag. I found her meds in the kitchen and shoved them in my purse. We could grab anything I forgot at the store in town. No way in hell was I leaving her here another day. There'd be hell to pay for what I did to that guard—if he really was a guard—but if he was a gang member, which I was willing to bet good money he was, I'd just painted a nuclear-sized target on my back.

Where was Dr. Perez? Had she said the wrong thing to the wrong person, and they'd silenced her? Or had she been in on it after all, and that phone call asking Jakob to come with me was nothing but a lure?

"Are you going to tell me why you felt the need to creatively reinforce my door?" Gran asked.

"We think some bad men may be in the building," I told her. No sense in lying.

She frowned. "Who's we?"

"Me and a man named Jakob Larson. I'll introduce you to him in a few minutes."

I hoped.

I moved back to the door, my ears straining for the sound of gunfire. The Kings had superior numbers. I'd been annoyed when Jakob arrived with the cavalry, but now I was thankful for it. Hopefully the men downstairs would see that the odds were stacked against them and decide not to put up a fight.

"I met Jakob yesterday," Gran said.

I whipped around. "You remember Jakob?"

“Of course I remember Jakob. Hard to forget that handsome bastard.”

I frowned. If she wasn't having a bad day, then what was with the glassy look in her eyes?

Oh no.

I stepped toward her and took a deep breath through my nose.

She put her hands up and stepped back. “What are you doing?”

The earthy, herbal stink of pot hit my nose. “Gran! You're not supposed to be smoking dope!”

“It's for my glaucoma,” she said.

“You don't have glaucoma.”

She dropped her hands and sent me a flat look. “Then it's for the headaches my overbearing granddaughter gives me.”

I deflated. “I'm sorry. I just worry about you so much.”

She patted me on the arm. “I know you do, sweetie, but you have to let me have a little bit of fun once in a while.”

I decided that now wasn't the time to point out the fact that her drug test told me just how much fun she'd been having lately.

My phone rang in my purse, and I scooped it out and answered. It was Jakob.

“We're walking up the hall now,” he said. “Get ready to open the door.”

I pulled the chair free from the knob. “I didn't hear any gunshots.”

“They took one look at us and bailed.”

“Did you recognize them?” I asked.

“No, but one of the guys with me did. You were right. They're Jokers.”

Fuck. “Do you think they took Dr. Perez?”

“We'll look into it,” he said. “What the hell did you do to that guard?”

“Who? Defenseless old me?” I asked, dropping an entire cup of honey into my voice.

“Cut the shit,” he said. “I already apologized.”

Ugh. He was right. I was keyed-up and taking it out on him. “You did. Sorry. I kicked him very hard several times and then kned him in the face.”

“He didn't get a hit off first?”

“No.”

“Good,” he said.

Heaven help me, he sounded proud.

A second later, there was a knock on the door. I glanced through the peephole to double-check that it was Jakob before pulling it open. We stood there, facing each other for an awkward moment. I was *not* going to hug him.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Hello again, Jakob,” Gran said, coming up behind me. “Oh, you brought friends.”

I swung the door wide, revealing the small, leather-clad army behind him. Men and women crowded together in the hallway. Several were open carrying military-grade weapons. No wonder the Jokers had taken off.

“Ready to go?” Jakob asked.

I nodded. “Gran's going to come stay with me.”

“You can't go back to your place,” he said.

I sighed. I should have seen this coming. If the Jokers had Dr. Perez or if she was working with them, they'd know by now that I was the reason the Kings were busting up their little operation. I'd

heard through the grapevine that the Kings had safe houses they used for situations like this, and if the intractable look on Jakob's face was anything to go by, I was about to spend some time inside one.

"Fine," I said.

I went to grab Gran's bag, but Rob stepped in and hefted it up.

"I got it," he said with a wink. He had one of those deep, purring baritones that rolled right through you when he spoke.

Gran perked up when she heard it. "Ooh, isn't that a voice."

He tipped his head toward her. "Ma'am."

"Thank you for such chivalry," she said, extending her hand. "I'm Izzy."

My grandmother, the flirtatious prom queen.

"Can we please get going now?" I asked after they shook. "The cops have to be on their way."

Miraculously, we made it out of there before any flashing lights arrived.



# Chapter Ten

The Kings surrounded my car as we drove, five ahead and five behind, both sets formed into a phalanx pattern. Jakob led the way. I thought we'd stick close to town, near the center of King territory, but as we wound out of Kearny and started gaining altitude in Hill Country, I began to wonder where the hell Jakob was taking us.

"Interesting friends you have," Gran said, turning toward me in her seat.

"They're not my friends," I told her.

"Accomplices? Comrades? Fellow criminals?" she pressed.

"I'm not in the Kings."

"Good. One set of lawbreakers is enough for a family." She peered through the windshield at Jakob's wide back. "Though I might be willing to make an exception about letting one more in."

I sighed. "I told you it isn't like that."

"And I'm still calling bullshit."

"We would kill each other within the first week if we tried to date," I said.

Last night proved that. What happened between Jakob and me had been less like a kiss and more like a physical altercation. Beth said he wasn't the kind of man to hit women, and I believed her. I wasn't the violent type either, and yet I'd all but choked him out in my desperation to close the distance between us.

A soft chuckle filled the car, pulling me from my thoughts. "Nothing like a little friendly violence to spice things up."

I choked and almost swerved off the road. "Gran!"

"Do mind the wheel, sweetie," she said, patting me on the back.

"Why are you always trying to send me back to therapy?" I whined. "Why can't you just pester me about getting married and having babies like all the other grandmothers?"

She sent me a devious look, and her lips parted on what was sure to be a traumatizing comeback.

I tried to cover her mouth and drive at the same time. "If you say anything else about you and Grandpa, I will turn this car around and let the drug dealers have you."

Wisely, she changed course. "Did you two mend your lovers' quarrel from yesterday?"

"It wasn't a lovers' quarrel," I said. "And yes, we did."

"How'd he make it up to you?" she asked.

*By following me home and kissing me senseless.* "He apologized for being a jerk."

"And did you apologize for being a jerk?"

"Who said I was a jerk?"

She was so quiet that I risked another glance at her. Her right brow was arched, and she gave me the same look I'd received countless times during my youth, the one that said "I see right through you, missy."

"I apologized," I muttered.

"Good. Knowing when to admit that you were wrong is half the battle. You two will be just fine."

I managed to resist the urge to correct her again. Once Gran got something into her head, there was no persuading her to change her mind. I asked Dr. Perez if that was a symptom of Alzheimer's, but she said no, it wasn't; it was a symptom of stubbornness.

An hour into the drive, the first pair of Kings veered off, leaving us with eight guards. Five minutes later, the next set fell behind, and then the next pulled a U-turn in the middle of nowhere.

Eventually only Jakob was left.

My car's engine whined as we climbed out of an old river basin. The road carved right through the red rock of the hill, obscuring our view until we got to the top.

"Oh, that's pretty," Gran said when we'd reached the summit.

I had to agree with her. Spread out before us was a plateau of farmland dotted with ranches and crop fields. Jakob led us into the very heart of it before making a right-hand turn onto an unobtrusive dirt road. Half a mile down it, we passed beneath an arch that read Frihet Ranch, and I realized this wasn't a road; it was a driveway.

The lane turned left, and as I followed the curve, a house came into view in the distance. It sat a little way down the hill from us, perched close to the edge of a drop-off. Below it, a wide, slow-moving river wound lazily past. It was an idyllic setting, especially with the small herd of longhorns grazing in a nearby pasture.

"Where has your beau brought us?" Gran asked.

"No idea," I said. This looked too nice to belong to the Kings.

Hill Country was known for its wild, tempestuous storms, and the house was designed to accommodate for that. It was large, but instead of being tall, it sprawled along the cliff edge, built in a modern style with stucco and pale stone cladding its exterior. The rooflines were asymmetrical, set at sharp angles so rain would sluice right off. Large windows looked out at the surrounding views.

Jakob pulled up to the garage and slid his bike in next to two Harleys. I parked, leaving a car length between us, and Gran and I got out. Bugs chirped from the nearby hayfield. Birds called from overhead. Someone had planted a willow tree in a low spot far enough away from the house that the roots wouldn't wreck the foundation, but even at this distance, I heard the breeze sighing through its bowed branches.

Tawny red flashed in my periphery. I turned just in time to watch a golden retriever bound down the front walk toward us. It caught sight of Jakob and started barking maniacally, changing course to barrel straight at him. Jakob crouched down to greet the dog and was almost knocked off his feet when it hit him at full speed. It jumped and whined all over him, trying to lick his hands, his face, wiggle as close to his big body as it possibly could—not that I could blame the thing. The scene reminded me of one of those YouTube videos where a loyal dog is reunited with their human after being separated from them, and a sinking suspicion yawned open inside me.

The dog fell off Jakob and turned to Gran and me next. We braced ourselves for impact.

A sharp whistle cut through the air. "Molly, you get back here now!" a man called.

The dog hesitated for one second, whined at us like she'd be back, and then took off, sprinting toward a blond man as large as Jakob. He looked to be in his late fifties or early sixties and padded down the walkway in a pair of worn-out jeans and a white V-neck T-shirt. His arms were sleeved in faded tattoos, and his feet were bare. Just behind him was a petite redheaded woman wearing a loose, sleeveless dress over leggings. They looked like a pair of wealthy, aging hippies.

The man's gaze met mine, and a shock of recognition zipped through me. I knew those eyes. I'd watched them ice over a hundred times.

Gran noticed the resemblance too. "I see looks run in the family," she said.

Jesus Christ, these were Jakob's parents. He hadn't brought me to a safe house; he'd brought me home.

The man I assumed was Jakob's father reached him, grinning in an open way that his son hadn't inherited. "Hey there, stranger." His voice was deep and a little rough around the edges, like he'd spent his youth smoking.

Instead of hugging, the two men shook hands. The petite woman, who I was pretty sure was Jakob's mother, was less formal. As soon as the men broke apart, she grabbed Jakob around the shoulders and pulled him down in a surprising show of strength, hugging him for a solid minute. I heard the soft hint of a feminine voice, but whatever she said to him was carried away by the breeze before it reached my ears.

There was something about meeting a person's parents that always made me nervous. Usually I didn't get too worked up about what others thought of me, but all bets were off when it came to the loved ones of people I cared about. I nearly sweat right through my shirt the first time I met Nina's mom.

For the past few days, I'd told myself over and over again that Jakob meant nothing to me. That he was just a man I'd slept with. The butterflies in my stomach exposed that for the lie it was. If I didn't care about him in at least some small way, the imminent threat of meeting his parents wouldn't make me feel like I was about to throw up.

Jakob and his mother pulled apart.

He turned to me and confirmed my fears. "These are my parents, Liam and Jennifer. Dad, Mom, this is Krista and her grandmother, Izzy."

The four of us exchanged hellos.

Liam gestured toward the house. "Why don't you come on in and tell us why your girlfriend has blood on her jeans."

"I'm not his girlfriend," I said, just as Jakob bit out, "She's not my girlfriend."

Liam snorted, looked between us, and turned toward the house. "Sure she's not," he said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Gran cackled like this was the most fun she'd had in years, then slipped her arm through Jennifer's as they followed Liam. Jakob and I stayed where we were, staring after them with that particular brand of long-suffering look reserved for children with embarrassing elders.

Molly chose that moment to jump on me. I nearly fell over backward.

"Yes, hi. It's nice to meet you too." I shot up a deflecting hand. "No, you may not lick my open mouth."

"Down, Molly," Jakob said.

She dropped back to all fours and weaved between us, tail shaking so fast that her whole body wiggled.

"You brought me home," I said.

Jakob shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "It's the safest place I could think of."

*Oof.* Nope. Not going to analyze that statement right now. "Won't I be putting your parents at risk?"

He turned to me with his signature *fuck you* face. He looked pissed off, but I was pretty sure he wasn't and that this was just how his facial features registered any strong emotion. Angry? Scowl. Confused? Scowl. Turned on? Scowl, but make it look sexy.

"You didn't see the bikes?" he asked.

"I didn't get a chance to look at them," I said. I'd been a little preoccupied with the fact that he wanted me to stay with his family.

He jerked his head in the direction of the Harley's, and I dutifully turned toward them. Dead center on each gas tank was an emblem with a pair of stylized, tattered wings spread wide. In the middle of them sat a grinning skull wearing a motorcycle helmet. I didn't grow up in the MC community, but even being new to it, I recognized the design. It was the patch for the Specters, one of

the largest and most notorious outlaw motorcycle clubs in the country. They were right up there with the Big Four on the FBI's watch list.

I turned back to Jakob. "Your parents are in the Specters?"

He nodded. "My father is a founding member."

My next exhale came out sounding more like a wheeze. It felt like he'd just gut-punched me. Suddenly I was less touched that Jakob had brought us here and more terrified. This was why everyone was afraid of him. Not only was he frightening in his own right, but piss Jakob off, and you pissed off daddy. If Liam was a founding member, he was arguably one of the most dangerous men in the state, if not the country. No one would want to make an enemy out of that man. Not unless they were suicidal.

I looked past Jakob. His parents were leading Gran through the front door. Molly, not wanting to miss out on the excitement, went tearing up the walkway after them. Gran said something to Liam, and he glanced back at Jakob and me with a wily look on his face. He nodded and turned back to Gran. Gran said something else and nudged him in the ribs, and he threw back his head and laughed. His whole face lit up with it. The sight did nothing to stem the fear flowing through my veins.

I turned back to Jakob. I wasn't about to insult him by insinuating that his parents were a danger to my grandmother, but I had to know that she was safe. "Promise me that Gran will be okay here."

He met my gaze with steady, unflinching focus. "She'll be okay here."

It would have to do for now. If he was lying, if his parents did anything to hurt my gran, I'd call in a favor or two with friends still in the service and reap my revenge on the entire Larson clan, to hell with the consequences.

Deep down, I didn't think it would come to that. And the fact that I trusted Jakob with my grandmother's safety scared me more than anything else had today.



LIAM LARSON CROSSED his arms over his chest and stared at his son. "So, after Krista went inside, what did you do?"

The three of us stood in the Larsons' beautiful Italian-style kitchen. Just outside, visible through the massive, sliding glass wall that faced the river, Gran and Jennifer sat on the back patio, sipping lemonade as they chatted. The sun was starting to dip toward the horizon, and the day had taken on a sort of hazy golden glow.

Jakob leaned against the marble counter. "We waited."

Liam cocked his head sideways and grinned at me. I tried not to squirm.

"My son must really trust you if he stayed put outside," he said.

"We needed to find out what was going on with Dr. Perez," I told him. "I had a decent chance of getting that information out of the receptionist."

"When did you start suspecting the guard with you?" he asked.

He had the same intensity as his son. It made it hard to meet his eyes as I answered him. "When it became clear that the receptionist was wary of him. Annie's pretty tough. She didn't even buy my sob story about Jakob yesterday, so when I realized she was rattled, I knew something was wrong. Then I noticed he wasn't wearing a name tag."

"You have good instincts," Liam said, and between his smile and open praise, my cheeks started to feel a little warm. "What happened in the elevator?"

I told him about the fight. "If he's a Joker, he's new," I said when I'd finished.

"What makes you think that?" Liam asked.



“Unlike the other guards, I didn’t see any visible tattoos on him, and he hasn’t been in a lot of closed-space fights. He projected the hell out of his first punch, didn’t guard himself, and let his pain slow him way down. It’s why I was able to take him out so fast.”

Liam’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “Why do I have a feeling that you’re being modest?”

I shook my head. “I’m not. I assume you noticed my limp?”

He nodded.

“The guard either didn’t see it or didn’t realize its significance. His opening move was to punch me instead of kicking my leg.”

“Ah,” he said, but he was still looking at me like he thought I was holding out on him.

I really wasn’t. Yes, I was faster and better trained than the guard, but if that big son of a bitch had taken me to the ground, that would have been a much uglier fight.

“When did you call Jakob?” Liam asked.

“As soon as I got out of the elevator,” I said.

He turned to his son. “And how did you respond?”

“I told everyone to get out the biggest guns they had, and we walked up to the front door open carrying them,” Jakob said.

Liam grinned. “I’m assuming they saw that you were loaded for bear and hightailed it out of there?”

Jakob nodded.

Liam clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Good job. Without that show of force, their pride might have gotten the better of them, and they could have tried to turn that nursing home into their Alamo.” It was hard to miss the pride in his tone as he let his son go. “Did you get out of there before the cops showed up?”

“Yeah,” Jakob said.

Liam turned to me. “Expect a phone call. They’ll probably want to question you about what happened.”

My stomach sank. “Lovely.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll send a club lawyer with you, and she’ll bury them in bullshit.”

“We’ll?” I asked, looking between the two men. “Wait, are the Kings a subchapter of the Specters?”

Jakob nodded.

*Oh sweet Jesus.* “Please tell me the Jokers aren’t a subchapter of another club.”

The smile fled from Liam’s face. “They’re a sub to the Bandits.”

Great. Just wonderful. Two of the biggest outlaw motorcycle clubs in the country had neighboring subchapters on the brink of open war. That would mean nothing good for Kearny.

I turned toward Jakob. “I need to go home and get some stuff if I’m going to stay here.”

He pushed off from the counter. “I’ll go with you.”

His father nodded in the direction of the garage. “You should take the Mustang. No one will recognize it.”

“Keys still in the same place?” Jakob asked.

“Yup,” Liam answered.

Jakob went to get them, and I went to steal Jennifer away from Gran for a minute. It turned out Jakob’s mother had trained as a nurse, and I assumed that was part of why he’d brought us here, knowing Gran would need some special care while we hid out.

The glass slider looked like it weighed a ton, but it whispered open from the slightest touch of my hand. Must be nice to have money.

“Jennifer, can I talk to you?” I called.

She looked at Gran.

Gran waved her away. “Go right ahead, Jen. I’ll be fine out here with this view for company.”

Jennifer smiled and squeezed Gran’s hand as she got up. She had the kind of steady focus and calm demeanor that lent well to the nursing profession, and after seeing her interact with Gran this afternoon, I felt a little less nervous about leaving Gran in the Larsons’ care for an hour or two while we drove back to Kearny.

Jennifer came inside and closed the door behind her. She was younger than Jakob’s father by about a decade, in her late forties or early fifties. Not a single strand of gray was visible in her wild red hair. Her face was still youthful, like Gran’s, either thanks to genetics or a healthy appreciation for sunscreen. Intelligence shone through her bright green eyes as she met my gaze.

“What’s up?” she asked, the lilt in her voice hinting at her Irish homeland.

“I don’t know how much Jakob told you, but Gran has Alzheimer’s.”

“Yes, he said.”

“Well, with a lot of Alzheimer’s patients, upheaval like this can throw them a bit. She’s had a good week so far, but I wouldn’t be surprised if after the chaos of today she goes downhill. You might need to repeat yourself a lot. Or she might get confused or upset as to who you are or why she’s here.”

Jennifer looked past me to where Liam stood in the kitchen. “Okay,” she said slowly.

“I just wanted to warn you because right now I’m her only familiar face, and after I leave, she might immediately start slipping,” I said.

Jennifer frowned. “Didn’t Jakob tell you why I got my nursing degree?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t even know he was bringing us here, let alone that you were a nurse.”

Her frown deepened, and she looked to her husband. “You need to go talk to your son.”

Uh-oh, she’d gone *your son* on him. I’d just landed Jakob in some shit with his parents somehow.

Behind me, Liam sighed and wandered off into the house.

Jennifer turned back to me. “My mother had Alzheimer’s. She passed away two years ago.”

I blinked at her.

“I got my degree so I could bring her over here and be her full-time caregiver,” Jennifer said.

“She lived with us here while Jakob was growing up.”

Heat crept into my cheeks. “He didn’t say anything. Yesterday when I gave him a rundown on Alzheimer’s symptoms, he just stood there like a stone.”

She put her hands on my shoulders. “I’m sorry. I love that boy more than life itself, but sometimes I just want to shake him until his teeth rattle in his head.”

She gave me a little shake in demonstration, and despite myself, I grinned.

“I feel like such an idiot,” I said.

She squeezed my shoulders. “Don’t. Jakob plays his cards close to his chest, even with us.

Growing up with parents in an outlaw club can instill a certain healthy level of paranoia in a child. And after his time in the service...” She let go of me and shrugged.

“How long was he in for?”

“Eight years.”

“Did he go in right out of high school?”

She nodded.

“Has he talked about any of his missions with you?” I asked.

She shook her head, sending her red curls flying. “He said he can’t for legal reasons. They were all classified.”

Another piece of the Jakob puzzle fell into place. In my experience, people who worked highly classified missions were a paranoid, secretive bunch. They kept to their own units, didn’t socialize with other soldiers, and lost touch with anyone they’d been friends with before they went into service. Because what could you say to outsiders? Can’t answer any questions about where you are or what you’re doing. Can’t talk about what you’re training for. It was much easier to stay silent than to lie, and if Jakob had been paranoid before enlisting, God only knew what eight years of classified missions had done to the guy.

“Give him time,” Jennifer said. “He’s a good man underneath that tough shell of his.”

“I’ll try,” I said, because I didn’t know what else to tell her. *Sorry, I’m just using him for his body* was a little too blunt, even for me, and I was beginning to realize it might not even be true anymore.

Twenty minutes later, Jakob and I were back on the road. The hunter-green Mustang we rode in was a classic with a big, throaty engine, and while it was both powerful and beautiful, I wished we’d taken my crappy car instead. We might have been recognized in it, but it had A/C, and that was starting to seem like a fair trade-off. In this part of Texas, the temperature usually topped out at ten degrees hotter than the surrounding low-lying towns. Not a cloud dotted the cornflower-blue sky today. The pavement radiated heat back up at us even as the sun scorched the hood of the car.

I piled my hair on top of my head in a messy bun and cranked my window down. Jakob lowered his too.

I turned to look at him. “Would it have killed you to mention yesterday that your grandmother had Alzheimer’s?”

He kept his gaze on the road. “Didn’t see the point.”

Ugh, men. “Gee, I don’t know, you could have saved me the breath at least.”

He glanced over at me, his eyes hidden behind his shades. “My grandmother didn’t know who we were the last two years of her life. I didn’t think you’d want the reminder of how bad it’s gonna get with your gran.”

I nearly gripped my chest. It felt like my heart just shuddered to a stop. Yes, it was going to get that bad with Gran, and there was nothing that I or anyone else could do to stop it. That fact gutted me every time I remembered it.

I watched Jakob’s profile as he turned back toward the road. “You’re right. That would have been hard to hear three seconds before saying hi to her, but you might have found another way to mention it without getting to that point.”

He shrugged one massive shoulder. “Maybe, or one question could have led to another, and we’d wind up there eventually. Plus you were already upset with me as it was.”

“I had good reason to be,” I reminded him.

“Not saying you didn’t. Just meant that I didn’t want to add heartbreak to my list of offenses.”

I turned away and looked out my window, contemplating his words. Did I like the way he’d handled it? No. Did I understand how someone with Jakob’s history might behave the way he had? Yes. We were already pissed at each other by the time we got to Gran’s. Instead of potentially ripping my heart out, he’d clammed up instead. In his own way, he’d been trying to protect me.

I kept my head turned away as I asked my next question. “In the future, can you try to find a way to say something in similar situations? I’d rather be upset in the moment than embarrassed after the fact.”

“I’ll try,” he said.

I had just alluded to there being a future between us, and he'd gone right along with it. God, what was I getting myself into?

We fell quiet as we passed from pastureland to cornfield. This spring, Texas had seen more rain than usual, and the swaying stalks were already tall enough that I couldn't see over them. An echo of Jakob's voice from earlier ghosted through my mind. "We're coming in to get you." From the sound of it, it would have taken an army to stop him.

He'd come for Gran and me, risking open confrontation with the Jokers, and by consequence, the Bandits. Last night, he'd done nothing to dispel the rumors about us. Afterward, he'd followed me home to make sure I was safe, apologized for being a jerk, and then kissed me like he wanted to consume me. Now when it seemed like a rival gang might be targeting me, he didn't dump me in some shithole safe house but brought me home to his parents.

I could have been reading into things, but it was looking more and more like whatever was happening between us wasn't just some casual thing for Jakob either.

Sweat beaded on my forehead. I draped my arm out the window and splayed my fingers, trying to angle some of the rushing air into the cab with us. I was hot and agitated. My fight with the guard had brought my blood up, and there was nothing like a brush with death to make you want to do something reckless.

I turned back to Jakob. He'd changed out of his leathers before we left, and now he wore a pair of dark jeans and a black T-shirt that clung to him like a second skin. His Kings jacket was in the back seat. I had no doubt that he would pull it on the second we got out of the car. Despite the way I'd taunted him about his need to always wear it, I was happy he'd brought it. If anyone tasked with watching me saw the Kings emblem stitched into the back of it, it might give them pause.

He made some subtle motion, and I looked him over. His left hand gripped the top of the steering wheel, bicep corded beneath the ink of his tattoos. If I decided to see where things went with him, one day soon, I was going to ask what each of his tattoos represented. He didn't seem like the sort of man to slap just any symbology on his body.

I dropped my gaze. His right hand rested on the gear stick between us, ready to downshift as we approached the next hill. I fantasized about those long, dexterous fingers for a minute or two before lifting my focus back to his face. The sunglasses he wore had a classic shape to them, and with his hair slicked back like this, he looked like he could have been a fairer, bearded brother of James Dean.

"Enjoying the view?" he drawled. He'd felt me watching him.

"Yes," I said, unashamed.

He glanced over at me. I stared into his shades for a second and then looked him over again, oh so slowly, so that there was no way he missed my interest.

He turned back to the road. "After the hallway, you're gonna need to say it."

Ah, yes, the hallway, when I'd shoved him and then revoked his permission to touch me whenever he wanted. That must have been why he'd stopped himself before kissing me last night. Damn my temper.

"I want you to get me off, Jakob."

Men, I'd learned, loved it when you said their name in any way it might relate to sex. Jakob was no different. His jaw clenched. He shifted his grip on the wheel. The hand resting on the gear stick moved to his crotch, and he adjusted the bulge that was forming there. A thrill shot through me to see that I had such an immediate effect on him.

"Unbutton your jeans," he said.

I hesitated for half a second. I figured I'd proposition him, and he'd pull over somewhere secluded so we could get freaky in the back seat. Did he want to get me off while driving? I looked around. There was no one else on the highway with us. I shifted my hips forward in the seat, unbuttoned my jeans, and then unzipped the fly.

He reached over and dipped his fingers into the top band of my underwear. The jeans were tight, and he had to shove his hand down to reach the spot I needed him to. I heard a tear and knew that a seam was in danger of splitting, but I didn't give a single fuck. If not for the very real threat of wrecking the car, I might have climbed on top of him.

He searched out my clit with the same single-minded intensity he always displayed, but instead of stopping there, he pushed right past, curled his hand under, and slid one long, thick finger straight inside me. I was already wet, had been since I'd seen him looming outside Gran's door, the threat of violence clinging to him like a near-visible miasma of menace. His palm rubbed over my clit as he slicked deeper into me, and a jolt of electricity zinged through my core. Before I could catch my breath, he was moving, stroking his hand back and forth, thrusting his finger in and out.

I moaned aloud and let my head fall back against the seat. I could have died today. Gran could have been hurt. If the Jokers had decided to make Magnolia into their Alamo, who knew how many people could have gotten caught in the cross fire? Thanks to Jakob's quick thinking, we had all escaped, and ever since walking out of that building, I'd been craving this reminder that I was still alive, still free, still capable of feeling joy and lust and need.

"Ride me," Jakob growled.

I gripped his wrist and held him in place as I did what he said, my hips shifting restlessly until I found the least painful angle for my bad leg. Yes, there. *Right there.*

The tightness of my jeans kept his palm plastered to my clit. I moved up and down, breasts jiggling with the motion. He took his eyes off the road, and even through the sunglasses, I could feel him branding my body with his gaze. Oh yes, he was a boob man.

I lifted a hand and palmed my breast through my T-shirt. "I wish you could put your mouth on me," I said, knowing it would drive him crazy that he couldn't.

He jerked his focus back to the road and shifted the angle of his finger, hitting a spot deep inside me that made me gasp on the next thrust. I was so close.

"I would tease your nipples until I had you screaming," he said. "The second we get into your apartment, I'm fucking you on the floor."

I thrust down onto him again, harder this time. "What's wrong with... Oh my *God*, Jakob... my bed?"

He shook his head, jaw clenched so tight that his next words came out through his teeth. "I won't have the patience to walk that far."

His words undid me. Pleasure built deep inside, centered around my core, and then exploded outward. I lost the rhythm, but as my hips stilled, he picked up the pace with his hand, dragging the orgasm out until I was so hypersensitive with pleasure that it almost hurt.

"Enough," I said, breathless.

His hand went still inside me. My muscles clenched around him with the lingering strength of my release.

Holy shit.

My head spun. Stars danced across my vision. It wasn't enough. Something about this man stripped away all my layers of humanity and left me exposed as the lustful, greedy creature I was.

*Again. More. Harder,* she demanded.

He slid his hand out of my jeans and stuck his finger in his mouth, drinking down the taste of me.  
“How fast does this car go?” I asked him.  
In answer, he dropped the gas pedal to the floor.



# Chapter Eleven

All thoughts of sex fled from my mind the second we walked through my door. There was no way Jakob could have fucked me on the floor because it was covered in glass. I lifted my head and stared in horror at the wreck of my apartment. I was only gone a couple of hours. That didn't seem like enough time for someone to do this amount of damage.

My coat hanger had been ripped off the entryway wall with so much force that the anchors I'd used to secure it had torn out a chunk of drywall. The picture of Gran and me that once hung opposite it was shattered beneath our feet. Someone had taken a knife to my couch and yanked half the stuffing out of it. The apartment was too small for a dining table, but I had a pair of barstools tucked beneath the overhang of the kitchen counter. All that was left of them now were two piles of sticks that would better serve as kindling.

I turned to take in the rest of the carnage. My mattress had been dragged off the bed frame and given the same stab and rip treatment as the couch. Papers littered the floor. Books had their pages torn out of them. Someone had yanked my pretty curtains off the windows, rod and all, creating still more holes in the drywall. Most of the kitchen cabinets were missing their doors, but a few hung by a single bracket, swaying in the breeze that blew in through the busted windows. I leaned forward and craned my head to the right. Remnants of my dinnerware lay in shards across the kitchen floor.

"Guess I'm not getting the deposit back on this place," I said, because if I didn't make a joke, I would start screaming.

Jakob shut the door behind me. "Stay here."

My apartment was a studio. The only places someone could hide were in the bathroom or the closets. Jakob's boots crunched over glass as he strode past me. I watched him check the closets first. No one there. He pushed open the bathroom door and recoiled, covering his nose.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he said, reaching out with his leg.

I had no idea what he was doing until I heard the sound of the toilet flush. Whatever was in there was so bad that he'd used the toe of his boot to touch the handle. Yes, I *would* stay right here, thank you. I had no desire to see anything that could make a man like Jakob Larson dry heave.

He shut the door behind him and came back to me. I must have looked truly freaked out because he put his hands on my shoulders and bent down to look me in the eye. "No one's here. You're okay. It's just stuff."

I nodded over and over again. Yes, I was okay. Yes, it was just stuff. But it was *my* stuff. And now it was all gone. The pretty curtains I picked out with Gran at Home Goods. Those handcrafted stoneware plates and mugs I bought from a local pottery studio. That frigging Ikea couch I saved up for, with the fold-out mattress so Nina could crash here if we got too tipsy down at the pool during our day off. Gone. All of it. Just like that. Someone had broken into my home, violated my safe space, and ruined everything I owned.

It made me feel untethered.

*Unsafe.*

I sniffed, a lump forming in my throat.

Jakob slid his arms around me and pulled me in tight. "I'm sorry, Krista," he said, voice low. "It's my fault for dragging you into this."

I shook my head and sniffled again. "It's not your fault. I agreed to help."



Three years ago, I wouldn't have given in to the threat of tears. I would have shoved them down, buried my pain deep, and let it eat me from the inside out. Tough girls don't cry. Soldiers don't cry. But that nice Army shrink who taught me about tricking my brain into enjoying a small amount of pain during sex had also shown me the consequences of bottling up emotions, so I stood there within Jakob's arms and allowed myself to break down for a few minutes.

The past two days had been awful, minus the brief moments of bliss this man had given me. It could have been worse. So much worse. Someone could have gotten to Gran. My knee could have given out during that fight in the elevator. If I'd been stubborn instead of listening to the sense in Jakob's words, Gran and I could have been in this apartment when someone broke in. Those thoughts, more than anything else, drove my tears. It was the what-ifs that always scared me the most. It had been this way since the plane crash. What if my crewmates hadn't gotten to me in time? What if I'd been trapped there and burned to death?

That psychologist had taught me not to repress these thoughts but to follow them all the way down the rabbit hole to the bitter, ugly end. Because doing so freed me from the torment of those thoughts and lessened the residual anxiety.

Jakob rubbed my back while I let myself think of every worst-case scenario that could have happened. He didn't once try to calm me down or tell me not to be upset. He didn't get awkward or make a joke about the fact that my tears had soaked through his shirt, and that, more than anything else, made me want to stick around and find out if there really could be something more than just sex between us.

By the time my tears started to dry, I felt better. Everything was still awful, my apartment was still trashed, but Gran and I were alive and safe.

As the sadness and fear drained away, anger rose to fill the gap.

I shifted within Jakob's grip. He leaned back and looked at me. My face was probably puffy and red; I'd never been a pretty crier. Jakob didn't seem to mind. He reached out and rubbed the last bit of wetness from the corner of my eye.

"I want in on whatever the payback is for this," I said.

His expression blanked. "What payback?"

"Don't bullshit me, Jakob," I said. "The Jokers or someone working for them came into the heart of Kearny and trashed the place of a woman they think is dating the son of Liam Larson. I know the Kings won't let this stand."

"You're not a King," he said. "You don't get to be in on the payback unless you wear the leathers."

"No one else beside you will even know I'm there."

He frowned.

"I was an aerial gunner with one of the best records in the history of my unit," I said. "Put me somewhere up high with a rifle, and if shit goes sideways, I'll make sure the Kings get out of there alive."

He gave me a flat look. "So you're going to what? Take up position in some building and put bullets through their brains if they come at us?"

Yikes. Why was everything always so extreme with him?

"I was more thinking of through-and-throughs in nonlethal spots that would take them out of a fight," I said. "I was top of my class in sniper school. I can do it."

His scowl deepened. "What if you miss? What if they move and end up dying from the wounds? You're not in the military anymore. These aren't foreign enemy combatants; they're American

civilians. There's no government oversight here authorizing the kill. You take one of them out, and you'll be a murderer."

There it was, the reason I didn't judge anyone in the Kings for what they did. Most of them were combat vets. Like me, they'd had their humanity stripped away during war. They'd gazed into the dark core of human nature and learned what brutal, ugly creatures we really were. "Thou shalt not kill" turned into "Actually, it's okay to kill who we tell you to."

Authorized slaughter. What a batshit-crazy concept.

When the war was over, we were dumped back into civilian life with laughably inadequate training on how to readjust. Was it any wonder that instead of reacclimating, members of the Kings had found another cause to fight for? Another unit to join? One filled with people just like them, who saw this world with eyes wide open? Anarchy reigned supreme on the battlefield, and even if you left it, it never really left you. Civilization didn't make much sense after that. We saw it for the thin veneer it was. We knew how little it took to strip it away, and so we'd stopped buying into the bullshit and started living our lives according to our own fucked-up moral compasses.

"I've been a murderer since I was twenty," I told Jakob. "Government authorization never made my kills any easier, and it sure as shit didn't stop the nightmares. I fought the Russians beside the Ukrainians to keep their country from being dragged back into the new USSR, and you'd damn well better believe that I'll gladly take out a couple of Jokers if it means I'll be protecting Kearny."

He held my gaze for a long moment, and then finally he nodded. "You can be in on it."

I let out a heavy breath. "Thank you."

A knock sounded from behind us, followed by a creak as the door swung open. "Krista?"

Jakob and I whipped around. An attractive Latino man in his late twenties stood framed within my doorway. His dark hair was cropped short, and a pair of black-framed glasses perched on his nose. It was my neighbor from across the hall, Raúl. He was a graphic designer who worked from home. Judging by the unsurprised look on his face as he stared at my apartment, he'd been home when someone trashed it.

Jakob stepped beside me. To the untrained eye, he might look relaxed. His posture was loose, hands hanging free by his sides. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him rise onto the balls of his feet, ready to spring. I put a restraining hand on his forearm.

"Hey, Raúl," I said. "This is Jakob. Jakob, my *neighbor*, Raúl."

Jakob eased back to the flats of his feet.

Raúl, unaware of the danger he'd just been in, nodded at Jakob. "Nice to meet you, man."

Jakob nodded back. "You too."

"I'm guessing you saw something?" I asked Raúl.

He shook his head. "I heard something. It sounded like you were having a wall knocked out, so I called down to Brad."

"Brad's our super," I told Jakob. I looked back at Raúl. "What'd he say?"

Raúl's expression darkened. "He said management was finally letting you remodel your kitchen." *Fucking Brad.*

"He was in on it?" Jakob asked, taking a step toward the door.

I tightened my grip on his arm. Running downstairs to murder my super real quick would not help this situation.

"Doubtful," I said. "Brad's a run-of-the-mill lowlife, but he wouldn't be stupid enough to work for the Jokers in King territory. They probably just paid him off."

Raúl's eyes flashed wide. "The Jokers did this?" He looked to Jakob, took in the patch on the front of his leather jacket, and lifted his hands. "I don't want anything to do with a turf war."

"Don't worry. We won't drag you into it," I said. "Right?" I squeezed Jakob's arm, and he grunted in a way that might have been assent.

Raúl backed out of my apartment and kept going, all the way across the hall. I saw his boyfriend poke his head out their doorway, eyes wide. Great. He'd heard that whole exchange.

"Thank you for the heads-up," I said.

Raúl nodded and disappeared into his apartment. I heard hushed whispers and what sounded like ten locks slamming into place.

"I guess we know why no one called the cops," I said, turning back toward the wreckage of my life.

Jakob frowned in question.

"Our apartment complex encourages residents to vet any complaints we have through each building's super," I told him. "It keeps the police from coming out here every time someone's dog barks too loud."

Understanding and frustration swept over his features as he realized that anyone who called downstairs concerned about the noise would have been reassured by Brad, which meant that there was a real possibility no one even caught a look at the people who did this.

On second thought, maybe we *could* go murder Brad real quick.

My phone rang from inside my purse. I fished it out and saw an unknown number. Just like with Dr. Perez, it was local. I swiped right to answer. "Hello?"

"Is this Krista Evans?" a deep male voice asked.

I hit the Speakerphone button. "It is."

"This is Officer Sanders with Kearny PD. We'd like you to come down to the station and answer some questions if you have time."

"Lawyer," Jakob said, not bothering to lower his voice.

"What was that?" Officer Sanders asked.

"I can come down," I told him. "I just need to set up a time with my attorney. I'll have them call you."

"Who's your lawyer?" he asked. "I want to make sure the call is put through to me when it comes."

"Katherine Jenkins," Jakob answered.

Officer Sanders sighed. He sounded tired. "You're a King. I should have known."

"I'm not a King," I said. "Just a friend of them."

"Fine. But, Ms. Evans?"

"Yeah?"

"The sooner you get down to the station, the better. We have a rep here from Magnolia Hills saying you assaulted one of their security guards."

I bit back the f-bomb that threatened. "Thank you, Officer. We'll be there as soon as we can."

We said goodbye and hung up.

I turned to Jakob, furious. "That piece of shit is saying that *I* assaulted *him*? He was the one who followed me into the elevator and tried to attack me."

Jakob wore a contemplative expression.

"What is it?" I asked.

“Sanders shouldn’t have told you that,” he said. “It’s against PD policy. They like to bring people in and then tell them what they’re being accused of so they can get something out of the reaction.” He sounded like he was speaking from experience.

“So why did he?” I asked.

“He’s not a bad man,” Jakob said. “For a cop. He doesn’t like the Kings, but he’s fair, even with us. He probably told you because he smells bullshit. Be grateful. This will give Katherine a chance to work up a defense in advance.”

I mulled that over while Jakob called his father to let him know what had happened since we’d left his house. After he hung up, he called Daniel King, repeated the story, and then called Katherine Jenkins, my new lawyer. We spent forty minutes replaying the day’s events to her. When we finished, she gave us a long list of instructions and told us to meet her outside the police station in an hour.



# Chapter Twelve

The engine of the Mustang rumbled to life as Jakob pulled out of my parking lot.

I turned toward him in my seat. “Is there something going on between you and Daniel King?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, like he hadn’t seen that question coming from a mile away.

“Is there a rift between you two?”

He shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of. Why?”

I stared at him. Seriously? “Oh, I don’t know. I guess I was just curious because he broke into your place the other night, made cryptic comments about some dude named Mike, and was just a complete asshole to you on the phone.”

The man had ripped Jakob a new one when he’d told him what happened today. Jakob didn’t have him on speaker, but I still heard his angry words, which meant he’d been yelling.

Jakob shrugged. “Don’t read into what happened at my apartment. Nothing Daniel King does makes any goddamn sense to anyone other than Daniel King. Questioning him only makes it worse. And he has a right to be pissed that I broke the chain of command and talked to my dad before him about what happened today.”

There was more going on, I just knew there was, but Nina’s caution from the other night whispered through my mind, and I decided to let the conversation drop. She was right. Despite my curiosity, I didn’t need to get any deeper into Kings business than I already was. After I got some vengeance for my apartment, I’d do my best to let it all go.

“There’s one thing I keep coming back to in all this,” I said.

Jakob eased the car to stop at a red light. “What’s that?”

“Why weren’t you able to figure out who the dealer is by asking someone in town who bought drugs off them?”

He shook his head. “We’ve asked. No one wants to admit to buying drugs inside Kearny, let alone tell us who they bought them from.”

“You didn’t push the subject?” I asked. “This is kind of important.”

“Nah,” he said, gunning the engine as the light turned green. “We start torturing people to get answers out of them, and the town will turn on us.”

*Um... what?* I eased away from him in my seat. “I was more referring to bribing someone into answering your questions.”

The fact that he skipped right over that option and went straight to torture was a little concerning. My moral compass might not point due north, but I was beginning to think that Jakob’s wasn’t even functional anymore.

He glanced over and grinned when he caught sight of my expression, just a flash of teeth that was too feral to be a smile. “I was kidding, Krista.”

“Oh.” I relaxed a little.

He turned back toward the road. “There’s no point in torturing people. You can’t trust anything anyone says under that level of duress. Eventually they’ll tell you whatever you want to hear just to stop the pain.” He spoke with an authority that made me think he might have learned this information firsthand.

I frowned at his profile. “You know, I’m starting to worry about where you fall on the psychopath scale.”

In answer, he tipped his glasses down and shot me the most deranged expression I had ever seen. “Turns you on, doesn’t it?”

Despite myself, I laughed.

I was going straight to hell when I died. Because actually, it did.



KATHERINE JENKINS WAS not what I expected. If someone had asked me what the woman who defended an outlaw gang of bikers looked like, I probably would have described the quintessential ice queen: tall, commanding, blond, and with a gaze that could freeze you in your tracks.

Katherine shot that assumption straight to hell. The door of her luxury SUV swung open as we pulled into a parking space beside her at the police station, revealing a short white woman in her midfifties. She was dressed in a fitted gray skirt with an expensive-looking top tucked into it. Her brunette curls were pulled back into a low bun, and what little makeup she wore had been expertly applied. Despite the classy getup, she looked like a mother. I couldn’t quite put my finger on why—maybe she matched some imaginary maternal figure I’d dreamed up as a kid when my own mother turned out to be an asshole—but the second my eyes landed on her, my brain just went to *mom*.

Her smile was welcoming as we climbed out of the Mustang. Our gazes met, and I saw something earnest in her brown eyes, a sort of unspoken “*Everything will be okay. I’m here to take care of you, dear.*”

“Hi. You must be Krista,” she said, extending a hand. Her voice only reinforced the mom vibe. Warm and melodic, it sounded like she was about two seconds away from asking me if I wanted a second helping of pot roast.

“I am,” I said. We shook. “Thank you for helping me on such short notice.”

“Of course. Any friend of the Kings is a friend of mine.” Her smile widened as she looked from me to Jakob. “I hope you’ve been staying out of trouble, young man.”

If he felt patronized by her words, it didn’t show. He cocked a brow at her, one corner of his lips rising in amusement. “I never get in trouble.”

Katherine made a low harrumphing sound. “Thanks to me, you mean.”

Jakob grinned. I could count on one hand the number of people I’d seen him smile at. He must really like her. Not that I could blame the man. Three minutes in her company, and I already wanted her to invite me over for a family dinner.

Katherine’s eyes met mine. “Remember, you’re not to answer a single question they ask you.”

“I remember,” I said.

She held my gaze. “It is imperative that you let me do all the talking. The police may try to say something to incite you into responding. Don’t.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, clicking my heels together and throwing her a salute.

She looked heavenward. “Great. Another smartass.”

I dropped my hand, grinning even wider than Jakob.

Katherine shook her head at me and turned toward him. “You need to stay out here. Kearny PD will know that she’s involved with the Kings because I’m representing her, but they don’t need a visual reminder shoved into their faces or a club member antagonizing them.”

Jakob adopted an innocent expression. “Since when have I ever antagonized cops?”

Katherine gave him a look that made me think she would be a stricter mom than I first thought. “Do you really want me to answer that, young man?”

Jakob shook his head. Good call. Wouldn’t want to press his luck and get grounded.

Katherine turned back to me. “You and the guard were alone in the elevator. Unless there were cameras in there, there’s no way either of you can prove your sides of the story. Without witnesses, anything you say will be hearsay. The bad news is that without the cameras, he can accuse you of assault and file either a civil or criminal lawsuit against you. If it’s civil, he’ll want you to pay for damages. Criminal, and you could be facing jail time.”

I nodded, my amusement evaporating. Please let there be cameras in the elevator. If I had to go to jail for defending myself against a gang member posing as a guard, I would lose what little faith I had left in the justice system.

Katherine laid a hand on my arm and sent me a sympathetic look. “Don’t worry. We can probably avoid a criminal charge. There isn’t much evidence for the police to pass to the district attorney, and without substantial proof that you just attacked him out of the blue, the DA won’t want to pursue it.”

I breathed out a heavy sigh of relief. “Okay.”

She looked me over. “Good outfit choice. Exaggerate your limp when we walk in. We want you to appear as helpless as possible.”

She’d advised me to change before leaving my apartment. I’d stripped my bloody jeans off, and following her instructions on how to destroy the evidence, Jakob and I soaked them in bleach and dropped them in a random dumpster a few miles away from my apartment complex.

Katherine had placed a lot of emphasis on appearing as wholesome and vulnerable as possible. I wore a bright yellow sundress with a white cardigan over it. This wasn’t my first rodeo with assault charges—I’d taken part in a couple of highly regrettable drunken bar brawls while still in the military—and I knew that looking helpless was a good way to make people question whether or not I was capable of doing what I’d been accused of.

The hem of the dress hit me just above my knees, leaving the worst of my scars visible. Usually I stuck to jeans and long dresses or skirts. It’s not that I was embarrassed or ashamed of my body; I just didn’t want to deal with the million and one questions I received every time my scars were on display. Most of the people who asked me about them in the past were well-meaning, and I understood the curiosity, but it got old. Now wasn’t a time to hide my scars. I would walk into this police station, exaggerate my limp, and hope to God that everyone who saw them took pity on me.

Was it low? Manipulative? You betcha. I had no regrets if it got me off the hook for criminal assault.

Katherine checked her watch. “If they’ve already filed charges, we’re going to counterfile and then petition for them to open an investigation into your apartment. Did you take pictures?”

I nodded and dug my phone out to show her the damage.

She let out a low whistle as she flipped through the images. “You’re staying with Jakob’s parents, right?”

“I am,” I said.

She glanced up from my phone, looking between Jakob and me. “I’d advise you two to stick together over the coming days. If someone was this violent with Krista’s belongings, I don’t want to think of what they’d do if they got their hands on her.”

Despite the sweltering heat of the day, a cold shiver ran through me.

Jakob saw it and wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “I won’t let her out of my sight.”

“You better not,” Katherine said, handing me my phone. “I’ll need Raúl’s contact information. It’s good we have a witness to this. You get attacked in an elevator and then go home to a trashed apartment? That would look bad even to a blind cop. The fact that Brad covered it up works in our favor. It shows conspiracy to commit a crime.”



The more she talked, the more I understood why Liam Larson kept her on his payroll. She was intelligent, competent, and seemingly unshakable. We spoke for several more minutes before saying goodbye to Jakob and walking into the building.

The front door spat us out into a small rectangular room. There were more doors to our left and right. Neither of them had handles. Dead ahead, a uniformed policewoman manned a front desk on the other side of a plexiglass barrier that was thick enough to be bulletproof. Katherine introduced us. Afterward, the policewoman asked us to fill out some paperwork and then buzzed us in. One of the side doors clicked open. Another cop met us at it and led us down a linoleum-lined hallway, deeper into the building. I looked around as we walked. It had been a while since I'd been inside a police station. The last time was in high school when I got called in to answer some questions about the possible whereabouts of my parents.

This station was bigger than the one back home. We passed a records department, a waiting room, several interrogation rooms, a lounge, and a large briefing room before being led through a door in the back. It opened into a wide office space crammed full of desks. Half of them were unoccupied. The others were manned by police officers in uniform and detectives in plain clothes. Civilians sat in uncomfortable-looking chairs facing some of the desks. One or two of them wore handcuffs while others looked to be filing complaints or answering questions.

My gaze wandered to the far corner of the room where I caught a semifamiliar face through the crowd. I frowned, struggling to place the man, and suddenly it clicked. It was the guy Jakob stared down at Magnolia Hills, the one who passed through the entrance hall while we waited to check in.

He must have felt me staring because he turned a little in his chair, and his dark eyes met mine across the room. I nearly missed a step. There was an intensity there, and despite the fact that his expression was damn near unreadable, his eyes told me more than I needed to know. I'd met enough bad men and women in my life to see the signs. Hell, I was a killer myself, but despite how fucked up I was, my eyes still had life in them. His were the eyes of a dead man, a walking husk whose soul had been shredded a long time ago. My reptilian brain recognized it right away. The second I locked eyes with him, it started hissing at me to put more space between us, and not even the fact that we were in a room full of cops with thirty feet between us was enough to shut her up.

I'd always had an expressive face, and he must have read something of my thoughts on it because he smiled. I jerked my gaze away and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. That was the kind of smile you gave someone right before you killed them.

Guess I knew who was filing the complaints against me.

I didn't like this coincidence. Jakob homed in on this guy like he knew him, and now here he was, trying to get Jakob's "old lady" charged with assaulting a fake guard. I'd thought he could be a doctor at first, but Officer Sanders said it was management making the complaint. If he was management, there was no way he didn't know that guard was fake. Had I just laid eyes on the mastermind behind the whole operation?

The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that I had. Everything fit. Who else but management could have inserted fake guards into Magnolia? Who else had the power to cover up what was happening there? Who else would be so angry at me for busting up their little drug operation that they looked like they wanted to murder me?

Katherine noticed my distraction. She leaned in as we walked. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," I said.

There were too many sets of ears around us, and I didn't feel safe saying anything about my suspicions. We fell quiet again and followed the cop to a desk pressed right up against the back wall.

Officer Sanders rose from the chair behind it. He was a tall white man in his midforties with sandy-brown hair and bright blue eyes. He had the kind of build that was well suited to his profession: trim but muscular. If someone tried to take off on him during an arrest, I had no doubt that he could run them into the ground.

He looked me over, wincing when his gaze fell to my leg, but at least he managed to greet me without any pity in his voice. “Officer Sanders,” he said, offering his hand.

I limped forward and placed mine in his. The handshake was firm and professional.

He let me go and turned to Katherine, and his face shifted into a sort of resigned, weary expression. “Let’s get this over with,” he said, leading us from the room.

I glanced at the guy from Magnolia as we left. He was still staring at me. I didn’t spook easily, but this guy made my fucking guts roil.

I stared straight ahead from that point forward, following Officer Sanders and Katherine back through the rabbit warren that was the police station. The three of us crowded around a small table in an interrogation room, and from that moment on, Katherine dominated the interview. It turned out there weren’t cameras in the elevators. The entire case would be hearsay after all. That revelation terrified me for a few minutes—what would happen to Gran if I was convicted?—but my fear soon evaporated. For every accusation lobbed against me, Katherine had a rebuttal. Every quote Sanders read aloud, Katherine refuted with the kind of steadfast doggedness that would wear down even the most fanatical cop. She never raised her voice. She was never rude. She simply sat there, speaking in a calm, logical tone that somehow made the entire case against me look absolutely ludicrous. I almost felt bad for Sanders toward the end. He hadn’t done anything to deserve being made to look like a fool; he was just trying to do his job. It was simply bad luck that my case landed on his desk.

I sat there throughout it all and kept my happy mouth shut. Whatever Liam Larson was paying Katherine, it wasn’t enough.

Once she’d finished destroying the criminal case against me—it turned out the guard *did* want to press criminal charges—she slid my phone across the desk and showed Sanders the wreckage of my apartment. He perked up as he thumbed through the photos.

“Can we get copies of these?” he asked.

“I’ll email them to you,” Katherine said.

His gaze rose to mine. “How long were you gone?”

“Five hours,” Katherine answered in my stead.

This was how the entire interview had gone. Sanders, bless him, kept addressing all his questions to me, either because that was protocol or he hoped I might break rank and actually open my mouth. I wasn’t stupid. Katherine told me to keep it shut, so I kept it shut.

“Isn’t it interesting,” she said, “that on the same day my client went to Magnolia Hills with the intent to expose what she believes is prescription fraud with one of the doctors there, that doctor never comes back from her lunch break, my client is attacked in an elevator by a guard she’s never seen before, and then afterward she arrives home to find her apartment vandalized?”

“*Interesting* isn’t the word I’d use,” Sanders said. “We’ll look into it.” He handed my phone back to me. “Where are you staying now?”

“With the family of a close friend,” Katherine answered.

He held my gaze. “I’d advise you not to leave the local area.”

Katherine rested her elbows on the table and leaned forward. “And why is that? She hasn’t done anything to warrant that order.”

Sanders's composure slipped a little as he turned to face her, his brow furrowing in frustration. "It's not an order. It's advice. We'll probably need her to come back in and answer more questions after we open an investigation into her apartment."

"I think my client has been beyond helpful already," Katherine said, her tone as calm and placating as it had been throughout the entire interview. "She was gracious enough to come down here of her own volition to address these patently false accusations against her. Any other questions you have, you can direct toward me. She's been through enough already."

Officer Sanders sighed, a long-suffering look on his face. "Fine."

"If that's all?" Katherine asked, rising from her seat.

Sanders leaned back in his chair and nodded. "That's all."

She smiled at him with the same warmth she'd shown me earlier. "We'll see ourselves out. It's been a pleasure, as always, Officer Sanders."

He snorted and waved a hand in dismissal. "Sure it has."

I rose from my chair and followed her into the hallway. "I really want to high-five you right now," I whispered.

A small, victorious smile spread over her face. "Wait until we get outside."



# Chapter Thirteen

I followed Katherine out of the police station, fighting back the urge to shiver. It was like an icebox in there. As if facing down cops wasn't bad enough without the bonus discomfort of being covered head to toe in goose bumps.

I paused just outside the door and let the Texas heat wrap around me like a blanket. The sun sat low on the horizon, but even as it set, it burned with an intensity that drove away my lingering chill. I closed my eyes and turned toward its warmth, rejoicing in the fact that I wasn't behind bars. Engines revved at a nearby stoplight. A gentle breeze brushed past me, carrying the scent of freshly cut grass.

I took a deep breath of freedom and turned to face my savior. "High five?"

Katherine lifted her hand. "High five."

We smacked our palms together and then headed down the front steps. Movement caught the corner of my eye. I turned to see Jakob push up from a park bench beneath a nearby stand of trees. Instead of his Kings jacket, he wore a loose, sleeveless leather vest over his black T-shirt, the MC logo emblazoned on the right breast. I felt like a fool for not seeing the similarities between the Kings and the Specters patches sooner. Where the skull in the Specters patch wore a skullcap helmet, the one in the Kings had a broken crown perched on its head. Otherwise, they were exactly alike.

Jakob emerged from the shadows of the trees out into the burnished gold of the dying day. I swear the darkness clung to him for a heartbeat too long, like it didn't want to let him go. He paced toward us with that particular gait that was all Jakob, long legs eating up the pavement, his focus lasered in on Katherine and me.

"How'd it go?" he asked when he reached us.

"As good as can be expected," Katherine said.

"She's being modest," I told him. "She destroyed Officer Sanders."

"Poor guy," Jakob said, but I could tell from the slight lift of his lips that he wanted to smile.

Katherine checked her watch. "Okay, I need to get going." She turned to me. "If anyone from Kearny PD contacts you, direct them to me."

"Can do," I said. "Thank you so much again."

She smiled and squeezed my arm. "You're welcome. We'll talk soon."

We said goodbye and watched her climb into her vehicle. A few minutes later, she waved as she pulled out of the parking lot. I'd vacillated between including her in the conversation I needed to have with Jakob or not including her. Ultimately I decided against her inclusion. She might need plausible deniability if the Kings did anything with the information I had. Well, thought I had.

I turned to Jakob. "You remember that guy you stared down when we were checking into Magnolia?"

He nodded.

I thumbed toward the front door. "He was inside. I'm pretty sure he's the one pushing for charges against me, and the more I think about it, the more I'm sure he's involved in all this."

"Why's that?" he asked.

"For starters, he has to know that guard is fake. Who else besides a manager would have the power to bring in gang members and cover everything up from the inside? And pressing charges against me is kind of a genius move, as much as I hate to admit it. It might throw any testimonial or accusations against them into question." I waved my hands in the air and let a little insanity slip into

my eyes. “That crazy chick is just making shit up to get out of assault charges. What grand conspiracy, Officer?”

Jakob turned toward the police station. If he had superpowers, the intensity of his gaze would have set it on fire. “Did you get his name?”

I dropped my hands. “No. I didn’t want to draw attention to the fact that I recognized him. Do you know him?”

Jakob glanced back at me, a little furrow between his brows. “Maybe. His face is familiar, but I can’t put a name to him.”

“Want to wait in the car until he comes out so you can get another look at him?” I asked.

He shook his head. “We can’t. We have to go to Daniel’s for a cookout.”

I frowned. “What?”

“He called while you were inside and invited us. Made a point to remind me that you told him you’d like to go over for dinner sometime.”

Damn my past self. “I don’t want to leave Gran alone in a strange place for too long.”

Jakob stepped close and put his hands on my shoulders. “I get it, but we have to go.”

I stared up at him. Shit. He had that intractable look on his face again. For some reason he *really* thought we needed to go. Whether it was because he didn’t want to piss off his gang leader or because something was going on between the two of them after all, I had no idea, and I didn’t like that.

The need to question him about this was strong, but I pushed it down and did my best to remind myself that it was none of my business. I’d gotten into enough trouble already by involving myself in the Kings’ problems.

“Okay, but I have to call Gran first,” I said.

He nodded and let me go.

I called Gran as we pulled out of the parking lot. She’d roped Jennifer into watching her favorite telenovela with her, and the two of them had spent the past three hours chumming it up together. I tried to ask a couple of leading questions to check in on her mental state, but she rushed me right off the phone. The last episode had ended on a cliffhanger, and she and Jennifer were both antsy to start the next one.

“Here, talk to Liam,” Gran said.

I heard muffled noises like she was passing the phone off. “Love you too!” I yelled.

That woman.

“Hey there,” Liam rumbled. “How’d it go?”

I put him on speaker, and together, Jakob and I caught him up on my visit to the police station. I made sure to openly hero-worship Katherine.

Liam chuckled. “That’s nothing. You should see her in a courtroom.”

“No offense,” I said, “but I’d rather avoid that.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “Jakob, we need someone to watch Magnolia. Choose a new guy you trust who won’t be recognized.”

“Already on it,” Jakob told him.

A loud noise echoed over the phone, followed by rapid-fire Spanish.

“I have to go,” Liam said, sounding rushed. “They started the next episode without me.”

The line went dead. I looked from the phone to Jakob. His dad was nothing like I imagined he would be. Proud of his son, willing to watch telenovelas with his wife and my gran, and all while simultaneously heading up one of the country’s most dangerous motorcycle gangs. I really needed to stop making assumptions about people if I didn’t want to continuously make an ass out of myself.



DANIEL AND EVA KING lived outside of town in a large two-story home set back in the woods. They must have owned a decent plot of land because the closest neighbors were over half a mile away. Good thing, otherwise someone probably would have called in a noise complaint.

Music blared from the backyard as we pulled up, so loud that I heard it over the rumble of the car's engine. Twilight had given way to dusk during the drive over, and the external floodlights were on, illuminating a driveway crammed full of motorcycles, muscle cars, and trucks. It looked like over half the Kings had turned out.

Jakob parked a few hundred feet away from the house and cut the car lights. We rolled up the windows, muffling the sound of the thumping bassline.

"You ready for this?" he asked.

I turned toward him. "For my first Kings party? Sure. Can't be much worse than a rowdy shift at the bar, can it?"

The look he sent me said it could. "You're cute when you're naive."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Har har."

He reached out and tucked a stray piece of hair behind my ear, then slid his hand around to cradle my neck. The pad of his thumb was rough against my skin as he rubbed it back and forth. His gaze fell to my lips. "I'm glad you didn't get arrested."

"Yeah?" I said.

His hand flexed, drawing me forward. "Yeah. It would have been harder to break you out of there than it was to get you out of Magnolia."

I smiled at the joke. He didn't. Shit, he was serious. Note to self: never get arrested.

He leaned forward and stopped with his lips an inch away from mine. "Why did you change?"

I glanced down. I'd tugged on a pair of jeans as he drove and then slipped my dress off overhead, torturously slow. He'd almost wrecked the car. Now I wore a low-cut tank top that put my boobs on full display.

"You don't like the new outfit?" I asked.

His gaze dropped straight into my cleavage. "I like the outfit." He dragged his eyes back up to mine slowly, like he didn't want to look away from my tits. "Why are you avoiding the question?"

I let out a breath. "Jesus, you really aren't into small talk, are you?"

He shook his head, thumb still sliding over my neck, lips tantalizingly close.

"I changed because I didn't want to deal with ten thousand questions from shit-faced bikers about my scars."

"You're here with me," he said. "They won't bother you."

The sheer ego of that statement. My God. Trouble was, he was probably right.

I shrugged. "I'd rather not risk it."

He nodded like he understood. Maybe he did.

"What happened to your leg?" I asked him. I'd been curious about it since our first night together, and thanks to the intimacy of this moment and the fact that he was being kind of sweet with me right now, I thought he might actually answer a question for once.

"Shrapnel," he said. "An RPG round hit the rooftop I was rappelling onto from the helo, and I took a big-ass chunk of steel to the thigh. Carved the muscle right out."

"Does your leg bother you?" I asked.

“Not always, but yeah,” he said. “It doesn’t help that I hyperextended that knee, landing hard on another mission and tore every tendon that runs through it. Surgery helped, but the leg’s still fucked.” Just like mine. What a pair we made. “Hopefully we never have to outrun anyone.” He pulled back a little, gaze boring into me. “Do I look like the kind of man to run?” I rolled my eyes. “Oh, my mistake. I forgot who I was talking to for a moment there. I’m sure you can just flex at our enemies, and they’ll swoon at the sight of all that rippling muscle.”

He cocked a brow and shot me an arrogant grin. “Worked on you.”

“Temporary insanity,” I said. “Now are you going to kiss me or what, Jakob?”

In answer, he let out a low growl and dragged me out of my seat. I swung my leg around as he spun me and ended up straddling him. It hurt my hip, but fuck it, this was worth a little pain. He leaned up and captured my mouth in a hot, searing kiss that didn’t last nearly long enough. I gasped as he pulled away, my lower lip pinched between his teeth. He bit down, hard enough to sting, before releasing me.

“One of these days, I’m going to figure out what to do about that mouth of yours,” he said, pale eyes flashing in the dim light.

“Don’t lie. You like my mouth.” I slicked my hands up the hard plane of his chest and laced my fingers behind his neck. “You like that instead of bowing and scraping like all your cronies, I call you on your bullshit.”

His eyes met mine in challenge, but he didn’t deny what I said.

I leaned forward and brushed my lips against his ear. “There might be one thing you could do to shut me up. It’d be pretty hard for me to talk around that thick cock of yours.”

He gripped my thighs and ground up into me, demonstrating just how big his dick was when fully aroused. “This cock?”

I rolled my pelvis into his thrust, careless of my aching hip. I loved that he was already hard and ready. There was something so primal in driving another person half-mad with lust. Jakob had the same effect on me, and I didn’t even want to know what it would do to his ego if he ever found out.

He thrust again, the friction of our jeans sending a jolt of pain-numbing pleasure scorching through me. I let go of his neck and shoved his shirt up a few inches so I could unbutton his jeans. I wanted that thick cock in my mouth. I’d been thinking about it since he got me off earlier, and it had nothing to do with quid pro quo and everything to do with wanting to explore and savor every inch of this man. How soft would his skin be? How long could he last before he—

A set of headlights flashed over us, and I froze. Holy hell, I’d been about two seconds from dropping down to the floor and sucking him off right here in the car. Anyone could have walked by and seen us. Jakob told Daniel that I was a private person, and by chance, he was right. The thought of getting caught giving him head was like getting dumped into an ice bath.

Jakob pulled me in close and turned a little as a truck rolled up the driveway, shielding me with his body.

“I totally forgot where we were,” I whispered into the side of his neck.

The truck moved past, and darkness descended on us again. Jakob eased back into his seat, his arms loosening around me. Those headlights had ruined my night vision, and I could barely see the white of his teeth as he grinned.

“I have that effect on women,” he said, tone dripping with smugness.

It was the same line he’d used on me the other morning, and despite myself, I laughed. “Don’t act like you didn’t forget where we were too.”

“Oh, I remembered,” he shot back. “I just didn’t give a fuck.”



We stared at each other from a foot apart, our eyes readjusting to the darkness. I wanted to kiss him again, and I could tell by the way he gripped my thighs that he wanted to kiss me too, but we didn't have time to start anything right now, and if we did, I might lose what little self-restraint I still possessed and let him drag me into the back seat, to hell with witnesses.

Jakob made a low sound of frustration, like his thoughts had gone down the same rabbit hole. "The sooner we go inside and make the rounds, the sooner we can leave. Ready?"

"Oh, I'm more than ready," I said, the words dripping with innuendo. In my mind, I saw him spread out beneath me, naked and straining. I was so turned on that it was almost uncomfortable.

Jakob dug his fingers into my jeans. "You keep this up, and we're going to end up fucking in public."

I dropped my head to his shoulder. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"Don't ever apologize for looking at me like that," he said, his hands sliding to my ass.

He swung his door open and climbed out of the car, holding me up with one arm. I clung to him for a minute, savoring the feel of his heavy muscles beneath my hands, before unwinding my legs from his waist. He steadied me as I slid off him. I took a measured step back when my feet hit the pavement, putting space between us that I desperately needed right now.

*You're in the driveway of Daniel King, about to walk into a house full of drunken criminals, I reminded myself. Get your shit together.*

I straightened my clothes and tried not to stare at Jakob. He really was a big son of a bitch, and between the whorling tattoos and the clinging darkness, he looked more like an actual specter than a King. His hand dropped to his jeans in my periphery, and my gaze snapped right back to him as he readjusted himself. I must have had a sadistic streak because there was something about knowing he'd been hard for me at least twice today without release that made me want to torment him a little. He turned away and reached in to grab his jacket from the back seat, and while his back was to me, I pulled my hair out of its messy bun and combed my fingers through it.

He shrugged his jacket on and locked the car behind him. Together, we headed toward the house. I reached up and started braiding my hair as we walked.

He looked over at me as we passed into the golden nimbus of the floodlights, gaze dropping to where my fingers were finishing the plait. "What are you doing?"

I tied the braid off and pulled it over my shoulder. "Giving us something to look forward to later." To drive the point home, I wrapped it around my wrist and tugged.

Jakob swore, with feeling, and dragged me into the house.



# Chapter Fourteen

I had no idea how Daniel and Eva King did it. If I lived in a house as nice as theirs, I would never allow five, let alone fifty, drunken bikers inside it. The noise was deafening. People yelled to make themselves heard over the music. Between their shouting, the random bursts of raucous laughter, and some idiot gunning a bike engine outside, I was half a second away from plugging my ears.

Jakob led me through the first floor like a man on a mission. He'd threaded our fingers together the second we stepped inside, and now he all but dragged me behind him, barely raising his chin in acknowledgment of the greetings thrown his way. Maybe taunting him was a bad idea. Despite the fact that we'd been forced together almost twenty-four seven the past few days, I still didn't know all that much about him. Sure, once or twice he'd dropped his guard and acted borderline playful, but now I couldn't tell if cock teasing him had crossed some sort of line. To me it was foreplay, but with the muscle popping out along his jaw, Jakob looked more pissed off than turned on.

We followed a hallway through the center of the home and emerged into a living room. To my left, a big man gesticulated as he talked, beer in hand. Foam splashed out of the can he held and rained down on the hardwood floor. He either didn't notice or didn't care. The woman he spoke to glanced at the mess he made, but she didn't look like she was in a hurry to clean up after his drunk ass.

We moved past them into the kitchen. I had to tug my feet up every few steps to unstick the soles of my shoes from the tile floor, evidence of still more spilled drinks and God knew what else. A big trash can overflowed in the corner. Cigarette and pot smoke mingled in the air, creating a haze of smog overhead. It was like I was back in high school and someone had thrown a rager while their parents were out of town. This felt more like a party for teenagers, who had zero respect for anyone else's things, than for grown-ass adults.

I glanced at Jakob's back. I was a pretty tidy person, and the sight of beer cans lining every available surface was making me twitchy. What was it doing to a clean freak like him?

I tugged on his hand.

He paused and turned to me, a brow raised in question.

I nodded toward the overflowing sink. "Want me to find you a pair of gloves and a scrub brush?"

From the flat look he gave me, he understood the joke and did *not* think I was funny.

I grinned up at him.

He shook his head and kept walking, hauling me forward. Straight ahead, a set of french doors opened onto a large porch. I took a deep breath of fresh air as we stepped outside. Tiki torches lined the railings around us, their citronella-scented oil keeping the worst of the bugs at bay. People crowded the deck, drinking and eating. To our left, a big man in an apron flipped burgers on an open grill. A young biker dashed past him and puked over the railing, her friends laughing at her.

I looked away, slightly queasy, and took in the scene spread out around us. The backyard was huge with what looked like a hundred thousand dollars' worth of landscaping. On the far side, a towering retaining wall held a small hill at bay. An Olympic-sized swimming pool was sunk into the center of the yard, complete with diving boards, water slides, and a small army of deck chairs. Spread around the pool were seating areas, pergolas, picnic tables, a waterfall leading to what looked like a man-made river, two firepits, and still more drunken bikers.

The word *Lupercalia* came to mind as I stared out at the crowd. It was an ancient Roman festival that revolved around sex and slaughter. The Kings looked like they were doing all they could to bring it back into practice. The swimming pool was packed with people in various stages of undress. A

fully nude white man of average height and build stood on the edge of it, hands raised overhead as he yelled. His fully erect dick was huge. Like, porn-star big. Someone threw a beer can at him from the pool, and he leaped forward, trying to cannonball onto their head. In an adjacent hot tub, a man and a woman were going at it like jackrabbits, careless of the people they shared it with or those who stood nearby, watching them with rapt gazes. I looked away from the couple when two women rose from a picnic table in the back and started beating the hell out of each other. Several other bikers streamed forward, I thought to break it up, but instead, they joined in, and a small brawl erupted in their corner of the yard.

I was way too sober for this shit.

Jakob turned to me. "Like a rowdy night at the bar, huh?"

I sent him the same flat look he'd given me in the kitchen and tried to pull my hand from his. There was a cooler full of beer nearby with my name on it.

He tightened his fingers on mine and tugged me close. "You're not going anywhere. This isn't like a shift at Charley's. The rules don't apply here."

I glanced past him. The woman in the hot tub started screaming as she came. "I can see that."

Jakob gripped my chin and turned me back to him. "We do this every couple of months to blow off steam. People drink until they black out. They fuck who they want, and they fight who they want, and afterward, there are no hard feelings. There aren't any consequences here, do you understand?"

He let me go, and I nodded up at him, trying not to let the mood of the crowd infect me. It was hard being the extrovert that I was. This was the kind of energy I fed off at the bar, only to a much greater degree. A heady rush of adrenaline sluiced through my veins, waking me up. Between what just happened in the car and then watching the couple in the hot tub, I was turned on. The sounds of a nearby brawl put me on edge as I waited for the violence to boil over into the rest of the crowd. It was a strange collision of emotions, and it made me feel reckless and wild.

I looked away from Jakob, back into the yard. God help me, I understood why they did this. Despite some small part of my psyche screaming at me to get out of here, a much larger part of me wanted to stay for a while. What would I do if, for a single night, I stopped giving a fuck? If I did whatever the hell I wanted without having to worry about consequences?

My clothes suddenly felt too tight. The night air was electric on my skin. I wanted to throw back my head and howl, strip naked and join that couple in the hot tub, push Jakob over the edge and see what he would do if he ever really let himself go. I had a feeling it would either lead to the best night of my life or scar me forever. Maybe both.

I felt the intensity of his gaze as I stared out into the revelry, and I slowly brought my eyes back to his. His pupils widened as he took in my face, like a predator sighting prey.

"Jakob," I breathed.

He tore his gaze from mine. "Fuck," he spat out. Someone called his name from the crowd. He ignored them and turned back to me. "We're not here to party. You're not ready for that yet."

"Don't tell me what I'm ready for," I said.

He scowled. "Fine. I'm not ready for that."

"You won't scare me off."

His answering laugh was mirthless. "Don't tell me what I won't do."

Okay, I deserved that.

"Jakob!" someone roared.

We both turned. Shit, it was Daniel King. He'd risen from his chair by one of the firepits and was gesturing us over.

Jakob lifted a hand in answer and then stepped close to me, his blue eyes flashing in the torchlight. "We get this over with and get out of here."

I took a deep breath and nodded, reeling my recklessness back in.

We descended from the porch into the fray and wound our way toward the small crowd gathered around their king. Daniel slapped the guy sitting next to him on the back of the head and gestured for him to get up. The man rubbed at his noggin, grumbling under his breath as he wandered off.

"Stay close," Jakob said. He veered away from me and took the vacated seat.

I turned from him and headed toward a bench full of women on the other side of the fire. "Mind if I sit?" I asked.

The woman closest to me was a biker in her early twenties. I'd served her once or twice at the bar but couldn't put a name to her face. She was pretty, with olive skin, auburn curls, and a deceptively innocent face. If not for the leather vest she wore with the Kings emblem on it, you might think she was a beloved kindergarten teacher instead of a gang member.

"Sure," she said, scooting over a little.

The woman beside her turned toward me as I sat. I stared back at her. I couldn't help it; she was stunning with skin so pale it shone like burnished alabaster in the firelight. Her thick blond hair fanned out a little in the breeze. Blue eyes latched onto mine, slightly bloodshot around the edges, and she swayed even while sitting down. If we were at the bar, now would be about the time I thought about cutting her off.

"You fucking Jakob?" she slurred.

Hoo boy. This should be fun.

"Who said that?" I asked.

She glanced around us and then looked back at me like I was an idiot. "Everyone."

"Okay," I said. I'd learned over the past three months that it was best to remain as neutral as possible when confronted with a drunk person.

Her eyes narrowed. "So you are?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

She leaned in front of the woman between us. "I used to fuck him."

The woman tried to push her back. "Don't be a bitch, Amanda."

Amanda glared at her. "Don't tell me what to do, Emily."

Emily turned to me. "Ignore her. She had a bad day."

I glanced between the two of them. "It happens."

Amanda leaned forward again, turning to look across the fire at where Jakob and Daniel were deep in conversation. "He couldn't keep his hands off me when we were together. If I were still with him, he would have dragged me down onto his lap, not sent me to sit somewhere else."

"Okay," I said again, because what the hell else was I going to say to that? She obviously wanted to argue with someone, and another lesson I'd learned while working at Charley's was that there was no winning arguments with drunk people.

She grinned. It wasn't a friendly look. "He must not like you very much."

I sighed. "Why don't we cut through the bullshit, and you just tell me what you're hoping to get out of this conversation?"

She reached out and shoved my shoulder.

"Oh, you want to fight?" I asked. "I've seen you in the bar before. I'm six inches taller than you and outweigh you by about thirty pounds of muscle. I'm also stone-cold sober, and you're not. It won't end well for you."

She tried to shove me again, but Emily grabbed her. “Stop it, Amanda. You’re drunk.” She turned to me. “I’m really sorry. She’s not usually like this.”

“It’s fine,” I told her. I looked at Amanda. “Did Jakob get you off?”

She blinked. “What?”

“When you were with him, did Jakob get you off?”

She sat back. “How is that any of your business?”

I shrugged. “It’s not, but humor me.”

“Yes, he got me off.” Her smile was cutting. “Sometimes two or three times when we fucked.”

I perked up at that. “Well, that gives me something to look forward to.”

She frowned. Clearly that wasn’t the response she’d anticipated.

“Look,” I said. “How about instead of getting into an argument that leaves both of us looking petty and jealous, we congratulate ourselves for choosing to sleep with a man who knows where a clit is?”

She narrowed her eyes at me, but she didn’t look like she was glaring; she looked like she was trying to process my words. I didn’t envy her. Thinking around a heavy buzz wasn’t easy. I’d done some stupid shit myself and acted out of character when I was drunk, and I was willing to cut her a lot of slack because of that.

“Come on,” Emily said to her. “Krista’s never been anything but nice to you. And you don’t even like Jakob anymore.”

Amanda glanced up at her friend.

Emily rubbed her back. “It’s okay.”

Amanda looked about ready to cry. “Fuck. You’re right.” She turned back to me. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Why did you have a bad day?”

She glanced to her left at a group of men gathered around a picnic table. “My boyfriend doesn’t know where a clit is.”



ONCE THE TENSION BETWEEN Amanda and me broke, I got along with the two women pretty well. We sat and talked for a solid hour. Emily was a King, which meant she was a veteran. She was Army, like Jakob, and as deep night set in and the party seethed around us, we sat in a little bubble by the fire and traded war stories.

Amanda switched to water after our little argument and was starting to sober up. She told me she was born and raised in Kearny. Her parents owned the bakery in town, went to church every Sunday, and were deeply involved with Kearny’s various boards and clubs, which meant that she had all the best gossip. Her boyfriend did actually know where a clit was, but she’d been so upset earlier because he’d been an asshole to her lately, to the point that she was planning to break up with him.

“What about you?” I asked Emily. “You seeing anyone here?”

In answer, she held up her left hand, displaying a wedding ring. “He works on an oil rig off Corpus Christi.”

“How are his shifts?” I asked. I’d met a few rig workers since moving closer to the coast, and the hours could be brutal from what I’d heard.

“He’s gone for two weeks at a time,” she said. “When he’s out there, he works seven days a week, twelve hours a day. But then he comes home for two weeks and has that whole time off, so it’s not that bad.”

Amanda glanced from Emily to me. “Don’t let her fool you. She worries the whole time he’s gone.”

Emily shrugged. “The fact that any mistake could lead to a massive explosion and a horrific oil leak might have something to do with that.”

“Has he thought about leaving?” I asked.

She nodded. “We talk about it every time he’s home, but no one else nearby pays the same or has the benefits that they do.”

Amanda set her water cup down by her feet. “They’re building that car plant a few towns over. That’s supposed to bring something like ten thousand jobs to the area.”

Emily shook her head. “We looked into it. Entry-level pay for a machinist is only half his current salary.”

I sat back. “Damn.”

Across from us, Daniel King roared with laughter so loud that it drowned out Amanda’s next words. She shot him an annoyed look, and I followed her gaze. More and more bikers had congregated around him while I spoke with Amanda and Emily, and now he held court on his side of the fire. Jakob still occupied the seat beside him. I’d expected him to get bitched out again, but instead, Daniel, looking like a full sociopath, had been grinning every time I glanced their way.

Jakob was leaned away from Daniel now, talking to another Kings enforcer who sat on his other side. Firelight played over the hard planes of his face, sharpening his features. Behind him, the bacchanalia raged on, members of the club drinking, eating, fighting, and fucking as if they were trying to resurrect a long-dead god of depravity.

The other enforcer said something to Jakob, and Jakob nodded in answer and took a sip of his beer. I’d had two beers myself while sitting here, but instead of feeling a buzz, the alcohol only served to deepen my exhaustion. I wanted to leave. The wooden bench beneath me was unforgiving, and my leg was starting to throb.

As if he could feel my eyes on him, Jakob glanced at me across the fire. He’d done it a lot since we’d sat down, sometimes watching me for long moments as he talked, sometimes just a quick flick of his eyes, as if he were checking that I was still here.

Our gazes locked.

“*You ready?*” he mouthed.

I nodded.

He set his beer down and stood.

I turned to the women beside me. “We’re gonna head out.”

Amanda glanced over at Jakob. “Don’t settle for anything less than two orgasms.”

I grinned. “I won’t.”

She’d made me laugh a few times while we talked. She had a dry kind of wit and a healthy amount of self-deprecation that made me glad we’d avoided an altercation.

I pushed up from the bench and paused for a second, breathing around my pain. *Fuck*, that hurt.

Emily stood and grabbed my elbow, steadying me. “You okay?”

I nodded. “Just a bum leg. I’ll be fine in a second.”

Actually, I didn’t know if I would be. A deep, throbbing ache had settled into my hip. My knee wasn’t happy either. Between my fight in the elevator and my sprint down the nursing home hallway, I’d pushed myself too hard today. Sitting on a rock-hard bench had only made it worse.

Jakob took one look at my face and came over. “I got her,” he said to Emily.

She nodded and sat back down.

Jakob moved closer, sliding an arm around my back like he was getting ready to scoop me up.

I put my hand on his chest, stopping him. The wall of pectoral muscle beneath my palm felt intractable. “You carry me out of here right now, and I will never live it down. I can walk.”

His expression flattened out. “You fall over, and they’ll never let you live it down either.”

“I’ll say I was drunk.”

He shook his head. “You’re so fucking stubborn.”

“You’re so fucking bossy,” I snapped.

Emily made a strange noise beside us. It sounded like she was choking back a laugh.

Jakob ignored her, looming over me, mouth set in a hard line. “If you start to fall, I’m throwing you over my shoulder. I’d rather deal with you being pissy than being hurt.”

“So chivalrous,” Amanda said in a dreamy voice.

Jakob shot her an unamused look.

I snickered and started to hobble away, glad that she’d broken the tension. Funny that I could keep a cool head when faced with a belligerent drunk, but the second Jakob started to order me around, the brakes on my temper malfunctioned. I hadn’t been lying to Gran when I said we might end up killing each other.

Amanda winked at me as I passed.

“First round is on me next time you come in,” I told the two women.

“We’ll hold you to that,” Amanda said.

I didn’t know if it was my pain or if the party’s energy had changed, but as we left, I no longer felt the temptation to join the debauchery. Even the sight of two people fucking against a wall, half-hidden by the shadow of the porch, didn’t turn me on. I just wanted to get back to Jakob’s parents’ house and sleep for the next twelve hours straight. Thank God I didn’t have to work tomorrow.

Since we’d arrived, the house had gone from dirty to trashed, and despite myself, I felt bad for Daniel and Eva. Who was going to clean all this shit up in the morning? Would Daniel pull rank and order the new recruits to do it? If so, I didn’t envy them the job.

I glanced into the dining room as we walked past and instantly regretted it. Someone had thrown up in there. Like, projectile vomited à la *The Exorcist*. It was all over one of the walls and ground into the carpet like people had stepped in it. I shuddered and kept my eyes trained straight ahead from that point on. My leg screamed at me, and I walked with slow, halting steps. Only the thought of the painkillers stashed away in my bag in the back seat of the car kept me from throwing in the towel and letting Jakob carry me out of there.

I breathed a sigh of relief as we rounded the corner of a hallway and the front door came into view. A collage of pictures lined the wall to my right, Eva and Daniel King’s lives spread out before us. There were photos of a teenage Eva in a gorgeous, floor-length quinceañera dress, surrounded by what must have been her family. She looked young, beautiful, and blissfully happy. Nearby was one of her and Daniel at their wedding, the two of them grinning ear to ear as they shared a slow dance.

My gaze slid to the next frame over, and I came to a staggering halt.

Jakob stopped behind me, his hand slipping around my waist, bracing me up. “You okay?”

Two bikers leaned against the wall near the front door. They glanced over when they heard him. I needed to be careful. I didn’t know them, and I sure as shit didn’t know where their loyalties lay.

In answer, I turned in Jakob’s grip, putting my back to the men. I stood on my toes and kissed him. I’d meant it to be quick, but then his lips opened beneath mine, and he did something with his tongue that short-circuited my brain.

Eventually I made myself pull back.



Jakob's brows drew together, shading his eyes. "I thought I was a bossy asshole," he said, voice low.

"You are," I told him. I wasn't one for public displays of affection, but I needed to sell this right now. My hands landed on his upper chest, and I dug my fingers into his leather jacket and pulled him down, kissing my way up his neck so I could whisper into his ear, "Look at the picture next to us. The one to the left of Daniel and Eva's wedding photo."

He slid his hands around to cup my ass and turned his head a little, just enough for me to nip at his earlobe. I knew the second he saw the picture I meant. He stiffened, fingers digging into me before he forced them to relax. Then he turned back to me and ghosted his lips over mine. To anyone watching, we must have looked like we were making out, but our mouths barely touched.

"We need to get the fuck out of here," he whispered.

I nodded and pulled away, glancing at the picture one last time before we walked out the front door. It was a photograph from Daniel's time in the service. He stood with a group of other soldiers, their arms around each other's shoulders. They wore the light camo of the Army's desert uniform, and behind them, sand dunes rolled away toward the horizon. The men and women filling the frame looked haggard but happy, like they'd just won a hard-fought battle. Daniel had his arm around a baby-faced soldier who couldn't have been a day over eighteen. Add ten years to him, pack forty pounds of muscle onto his wiry frame, and fill out his face a little, and he'd be a dead ringer for the Magnolia Hills manager I saw at the police station. The name tag on his chest said Redding. Jakob must have seen this picture a hundred times while passing through Daniel's hallway. That's why the man looked familiar.

We walked to the Mustang in silence. The night was hot, but a chill slipped down my spine that made me want to shiver. Jakob unlocked the car when we reached it, and I climbed in and dug my phone out from where I'd stashed it in the glove box.

"What are you doing?" Jakob asked.

I held up a finger and dialed the nursing home.

"Hello, you've reached Magnolia Hills," the night receptionist said. "How many I assist you?"

"I'm trying to get ahold of Mr. Redding," I told her. "What time will he be in tomorrow?"

"He should be in around eight."

"Thank you so much," I said and hung up.

I turned to Jakob. His face was carefully blank.

"Just so it's out in the open," I said. "The leader of your motorcycle club served in the same unit as the man heading a rival gang's drug operation. A drug operation that's encroaching on King territory, destabilizing your hold on Kearny, and has the potential to drag you into open conflict with each other."

Jakob shoved the keys in the ignition and turned the car on. The engine roared to life. "It could mean nothing," he said.

I frowned. "You don't really believe that."

He glanced over at me and shook his head. "No. I don't."



# Chapter Fifteen

I woke to the feel of fingers sliding over my skin. Pressure alighted on my neck, followed by a soft tickle and a flush of warmth, like someone had just kissed me there.

*Mmm... that feels nice.*

I cracked my eyes open, momentarily disoriented. This wasn't my apartment. A wide bank of blackout curtains covered the windows in front of me. I lay on my side, on a mattress soft as a cloud. I glanced down. The sheets had pooled around my waist. I wore a large white T-shirt, and from the feel of it, I still had underwear on.

Last night came rushing back. The party. The picture we'd seen as we left. The last thing I remembered was Jakob glancing over at me in the Mustang and telling me to put my seat back and rest. I must have fallen asleep while he drove. And because I had no recollection of climbing out of the car, he must have carried me in and put me to bed.

A hand slipped under my shirt. Jakob wrapped his arm around my middle, bicep flexing as he drew me backward through the sheets. I settled into the crook of his large, warm body. His erection pressed against my lower back, sending an answering rush of awareness through me.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Almost noon," he said.

He dropped a kiss on my neck. And another. I hummed in appreciation as his lips scorched down my skin toward my collarbone. The shirt he'd dressed me in was in the way. He lifted his arm from my waist and snagged the hem of it, and I sat up just enough for him to tug it off. He tossed it aside and then gripped my shoulder, rolling me toward him, onto my back.

The blackout curtains blocked most of the light, but enough illumination crept around the edges that I could see him. Instead of staring up at a bloodthirsty Norseman, I gazed into the face of a man who was barely awake. He looked... kind of adorable actually. His hair was disheveled. Sleep had softened the harsh lines of his features. His eyes were half-lidded as he stared down at me. He looked younger than he was, unguarded and almost boyish.

I lifted a hand and brushed his hair back from his forehead. He closed his eyes and leaned into my touch. I tried to remind myself that he could be a royal bastard sometimes, but then he turned and dropped a kiss on the inside of my wrist, and it was too much, too close to genuine affection. My stomach gave an unwelcome little flutter. I had to do something to break this spell. His eyes were still closed, evidence of how tired he must be, and I latched onto that.

"I will be so insulted if you fall asleep right now," I told him.

In answer, he crashed down, half on top of me, and started snoring into my ear.

I shoved at his shoulder. Jesus, he was heavy. "You're not funny," I said.

He rose up on his elbows. "Then why are you smiling?"

Shit, I was, wasn't I? "Shut up," I said, reaching for him.

He slid between my thighs. "No, you shut up."

I laughed and wrapped my legs around him, trying to pull him closer. I liked this playful side of Jakob.

His big hand landed on my mouth, smothering my laughter, and his gaze cut right, toward the door. "Seriously, Krista," he said, voice low.

I caught it then, the sound of life outside this bedroom. Conversation floated up from downstairs. Somewhere nearby, a washing machine kicked into spin cycle. Right. This wasn't his apartment. We

weren't alone.

I gently bit his palm, and he lifted his hand away.

"I can be quiet," I said.

His answering grin was a dark thing. "We'll see about that."

He braced his elbows on either side of my head and shifted his hips forward, running the hard length of his dick over my sex. I swallowed the moan that threatened. God, that felt good. Too good for there to be many layers between us. I craned my head up to look, and sure enough, Jakob wasn't wearing boxers.

"How's the leg?" he asked, rolling his hips again.

I dropped my head back to the pillow. Pleasure coursed through me, making it hard to focus on his words. "It's fine," I said.

And it was. I'd taken a muscle relaxer in the car, and between that and the ten hours of sleep I must have gotten, the pain from last night had faded into the familiar morning stiffness I was used to. The friction of Jakob's dick sliding over my clit made my core clench, and my mounting arousal drove any lingering discomfort to the background.

"Do that again," I told him.

He thrust his hips against mine and dropped his head, trailing a line of kisses over my cheek. I turned my face away, giving him better access, and he kept going, the pressure of his hips disappearing as he kissed his way lower, down my neck, and then along my collarbone. If I'd been in this position with anyone else, I would have wanted some slow, sleepy sex and then maybe another nap at the end. But this was Jakob. His kisses weren't soft. They weren't sleepy or gentle. Despite the need to be quiet, he branded my skin in a way that forced me to clench my teeth and take deep, harsh breaths through my nose. Five minutes ago, I'd been asleep, and now I was so turned on that I could feel the slickness of my arousal coating my panties.

Across from us, the bedroom's sleek wall A/C unit whirred to life, and my nipples puckered as cool air rushed over me. Jakob dropped his head and dragged a nipple into his mouth, rolling his tongue over it. I bunched the sheets in my fists and arched into him. My nipples had always been sensitive. If he kept lathing at me like this, the next gentle brush against my clit might totally undo me.

He moved from one breast to the other, his hands cupping them, the heat of his palms driving away the chill of the A/C. While his tongue worked one nipple, the fingers of his free hand bumped over the other, keeping me hyperstimulated. I could feel myself getting fuller, softer, my body making itself ready for him. Heat gathered in my core. My inner walls pulsed in time with my heartbeat, an aching reminder that I was still empty. I felt almost bereft without him filling me up—that's how desperate he made me.

I knew some of this desperation was residual from yesterday. He got me off while driving, but instead of acting as the release I needed, it only served to wind me tighter. We were both fully clothed. We barely touched each other the rest of the day. I was forced to stare at his wide shoulders, covered up by his jacket, his firm ass, hidden by his jeans, for hours on end. The sight of him now, fully naked as he worshipped my body, absolutely destroyed me.

"Jakob," I whispered.

He must have heard the need in my voice, because he dropped a hand to my hip and started tugging my underwear off. His lips disappeared from my nipple, and I nearly cried out at their loss. He moved lower, pausing over my belly to suck in a breath through his nose. A low sound of approval, almost like a purr, rumbled up out of his chest as he looked up at me. "I can *smell* how much you want me."

So could I. With the breeze from the A/C unit still blowing over us, the musky scent of my arousal was undeniable. He pulled in another deep breath, rib cage expanding between my thighs, and then moved lower still. His hands hit my knees, pushing them wide, spreading me for him. The look of open possession on his face as he stared down at my pussy made me absolutely wild for him.

“Jakob,” I said, harsher this time.

I caught sight of the dark edge of a grin as he dipped forward. He didn't tease me. He didn't take his time. Instead, he speared his tongue straight into me. I arched up off the bed, gasping. The man must have been ravenous, because he ate me out with such intense focus that I was soon left panting. But if I had a small, sadistic side, then Jakob had me beat. Instead of giving me the release I so desperately needed, he studiously ignored my clit and continued to tongue my pussy, spinning me higher and higher.

I shifted my hips, trying to tell him what I wanted with my body. He let out a low growl against my wet flesh and pulled my legs over his shoulders. Then he hooked his heavy arms around my thighs and across my waist, effectively pinning me in place. The message was clear: he knew what I wanted, and he'd get to it when he was damn well ready. Until then, he planned to take his time devouring me.

I might have been pissed if I wasn't so worried that I was about to have a heart attack. Being this turned on for this length of time without release couldn't possibly be good for my health in the long run. My breaths came in shallow gasps. My pulse pounded through my body like a runaway train. Deep inside, my muscles clenched over and over again, begging for something to hold on to.

He slicked his tongue into me while I strained against his grip. He was going to have bruises from where my heels dug into his back, searching for some kind of purchase, but if anything, my desperation only seemed to encourage him. A low rumble came from the back of his throat. His mouth shuddered over my fevered flesh, and I realized he was laughing at me.

Now it was my turn to growl at him. I was going to murder the man if he didn't get me off soon.

Actually... as much as it killed me to admit it, I sort of liked that he pushed my buttons. I liked that he continuously taunted me, even now, during foreplay. I wouldn't be so unbearably turned on if I didn't. Whatever this was between us, it was twisted, and God help me, I kind of loved it. In the back of my mind, I was already thinking up ways to pay him back for this. Ways that involved silk ties and delayed satisfaction and— *Oh my god, what did he just do with his tongue?*

He shifted the angle of his mouth, tonguing me like that again, his nose nuzzling against my clit in a way that had stars bursting behind my closed eyelids.

“So impatient,” he murmured into me.

“Sadist,” I hiss-whispered.

He chuckled again and dropped a kiss on the one part of my anatomy that I'd been desperate for him to touch. I sucked in a sharp breath, a fine tremble running through my limbs. This was it. He was finally going to give me what I needed.

He dropped another kiss on my clit and glanced up at me beneath his lashes, and this time I went utterly still beneath him. Because damn it, he was beautiful. It was a savage sort of beauty, like looking at a tiger stalking past the bars of its cage and knowing if it ever got out, you were totally fucked. And yet there was something else in his eyes. Something that made me feel safe and appreciated.

*Seen.*

He'd been taunting me this whole time, but the longer I held his gaze, the less of a teasing edge I saw in his expression and the more a deep-seated desire began to take over. I felt like he was finally letting me see him back.

The last bit of mischief faded from his eyes, replaced by what looked like raw, voracious need. He lowered his mouth back to my aching bud, slicked one long, thick finger into my pussy, and sucked at my clit. My orgasm hit so hard and so fast that my entire body clenched up. Thank God, otherwise I might have been screaming. He lapped at me, urging me on, drawing out every shudder of pleasure until the last waves rolled over me and I went boneless beneath him. He gave me one more lingering kiss and then wiped his face off on the sheets before rising and moving toward the dresser.

I turned my head to watch him, taking in the way his muscles rolled and flexed with every movement. No wonder the Romans had been obsessed with statues of muscular men. There was something so intrinsically carnal about a body honed by years of hard work.

“You should always be naked,” I said, feeling sex-drunk. I might regret the words later, but right now I couldn’t bring myself to care. At least I’d had enough sense left to keep my voice down.

He ripped a condom open and rolled it over his girth, shooting me a look when he was done. “Remember that the next time I say something to piss you off.”

“I want you naked even when you piss me off,” I told him. Because it was true.

His cock visibly stiffened at that, and he prowled back toward me. I expected him to crawl onto the bed, but he dropped to his knees at the foot of it, hooked his arms beneath my hips, and carefully pulled me half off the mattress. I landed in his lap, and even as he steadied me, I was reaching for his dick. I wanted more. Harder. Deeper. Clitoral orgasms were great, but they were nothing compared to cervical ones, which lasted longer and made every nerve in my body simultaneously ignite with pleasure.

He lifted my hips, shoulder muscles straining, and I guided him to my entrance. In one smooth, excruciatingly delicious stroke, I slid down his length until he bottomed out. Like this, we were almost eye to eye, and I watched his lips part on a small, barely audible moan. I had to bite my cheek to hold back an answering sound. He was bigger than any other man I’d been with, and the feel of him filling me up, stretching me out, was almost too much.

His eyes, pupils blown wide with lust, searched my face, a small crease forming between his brows as he shifted his hips back and then surged into me again. My breasts bounced with the movement, and he dropped his gaze to them as if transfixed, thrusting deep again. A surge of fierce pride streaked through me. I loved that I had this effect on him. A moment ago, I thought he’d been in complete control, but now, this close, there was no way he could hide the fact that he was quickly coming undone.

I leaned back and braced myself on the mattress behind me, trusting that he was strong enough to hold my weight up. His hands gripped my ass, steadying me.

“Again,” I said.

He surprised me by leaning forward, into me, shifting our angle, the skin of his lower abdomen slicking over my clit as he slammed home. And then his lips were at my neck again, just below my ear. The heat of his breath warmed my skin as he started a steady rhythm. His strokes were deep and even, his pace smooth. Just like last time, Jakob treated this like a marathon instead of a sprint.

He rose up a little, and I hooked my legs around his waist. Like this, I had to arch my back to keep the contact of his skin slicking over my clit, and it pressed my breasts up as if I was offering them to him. He made a low sound and dropped his lips to my nipple, and I lifted my hand and palmed my other one. I had contact everywhere I needed it, was being stimulated on so many parts of my body that the pleasure was beginning to blur together in a way that made me feel weightless and dizzy.

“Jakob,” I said, helpless to stop the keening moan building in the back of my throat.

His mouth crashed against mine, lips working as he thrust his tongue inside. I gripped his shoulders and shifted my hips with his, losing myself to the lust coursing through me. He hit a spot deep within me that felt so good I wanted to scream for him, but I couldn't. Instead, he drank down the noises I made and continued to drive into me, slow and steady. I clenched my eyes shut as another orgasm built. If my first one had been hard and fast, this one rolled through my body with the slow, devastating force of a tidal wave. It felt like I came for minutes on end, my inner muscles squeezing so tight that Jakob could barely move.

He pulled out when it passed and turned me around so that I faced the bed. The mattress sat on a platform, low enough that bent at the hips like this, I could fold forward and rest my sweat-slicked upper body on the sheets. I still shuddered with aftershocks from the strength of my orgasm when Jakob gripped my hips and, in one smooth thrust, buried himself in me from behind. I thought he would pick up the rhythm now. His dick felt huge inside me; he had to be close. But he just kept up that same, torturous tempo, and when one hand snaked around so he could stroke his fingers over my clit, I knew he wasn't finished with me yet.

I gripped the sheets in my fists, scrambling for purchase. "I can't," I whimpered. If I came again, I would have an aneurysm. I just knew it.

"Yes, you can," Jakob said, voice low and demanding. "Give me another one, Krista."

His fingers picked up speed on my clit, and soon I was shoving my hips back to meet his thrusts, my body moving on an instinctual level as I chased after another mind-melting rush of release. *Oh no*, I thought, as a deep, aching pressure built inside me. I couldn't survive another one, could I? But it was like my second orgasm had never really faded, and soon I had to bury my face in the sheets to smother the high-pitched sounds of need I was making.

I tumbled over the edge a second later, spine bowed, slamming my hips backward. Thank God for the A/C unit and the nearby washing machine, otherwise the sounds of our skin slapping together might be audible to anyone walking by the room.

Jakob's fingers left my clit and landed on my good hip. His other hand gripped my shoulder. He yanked me toward him and thrust hard, dick stiffening inside as my orgasm triggered his. The feel of him pulsing deep against my cervix prolonged my pleasure, and by the time it faded, I collapsed, spent.

Jakob slid out of me and pulled me off the mattress, gathering me against him. Our skin was slicked with sweat. I felt his heartbeat pounding against my back, proof that he'd come as hard as I did.

"Holy hell," I panted. Three orgasms. My thighs shook. If not for Jakob's arms banded around my waist, I would have sunk to the floor in a heap of useless flesh.

He dropped his lips to my neck and made a low, appreciative sound. "I knew you had another one in you."

"Don't sound so smug about it. You almost killed me."

"Nah," he said. "You'll get used to the feeling."

Used to three back-to-back orgasms? "Are you sure that's safe?" I said, my voice little more than a squeak.

He chuckled, the vibration of his laughter moving through me in a way that sent another small aftershock of release rolling through my core. It was like he'd set something seismic off inside me.

"Come on," he said. "We need to shower."

He helped me stand, and I hissed as my hip twinged. Goddamn, that stung. I'd strained a nerve sometime between orgasms number two and three. I felt it happen, a weird little *twang* of pain that I

knew from experience would get worse later, but in the heat of the moment, I'd barely noticed.

Jakob saw me wince, and before I could protest, he scooped me up and strode into his en suite bathroom. A massive claw-foot tub stood beneath a low bank of windows that looked out on the river. He set me down and turned on the faucet. I leaned against the double sink vanity as he dropped a big scoop of Epsom salt into the bath. The familiar, muscle-soothing scent of eucalyptus hit my nose a minute later.

His brow furrowed as he worked, jaw clenched like he was mad. With him, it was hard to read his emotions, what with the perpetual scowl he wore, but from the stiff line of his shoulders, I started to think he was actually angry.

A few minutes later, we sank down into the bath together, with him at my back, bracing me up. His hand fell to my hip, and he started massaging the sore joint.

"Why are you pissy?" I asked.

"Why didn't you say something?" he countered.

I leaned my head against his chest and closed my eyes as his fingers went to work on my aching muscles. "About my leg?"

He rumbled his ascent.

"It didn't hurt until the endorphins faded," I said.

He made a low grunt that sounded like disbelief, and now it was my turn to be irritated.

"I'm not some delicate, wilting flower, Jakob," I said. "I have a voice. If something hurts too much for us to continue, I'll tell you."

His fingers stilled on my skin, and his chest heaved as he took a deep breath. "I don't want to hurt you."

I melted a little. His voice was low, insistent, his tone filled with some emotion that had my mind spinning. It sounded like the words had deeper meaning, like he didn't want me hurt *ever*, physically or emotionally.

Before I could let myself read too much into it, I craned my head back and pulled his face down. "Then don't," I said, sealing my lips over his.





# Chapter Sixteen

Gran wasn't doing so great today. As predicted, waking up in a strange place surrounded by strange people had thrown her. After Jakob and I emerged from our little sex den, we all had brunch together out on the back patio, Molly moving from one person to the next beneath the table, willing us with wide, soulful eyes to slip her table scraps. A breeze blew in off the pasture, driving back the Jurassic-sized mosquitoes that plagued this part of Texas and keeping the worst of the heat at bay.

As we ate, Jakob and his parents answered Gran's questions about who they were, while I fielded the ones about what we were doing here with them. From the nonchalant way the Larsons handled it, you would never know something was wrong, and I felt a weird mix of gratitude and sorrow that they'd already been through this with Jakob's grandmother.

"Thank you for lunch," I told Jennifer as we cleaned up afterward.

"You're welcome," she said, glancing past me. "I'll take those, hon."

Liam handed her a stack of plates he'd cleared from the table and headed back for more.

Jakob stood at the sink, rinsing dishes before putting them in the dishwasher. Motorcycle clubs and the people who joined them could be shockingly backward sometimes, and just because women were prevalent in both the Kings and the Specters, it didn't mean they weren't often shoved into traditional gender roles or treated as "lesser" members. I hadn't known what the dynamic in the Larsons' household would be coming into it, and seeing Liam and Jakob help cook and clean came as a nice surprise. Then again, maybe I should have expected something like this after spending the night in Jakob's spotless apartment.

"What can I do?" I asked, glancing at the plates in Jennifer's hands.

She looked out through the glass door to where Gran sat in one of the comfy deck chairs. "Maybe just go sit with her for a while?"

I nodded and left them to their work. She was right. Gran probably needed a familiar face more than they did another set of helping hands. It wasn't that I'd been avoiding being alone with her; I just felt so guilty that I didn't know what to say right now. Her being here was my fault. If I'd just kept to myself and stayed out of Kings business, she might still be in her familiar apartment, having another good day.

I took a deep breath and headed out to sit with her, reminding myself that she wasn't safe there. Gran having a bad day because she was in a new environment was better than her being at risk in a place that had been infiltrated by gang members who had already stolen one prescription from her and might have been getting ready to pilfer another. But it didn't mean I had to like it. And it sure as shit didn't do much to assuage my lingering guilt. She'd taken such great care of me for years on end, even when I was a shitty teenager who was always getting into trouble, and I felt like now that it was my turn to take care of her, I was failing.

"Hey there," I said, sinking into the chair beside her.

She turned to me, her long hair floating a little in the breeze. Her grin was wide, and beneath the glow of the afternoon sun, she looked younger than her years and deceptively healthy.

*Fucking Alzheimer's*, I thought for the millionth time since her diagnosis.

"It's so peaceful here," she said.

I nodded and turned to take in the view. "It really is." The breeze died back, and I heard water rushing along the banks far below, as if the river wasn't as slow and lethargic as I'd first assumed.

“Your beau is handsome,” Gran said, a teasing edge to her tone that had me turning back to her.

“I sure think so,” I said. No point in arguing with the woman. I’d reintroduced her to Jakob before we sat down to lunch—she’d forgotten him overnight—and if the first time she met him was any indicator, trying to tell her we weren’t an item was a losing battle that I’d be stupid to fight a second time.

“His parents seem nice,” she added. “Especially under the circumstances. Not many people would take in two women who have drawn the attention of a criminal organization.”

I nodded but kept my mouth shut. Sometimes when Gran had bad days, she grew upset easily, and I didn’t think it wise to tell her that the people she had just called nice were also members of a criminal organization.

“How long do you think we’ll need to hide out here?” she asked.

“Not long, I hope. When I talked to the police yesterday, they said they were going to look into Magnolia.”

“Do you plan on trying to salvage your apartment once it’s safe to go home?” she asked.

I’d given her a brief rundown of the past few days, excluding her involvement from a lot of the story so she didn’t feel bad or get upset over her missing memories.

I bit my lip as I contemplated her question. I’d been studiously ignoring the thought of my trashed apartment. That apartment had been my safe haven since moving here. I’d nested pretty hard, craving a place that finally felt like *mine*. Between how much we moved around when I was younger and spending my early adult years living in barracks or temporary military housing, home was a concept that was unfamiliar to me, and I’d wanted my apartment to be that home. Now I balked at the thought of going back to it. Someone had already violated it, and I didn’t think it would ever feel like the safe, inviting space I’d longed for.

“I don’t think I can salvage it,” I told Gran.

“Oh, sweetie,” she said, reaching out to grip my hand. “I’m so sorry.”

I nodded, fighting back the sting of tears. “I know you are. I’m sorry too.”

Her expression hardened. “You don’t have anything to be sorry about. None of this is your fault.”

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat and tried to let her words sink in. Tried to believe them.

A soft *whoosh* sounded from behind us, and we turned to see Jakob pushing open the slider.

“Good Lord, he’s striking,” Gran said, voice low enough that he wouldn’t hear—thank God. “Not traditionally handsome, maybe, but you just want to look and look at him, don’t you?”

I nodded. Yes. Yes, I did.

Gran caught sight of my face, laughed, and then stood from her seat. “I think I’ll go see if Jennifer needs any help inside.”

“She doesn’t,” I said, wanting to keep Gran out here. We’d barely had five minutes together.

“Yes, well,” Gran said, looking back and forth between Jakob and me, “I think I’ll just go on in anyhow.”

She patted Jakob’s arm as they passed each other, wearing a small, amused smile. “You be good to my baby now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

She leaned in and stage whispered, “She can be stubborn as a mule sometimes. She needs a nice strong man like you to stand up to her.”

Jakob’s grin was a wicked thing as he turned to me, and I had a flashback to this same conversation from a few days ago.

I narrowed my eyes at him. *Don't you fucking dare, Jakob.*

"Oh, I know all about how stubborn she can be," he drawled.

I was going to murder him. It was bad enough that I had to hear this conversation twice. Gran at least had an excuse for repeating the words, but Jakob didn't have to look so damn smug while he listened to them.

Gran laughed and went inside.

I shook my head at Jakob as he came over to me, but beneath my irritation, part of me was almost—*thankful* wasn't really the right word—that Gran was meeting him like this and didn't remember their earlier, more contentious introduction where Jakob and I were both shitty to each other.

Yeah, thankful *definitely* wasn't the right word now that I thought about it because how could I be thankful for a disease that had stolen those memories from her? Maybe I'd already spent so long looking for silver linings with Alzheimer's that my reactions to how it affected her were starting to skew as badly as my moral compass.

Before I could analyze *that* troubling thought, Jakob stepped in front of me. I lifted a hand to shield my eyes and look up at him.

"You're cute when you're irritated," he said.

"Patronize me again. Go ahead," I told him, dropping my gaze to his waist. His crotch was in striking distance, and I might not actually hit him in the dick, but if I faked a punch and he flinched, I would lord it over him forever.

As if he could read my thoughts, he dropped down into a crouch in front of me. He met my eyes, and the amusement faded from his face. "You were right," he said, tone grim. "Dr. Perez isn't in on it."

Despite the heat of the day, goose bumps erupted over my skin. "What happened?"

"Dad just got a call from a friend. The cops in Mayville found her this morning."

Mayville was the next town over, a little more upscale than Kearny, where someone with Dr. Perez's income might live.

I gripped the arms of my chair. "Is she...?" Oh God, I couldn't say it.

"She's alive," Jakob told me.

I let out a heavy breath and folded forward in my seat.

His big hand landed on the back of my neck, massaging it a little as if trying to ease some of my anxiety. "She's in critical condition in the hospital over there. We have a contact on staff, and they said they'll call when she wakes up."

"Is she in a coma?" I asked, staring down at his boots.

"A medically induced one. Someone beat her up pretty bad, and she had some swelling in her brain."

My lingering guilt vanished. I'd done the right thing bringing Gran here. Between my wrecked apartment and now Dr. Perez, I couldn't regret any of my decisions. Gran was at Jakob's parents, and yeah, she was having a bad day, but she was safe, goddamn it, and that was all that mattered anymore.

Jakob gave the back of my neck one last squeeze and then moved his hand to my chin, tipping my head up so he could look at me. "I need to head down to Kearny. You still want in on this?"

I stared at him for a minute before answering. How did he manage to look dangerous even while crouching? Maybe it was his preference for dark clothing or it had something to do with the way his muscles bunched like he was a heartbeat away from springing into action. Whatever it was, I was thankful for the reminder that the man I was sleeping with could be both unforgiving and violent. It

made me feel less fucked up about the fact that what he'd just told me hadn't scared me away in the least. In fact, it made me want to go shoot something. Or more like several someones.

"I still want in on this," I told him.

His eyes flashed with approval, and he leaned in and pressed a quick, hard kiss to my lips. He pulled away just as swiftly and opened his mouth to say something more, but his gaze slipped past me, and I heard another whisk of air as the door opened behind us. I turned in my seat just as Liam stepped onto the patio. Behind him, Gran and Jennifer stood at the kitchen island, chatting. Liam glanced at them and then shut the door, his expression troubled as he headed over to us. Jakob rose from his crouch as he approached, and the two men towered over me.

"Let me send a few Specters with you," Liam said, voice low. At that moment he didn't look like one of the most dangerous men in the state; he looked like any anxious father might when their kid was heading into trouble.

"And have someone say I can't fight my own battles without my father backing me up? Pass," Jakob said. "Plus this is Kings business. Let us try to handle it first."

Here again was the reminder of past military experience. We'd been taught from day one of basic training to handle all our problems at the lowest level possible. One of your fellow soldiers being an asshole to you? Find a way to get them to stop. Only if you can't do that do you bother your sergeant with your bullshit.

Liam nodded, still tense. "You'll keep me in the loop though?"

Jakob shot him a sideways look. "As long as you promise to stay out of it until I ask for help."

The tension finally broke as Liam grinned. "I promise."

An hour later, Jakob and I climbed into a nondescript minivan that had been gathering dust in the Larsons' oversized garage. The Mustang was great if you wanted to get somewhere fast, but it had limited trunk space and no air-conditioning, and today was supposed to top out near one hundred degrees. While I'd spent more time with Gran, Jakob and Liam loaded up the van. Afterward, they switched out the license plates on it, and miracle of miracles, I managed to keep my nosy mouth shut instead of asking why.

I tugged my seat belt on and glanced into the rear of the van as Jakob drove us down his parents' long dirt driveway. The back seats were folded into the floor, and a stack of oversized duffel bags full of God knew what sat behind us. I lifted my gaze to the side panels. Several circular metal patches stood out against the paint. The longer I stared at them, the more I began to suspect that they covered up bullet holes. Beneath them, a white spot smeared across the carpet in the way back. It looked like someone had dumped a gallon of bleach there to get rid of a bloodstain.

*Please don't let us get pulled over,* I prayed. The only thing that could make this thing look more suspicious was a Free Candy sign plastered over the side of it.

"What's with the bags?" I asked.

"Killing two birds with one stone," Jakob said. "We're going into Kearny. We might as well drop some shit off for my father."

So, guns or drugs or some other illegal Specter/King business then. I turned back around and watched the flowing field of grass out my side of the window. Part of me had been worried that the duffels were full of weapons for us. I'd been with Gran and Jennifer while Jakob and Liam made a game plan for today, and I was still clueless as to what we'd be doing in Kearny. Spying on Magnolia Hills? Tracking down the assholes who put Dr. Perez in the hospital?

Jakob's phone rang, and he lifted it from the cup holder between us and brought it to his ear. "Where is he?" he asked, not even bothering to say hi.

I could barely hear the muffled answer, let alone make out the words.

Jakob frowned. "We'll be in Kearny in an hour. Let me know if he moves before then." With that, he hung up.

"Let me guess. That was the King you have watching Magnolia?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. The person I put on Redding. He's over in Weyhome now."

I frowned, absorbing the news. "Isn't Weyhome where the Jokers are from?"

"Yeah, and he just walked into their clubhouse. Motherfucker isn't even trying to be circumspect."

"Is the person you have tailing him going to be safe there?"

"She's ex-HUMINT," he said. "She'll be fine."

HUMINT was short for human intelligence, the military's version of spies, people who went into enemy territory and blended in with the locals, all so they could feed information back to headquarters. Spying on a rival motorcycle gang would be a walk in the park for a woman with that kind of background, and I relaxed a little into my seat as we made our way up the drive.

"So, what are we going to do?" I asked.

"We're going to go drop this shit off," Jakob said, thumbing toward the duffels in the back. "And then we'll wait to hear where Redding heads after he leaves Weyhome."

"Are we going after him?" I asked.

Jakob shook his head. "Not yet."

I turned back toward the window, mulling everything over. Something about this whole situation felt just a little... off, and I couldn't quite put my finger on why. My mind kept circling back around to Daniel King. Why was Jakob so focused on Redding instead of him? I hated enigmas, and Daniel King was a giant one dressed up in leather. One minute he breaks into Jakob's apartment and makes cryptic comments and the next, he's slapping him on the back at the bar. Then he's bitching Jakob out over the phone, and just a few hours later, he's acting all buddy-buddy at a party. His abrupt shifts in behavior were bizarre. Unsettling. Jakob said nothing the man did ever made sense to anyone else, and now I wondered why. Was Daniel King just paranoid? A mastermind? Or a fucking whack job?

Even with the mounting evidence against him, Jakob hesitated to condemn the man last night, and God only knew what he'd told Liam while I'd been with Gran. I couldn't wrap my head around Jakob's reactions. It seemed so obvious to me that Daniel King was involved. The man had served with Redding, and now here Redding was, working for the Jokers to destabilize Kearny.

Daniel King *had* to be working with him. Maybe he was sick of heading a subchapter of the Specters, beholden to Liam. Maybe he wanted to lead his gang without any oversight. Of course he wouldn't tell Jakob about what he was up to; Liam was his dad. Of course he'd bitch Jakob out for getting involved; he was probably scared Liam was going to find out about his treachery. So why was Jakob giving him the benefit of the doubt? Why was he so goddamn loyal to a man who treated him like absolute shit?

I wanted to turn to him and demand answers, but if my past inquiries had taught me anything, it was that Jakob clammed right up every time I mentioned his evil overlord.

Jakob's phone chimed from between us. He picked it up and glanced at the screen, slowing the van down so he could get a better look at it. His jaw clenched, and he threw it back down.

"God *damn* it," he ground out.

"What's up?" I asked, not liking the look on his face.

"Change of plans," he said, pulling out onto the main road. "We need to go talk to someone after we drop this shit off."

"Who?" I asked.

In answer, he just shook his head.

I stared at his profile, fighting back the urge to scream. “If you ever call me stubborn again, so help me God, Jakob.”

He reached out and grabbed my hand, drawing it toward him so he could plant a kiss on my knuckles. His eyes met mine over the top of them, briefly, holding both a promise and a warning. A promise that he would answer me soon? A warning to stop asking questions?

*Argh!*

Why did I feel like I never really knew what was going on with this man? Why did I constantly feel off-balance and in over my head?

I tried to pull my hand from his, but he held on tight, his thumb stroking over my skin as he drove. “Let me go,” I said, sounding angrier than I was. I needed to think, try to sift through my thoughts about what was going on and my ever-changing, ever-conflicted feelings for this impossible man, and I couldn’t seem to do either of those things with him touching me.

He glanced over again and caught sight of my expression. A scowl crept across his face, and he dropped my hand and flicked on his blinker, pulling off to the side of the road.

I looked around us—cornfields to the left, cornfields to the right.

Jakob put the van in park and came over to my side of the vehicle. Before I could ask him what the hell he was doing, he wrenched open my door, unbuckled my seat belt, and hauled me out of it.

“Jakob!” I yelled, grabbing onto his neck as he strode into the cornfield.

The van was still on, and both the doors were wide open, like we’d been abducted. If anyone drove past, they’d be so overcome with *Children of the Corn* vibes that they’d either take the fuck off or call the cops.

“You drive me crazy sometimes,” he growled.

“Ditto, buddy,” I said, poking his meaty chest for emphasis.

“Why couldn’t you have trusted that I would answer you when I could?”

“I didn’t know that’s what you were asking me to do!” I shot back. “Why didn’t you just say that to me?”

He made a frustrated sound and then hauled me forward so he could seal his mouth over mine. My head spun as he kissed me, hard and fierce, and I did that stupid thing where I forgot to breathe again. By the time he pulled back, I was light-headed and thankful he was holding me up.

“We’re going to see Daniel King,” he said.

Just like that, the light-headedness vanished. “Um, what?”

“And I didn’t say anything in the van because my father might have bugged it.”

“Um, *what?*”

“Now we need to quit wasting time and get back on the road before he looks at the GPS tracker on it and wonders why the hell we’re parked here.”

With that, he turned on his heel and headed out of the cornfield.

I clung to him, dumbstruck, looking back over the past few days and beginning to realize that the reason I had felt like I never knew what was going on was because I hadn’t.





# Chapter Seventeen

The rest of the drive to Kearny passed in silence. Because what the hell was I going to say, knowing that Liam might overhear every word? On that note, *why* might Liam overhear every word? Was he just paranoid by nature? Was that where Jakob got it from? Admittedly, I'd just met Liam. I knew nothing about him besides what Jakob told me and what I'd seen with my own eyes. Liam seemed stable enough, but for all I knew, he was secretly a control freak who bugged all his vehicles because he wanted to hear every word spoken outside his hearing.

*Oh, sweet Christ on a couch.* Jakob got me off in the Mustang yesterday.

I started to turn toward him in horror but stopped myself. The Mustang didn't even have automatic windows, let alone enough circuitry to support a complex bugging system. I hoped. And would Jakob have fingered me, knowing that his father would overhear every sound we made? I didn't think so. Sure, he hadn't given a shit about being seen in the Kings' driveway last night, but being briefly glimpsed through tinted windows and eavesdropped on for a prolonged period were two totally different things. Plus he'd been much more talkative in the car, much more open with me—I mean, at least for Jakob he was—whereas he'd barely said two words since we'd climbed into the van.

I let out a shaky breath and tried to calm down. Okay, so Liam probably hadn't heard his son get me off. But he still sent us out today in a vehicle that might be bugged. After suggesting that Jakob take some Specters with him.

I thought back to the tension of our discussion on the patio, the open worry on Liam's face, knowing that his son might be heading into danger. Was Liam just an anxious father? Jakob was their only kid; I could understand him being overprotective. Or was something else going on?

Back in the cornfield, Jakob hadn't been acting like Jakob. I thought of the near desperation of his kiss, the way he'd hauled me so far away before answering my questions, his hurry to get back in the van after mentioning his father might be looking at the GPS tracker. It all made it seem like Jakob was almost... afraid of his father, or at the very least, wary of him. He sure as shit didn't want him to know who we were about to go visit.

I started to look back over the past few days and question my perception of everything that happened. While I'd been so focused on Daniel King and his mysterious buddy, Redding, should I have instead been thinking about Liam Larson?

I tried to remove myself from the situation and look at it from the perspective of an outsider. My dislike of Daniel King made me *want* to think that he was up to no good. That he was the kind of man who would endanger innocent people like my grandmother just to get ahead in the world. And really, who could blame me for that? He'd thrown Jakob and me under the bus the day after learning about our fake relationship. He'd broken into Jakob's apartment and then treated him like dog shit.

But now that I was thinking about it, *really* thinking about it, I realized how much my own bias might have skewed my view of recent events.

As much as I disliked him, as much as it rankled, I knew that Daniel King was good for this town. That he cared about this town. Was he highly problematic? Yes. Was he a volatile megalomaniac that I would never, ever let myself be alone with? Also, yes. But again, not everything was black and white. The characters of most people I'd met were shaded in hues of gray, and as much as it pained me to admit it, that included Daniel King.

Not a single function happened in Kearny without him being involved in some way, whether that be by donating his time or his money. He was a judge at the annual 4-H fair. The Kings sponsored

three of the local youth sports teams. They'd even started a summer camp for underprivileged children so they had someplace to go during vacation and their parents could keep working without having to worry about paying for two months of childcare. Daniel's wife, Eva, sat on half the town boards, and where most of the folks in Kearny had a healthy fear of Daniel, they viewed Eva as a legitimate community leader. They trusted her opinions. They looked to her for guidance.

It made no sense that the Kings would do so much to keep this town safe and thriving just for Daniel to turn around and bring drugs into it, and the more I reexamined my original theory, the more I saw the gaping holes in it.

Because, really, what did Daniel King have to gain by destabilizing Kearny? How would a border war with a subchapter of the Bandits help him throw off the oversight of Liam Larson and the Specters?

Maybe I wasn't devious enough, maybe I wasn't good at thinking outside the box, but any way I came at that question, I still ended up in the same place. Even if Daniel was angling to start a war just to make it look like the Specters couldn't protect their own people, Kearny and Daniel King would still suffer because of it. And a big ugly fight like that would draw national attention, something the Kings, the Jokers, the Specters, and the Bandits would want to avoid at all cost, because with national attention came federal focus, and no one wanted to give the FBI a reason to invade.

After poking at this problem for a solid ten minutes, I didn't see any way that kind of tactic would work for Daniel or even be beneficial to him. And I'd bet good money that Daniel King didn't do anything unless it benefited Daniel King in some way.

So what the hell was really going on here? Who had the most to gain from weakening his hold on the town? The head of the Jokers was a prime candidate. With Daniel out of the way, it would create a power vacuum in Kearny that they could try to slip in and fill. But they would never pull that off without one hell of a fight from the rest of the Kings. The clubs *hated* each other. Their rivalry went too far back for the Kings to accept the yolk of leadership from the Jokers, and Lord knew the Specters would never let it happen without one hell of a fight. Which brought me back to no one wanting to bring the attention of the feds down on their heads.

Maybe the point wasn't to take over the Kings territory. Maybe the Jokers only wanted to destabilize the Kings so they wouldn't be competition anymore.

Or maybe it was something else.

I turned in my seat, looking at Jakob but thinking about his father. Liam Larson. A man who, from all appearances, loved his son more than almost anything else in the world. Worried about him. Was proud of him. Probably wanted the best for him. To see him rise to the same kind of influence and power that Liam had.

The quickest way to make that happen was to get rid of the man standing in his son's way. Daniel King wasn't great to Jakob. Maybe Liam had seen that and didn't like it. Maybe Liam thought he'd have greater influence on Kearny and the Kings if his son headed the club.

Liam must have known how loyal his son and the other members of the club were to Daniel. So how would he go about dethroning Daniel without the Kings suspecting his involvement?

The answer was obvious: by framing him. By bringing in a man from Daniel's past and setting him up as the head of a rival drug operation right on Kearny's doorstep to make it look like Daniel *had* to know about it. That he *had* to be involved.

And I had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

Jakob glanced over at me, feeling my regard, and I started to look at him in a new light. I'd been thinking of him as the strong, silent type, but what if I was as wrong about him as I'd been about his

father? He'd grown up in the MC world. How young was he when he first dipped his toes into the politics of the bigger clubs? Had Liam spoon-fed him a steady diet of paranoia and coercion all his life? Taught his son how to toy with others? How to stand in the background and manipulate events like a puppet master pulling the strings of his marionettes?

How long had Jakob suspected his father's involvement? Because from everything that had happened over the past few days, it was pretty obvious that he didn't think Daniel was behind everything.

Had he known since that first night in the bar? Jakob was the one to approach me and strike up a conversation, and later I'd learned that he'd looked into me when I moved to town. Had he already known that Gran was in Magnolia? Had he dropped that cryptic comment about her safety, hoping to reel me in?

Jesus, had he intentionally trapped me in his apartment and seduced me all so he could use me to weasel his way into Magnolia and get a look at what was going on for himself?

I leaned away from him, feeling sick to my stomach. Because it seemed... possible.

*Don't get ahead of yourself, Krista.*

I took a deep breath and tried to shove my anxiety down. I'd jumped to conclusions about Daniel, and look where that had gotten me. After everything I'd been through with Jakob over the past several days, the least he deserved was the benefit of the doubt.

I turned to frown out my window, setting my unease about Jakob aside for a minute. There was still the problem of my apartment. If Liam was behind everything, had he ordered someone to trash it? Or had Redding and his goons done that on their own?

I circled back to an earlier question I'd asked myself: Who had the most to gain in this situation? By trashing my apartment, the goons would send the message that I wasn't safe and that I should stop sticking my nose where it didn't belong, but Liam...

If Liam was anywhere near as manipulative as I was starting to think he was, then it was plausible that Redding had told him about his son showing up at the nursing home and who his son had been with. Had he also told Liam that I said Jakob was my boyfriend? If so, what better way to keep his son away from Magnolia and Kearny than by making him believe his alleged girlfriend wasn't safe there? After all, Jakob's initial response was to pull me out of Kearny and bring me home, placing us right beneath Liam's thumb. My trashed apartment would ensure he stayed right there.

My head started to spin. If Jakob had already suspected Liam's involvement by then, he might have known Liam could be the one behind my trashed apartment and had brought me home because he wanted to play right into Liam's hand. It meant Jakob could keep an eye on Liam while simultaneously making Liam believe that Jakob had no idea what was really going on. Because if Liam was willing to have my apartment ransacked and maybe even go so far as to have Dr. Perez attacked, what was next? Ordering someone to hurt me? Or Gran?

The blood drained from my face. Oh God, I left her there with him.

I could wait until we got to Kearny before I started interrogating Jakob, but the question of Gran's safety had to be answered now.

As we wound out of Hill Country and descended back into civilization, I pulled my phone from my purse and punched something into my note app in caps, waiting until we rolled to a stop at a light before shoving it beneath Jakob's nose.

It read, IS MY GRAN REALLY SAFE WITH YOUR PARENTS?

Jakob reached out and gripped my shoulder, dropping his shades so he could look me in the eyes. "Yes" was all he said, and from the conviction in that one word, it was clear that he believed she

was.

But did I? If Liam was willing to destroy my apartment just to get his way, how far would he really go? Who else would he hurt?

And for that matter, how far would Jakob go?

Had anything between us been real?

One thing was for certain; Jakob and I needed to have a long conversation once we got out of this van.



# Chapter Eighteen

**K**earny was an old-school kind of town, bisected by railroad tracks that split it into two sides, one good and one bad. The bags in the back of the minivan rattled as we passed over those tracks and headed into the bad side where incomes were lower, homes were smaller, and nothing happened without the Kings knowing about it.

My mind worked on overdrive as Jakob took us deeper into club territory. Daniel or Liam? Liam or Daniel? Or someone else entirely? I'd been wrong about Liam once already. What if I was wrong again? About both of them?

I rubbed at the back of my neck, trying to stave off the headache that threatened. I felt like I didn't know up from down anymore. Too much had happened in the past few days, and I was struggling to process it all. It didn't help that this felt like trying to put together a puzzle with half the pieces missing. Fricking Jakob and his refusal to tell me what was really going on. Even if he hadn't intentionally seduced me just to get into Magnolia, I had a lot to be angry with him about. Like the fact that he'd kept so much from me. Things that only further endangered me.

*Here, Krista, come play in my world. Oh, you want to know the rules of the game? Too bad!*

I would never have been so at ease around Liam if I'd known that Jakob suspected him.

Oh, holy hell. What if that's *exactly* why Jakob had kept me in the dark? We'd only really known each other for a few days. How could he trust that I'd keep my trap shut about his suspicions? Or be convincing enough to fool Liam into thinking I was comfortable around him?

The more I thought about it, the more I thought I understood Jakob's behavior. A *good* man, a *decent* man, would have told me everything up front and let me decide for myself how involved I wanted to be. Jakob already confirmed that he was neither of those things. And if our roles were reversed, would I have trusted a strange man with all that? I thought about it for less than a minute before I had to admit the answer was a resounding nope.

Was I still angry at Jakob? Yes. But I thought I understood his motivations, which made everything that much more complicated.

Ugh.

A few minutes later, Jakob eased the van to a stop in front of a grimy-looking tattoo parlor. Several motorcycles were parked at the curb, the Kings patch stamped proudly on the side of each gas tank. The windows of the shop were caked in dust. A few letters in the neon sign were out, and now instead of Brad's Ink, it read Bad Ink. Fitting. This looked like a great place to contract Hepatitis C.

I glanced sideways at Jakob. "Please tell me you've never gotten a tattoo here."

He took off his shades and shot me a piercing look. "No one gets tattoos here."

I frowned and turned to the row of bikes beside us. If their owners weren't inside getting tattoos, what were they doing here? Was Jakob being a smartass, or was he serious? Was this shop nothing but a cover for other, more nefarious Kings business?

I glanced back at the dirty windows and general neglect of the storefront. I wouldn't want to get a tattoo here, and maybe that's what the Kings were banking on. Maybe the dirt and decay weren't from neglect but were intentional.

Before I could question Jakob about it, a large Latino man about my age strolled out the front door and headed toward us. He wore a skintight black T-shirt with a sleeveless leather vest over it that had the Kings emblem on the right breast, similar to the one Jakob donned the other day. His head was

shaved. Tattoos snaked up his arms. The brows that shaded his dark eyes were heavy, lending him a hard expression that was somewhat softened by his full lips. I'd never seen him before.

"Stay here," Jakob said as he climbed out of the van.

Fine by me. I didn't want any part of whatever exchange was about to happen. It was bad enough that I was already caught up in Kings business; no need to add accomplice to gunrunning to my list of crimes.

Jakob exchanged a few words with the other biker that were thankfully lost beneath the low hum of the van's engine. With a curt nod at Jakob, the Latino man turned and motioned toward the shop front. The door swung open, and three more men poured out. I didn't recognize any of them even though they wore the club's leathers. It wasn't unusual. Not all the Kings frequented Charley's, and the club had over two hundred members at last count.

With swift efficiency, they unloaded the bags from the back of the van. I kept my eyes forward and did my best to look like a woman minding her own business. Afterward, they headed back inside, the Latino man digging in his pocket and handing something to Jakob before they parted ways.

Jakob came back and opened the driver's side door. He cut the engine and motioned for me to get out. I climbed down and went around to join him, and he led me toward the back of the shop. We were several hundred feet from the van before he spoke.

"We're taking another car."

I only nodded. I didn't know how sensitive Liam's bugging system was, and I didn't want to say anything he might hear. With the van behind us, the spot between my shoulder blades itched like it was a sentient creature under Liam's command, watching us even at this distance.

Jakob hit a button on the key fob his biker buddy had given him, and a chirping sound erupted from a flashy red BMW parked within the shadow of the building. Gunrunning must pay well.

I climbed into the passenger side and buckled myself in. "Is it safe to talk here?" I asked as Jakob slid in beside me.

"Yeah," he said. He hit a button on the dash, and the engine roared to life, nearly as loud as the Mustang.

"Did you intentionally seduce me just to get into Magnolia?" I asked. Might as well get the hardest question out of the way and know once and for all how mad I should really be.

He cut me a glance before putting the car into first and shooting out of the parking spot. "Not exactly."

My spine went rigid. "Explain."

"You seemed like my best bet on getting into Magnolia," he said. "And I've wanted to fuck you since your first shift at Charley's. So yeah, I tempted you over to my place, hoping to kill two birds with one stone, but the two aren't connected. If you'd turned me down, I still would have asked you to lie and say I was your boyfriend to get me in there."

The breath I'd been holding came out sounding more like a hiss.

He glanced at me as we roared out of the parking lot, biceps flexing as he shifted through gears and the car gained speed. "You know you still would have gone along with it to keep your gran safe."

Yes, I would have gone along with it, but I didn't like this. It felt too much like manipulation, and it made me wonder if he was still lying to me, withholding some crucial bit of information.

I thought back to the look on his face after I walked out of the police station, when he told me that it would have been harder to break me out of there than Magnolia. He'd seemed dead serious. Like I was worth mounting an assault on a building full of armed men and women with the law on their side.

He glanced over at me again, just a quick flick of his eyes. "I get why you're pissed," he said. "I'm sorry. I didn't know how to bring it up without making you question everything between us."

"Well, congratulations on a job well done," I said. "I'm now questioning everything between us."

I let out a strangled gasp as he slammed on the brakes. We squealed to a stop on the side of the road. A car honked behind us, and the driver screamed, "Asshole!" as they passed. I eased the seat belt away from my chest and rubbed my breastbone. Ouch.

Jakob turned to me in his seat. "Everything between us is real. I'm not going to beg you to trust me, and I'm not going sit here and argue with you about it. You either believe me or you don't." He reached down and grabbed his crotch, and I was shocked to see that he was rock hard. "Even now, I'd rather be holed up somewhere making you scream my name than dealing with this bullshit, and if you don't believe anything else I've said to you, believe that."

Shit. I was in way over my head with him, because even though I was pissed, the bulge in his pants made me want to crawl on top of him right here in the car. Maybe the fact that I was pissed was part of it. Maybe deep down, I'd known all along that the realest we'd been around each other was when we were both naked and slicked in sweat.

I exhaled, long and slow, letting his words sink in, remembering everything that had happened between us over the past few days.

"I believe you," I said. Because I did. I might not know how I felt about anything else he'd done, but I knew that he wanted me, and I trusted him enough not to lie to me about this.

Jakob let out a breath. It was a harsh expulsion, like he'd been holding it in, like he was relieved, and that, more than anything, drove home the fact that I wasn't the only one losing my head over whatever this was between us.

"Good," he said.

And then his hands were on my cheeks, sliding into my hair, his grip tightening as he dragged me forward. My seat belt locked up, and I could go no farther. He did the rest of the work, closing the distance between us to kiss me with breathless intensity. His lips were bruising, tongue demanding, forcing me to meet him stroke for stroke. I was still mad at him, but it only drove my need for him higher, wound me tighter, made me want to strip his clothes off and see the honest, simple truth in his desire for me.

He broke away too soon, breathing hard, and rubbed his thumb over my lips. "We need to get to Daniel's."

I nodded up at him.

He continued to stare at my mouth like a man transfixed.

Despite myself, I grinned. "Which means you should probably let me go."

The scowl returned to his face. "Yeah, I should."

Instead, he leaned in and kissed me again, and this time he kept kissing me, fingers digging into my scalp, teeth nipping at my lips. It reminded me of our first night together in his apartment, the marble of his kitchen island cold beneath me and him between my legs, burning like a fire, setting me aflame with his touch.

I was the one to break the kiss this time because if he kept it up, we'd never get to Daniel's, and the entire world would implode around us before we let each other go. His grip on my neck eased as I pulled away, and he leaned back a little in his seat, enough that I felt like I could form rational thought again. The air between us still felt charged, heavy and electric, like lightning might strike at any second. We needed something to break the mood.

"How long have you suspected your father?" I asked.



Jakob let me go and straightened in his seat. A little thrill of vindication shot through me to see his cheeks were flushed. He shook his head like he was trying to clear it, then turned forward and shifted the car into first.

“Since I was twelve,” he said, checking his mirrors before pulling back onto the road.

I frowned. Maybe I’d misheard him because of the engine noise. “Since you were twelve?”

He nodded. “I eavesdropped on one of his phone calls to an enforcer and realized what a manipulative bastard he was. After that, I never fully trusted him again.”

Okay then. “I meant, how long have you suspected his involvement in what’s going on at Magnolia Hills?”

“From the beginning,” he said. “My default is to suspect him anytime anything happens in Kearny.”

“Why?”

“Because he hates Daniel and wants him out,” Jakob said.

I grinned. I’d unraveled at least part of what was going on for myself. Go me!

“When did you start suspecting my dad?” Jakob asked.

“Not until you told me the van was bugged.”

“And now you think he’s behind everything?”

I hesitated before answering. The way he said that made me wonder what *he* thought. He didn’t seem totally convinced that it was his dad, just like he didn’t suspect Daniel. Maybe Jakob was a hold-all-judgment-until-the-end kind of guy.

“I don’t know what to think,” I said. “It’s not like you’ve been very forthcoming with me.”

He nodded. “I haven’t. So, tell me your theories.”

My lingering desire for him was drowned beneath a fresh wave of frustration. “Seriously? You’re still withholding, and you expect me to pour out all my half-assed guesses?”

“I don’t want to influence you,” he said. “It’s part of why I haven’t said shit to you about my suspicions.” He glanced over at me as we gained speed again. “I want to hear what you think. You’re smart, and Dad was right about your instincts; they’re good. You might have picked up on something I missed.”

Damn it. I must have been starved for affection before meeting him. That must be why his praise made my cheeks heat and my stomach do a stupid little flip.

“I have a few questions for you first,” I said, still hesitant.

“Ask them.”

“Are you actually going to answer me for once?”

A small, evil little grin lifted the corner of his lips. “Maybe.”

“You’re a real pain in the ass sometimes, you know that?”

“Only because I like what happens when I get you riled up like this,” he said, his grin widening into a full-blown smile.

I didn’t know whether to kiss him or punch him. Both seemed equally appealing. Instead, I decided to ask my questions while I had the chance.

“Do you think your dad would go so far as to have my apartment trashed and order someone to attack me in an elevator?”

Jakob didn’t look at me when he answered. All his focus was on the road as he tore out of the Kings stronghold like someone was chasing us. “The apartment, yes. By bringing you home, he’d assume things between us were serious and that wrecking your place was a good way to keep me where he wanted me.”

“Right beneath his thumb,” I said.

He nodded, downshifted, and hit the train tracks crossing back into the good side of town so fast it felt like we went airborne for a few seconds. My teeth rattled in my skull when we hit the other side, and my hip throbbed on impact.

“Mind slowing down a bit?” I ground out.

Jakob looked over, saw my pained expression, and immediately slowed the car to the speed limit.

“Sorry,” he said.

God bless men who aren’t afraid to apologize. That was twice in the span of a few minutes, and both times he sounded like he meant it.

“It’s fine,” I said. “Why did your dad want you home so badly? To keep you away from Magnolia?”

“Most likely.”

“But you don’t think he’d have me or Dr. Perez attacked.”

He shook his head.

“What about Daniel? Do you think he’s involved at all?”

“No,” he said. “If this shit implodes, Daniel will be fucked.”

“How so?”

“He’ll lose the loyalty of the club. You don’t work with the Jokers. Ever. They’re the enemy. If anyone else in the Kings knew what we did, he’d already be out.”

I thought about his words for a few minutes and realized that he hadn’t spoken to anyone but Liam about Redding. At least not in my company.

“You only told your dad about Redding to see his reaction, didn’t you?” I asked.

Jakob nodded.

“Did he give anything away?”

“No,” he said. “But then he usually doesn’t.”

“And you haven’t told anyone else?”

Jakob shook his head.

“What about the bikers that came with you to Magnolia?” I asked.

“They think the Jokers are behind everything.”

“And the woman you have tailing Redding?”

“She has no idea who he is,” he said. “Only that we want him watched.”

“No one else knows about Redding but us and your dad?” I asked, just to clarify.

“I haven’t told anyone else about him.”

I watched him shift through the gears, his large, muscular upper body on full display, his movements quick and sure, almost graceful. It sounded like he’d chosen those words carefully. Jakob might not have told anyone else, but clearly he thought other people knew about Redding.

When I first met Jakob, I thought he was just a large, violent man with irresistible sex appeal. Turned out there was a brain beneath all that. I’d suspected it since our first night together, but now I was beginning to wonder just how sharp his mind was. He wanted to know my suspicions, see if I picked up on anything he’d missed, but I was willing to bet that Jakob Larson was a man who missed nothing.

“Who’s Mike?” I prodded, switching tactics. I remembered the name from that first run-in between Jakob and Daniel. It had been lingering in the back of my mind, bugging me, like a mosquito hovering just on the edge of hearing.

This time Jakob's grin was warm when he glanced over at me, softened by the approval in his expression. He picked up his phone, unlocked it, and passed it to me. On the screen was a picture of Redding and another man, a big white guy with sandy hair and Slavic features.

"That's Mike," Jakob said.

"He works for your father, doesn't he?"

He cocked a brow and looked over at me. "What makes you say that?"

I shrugged and handed the phone back. "Just a gut feeling."

"Your gut is good," he said, setting the phone in a cup holder between us. "He works for my dad. Not many people know who he is. Dad sends him in when he needs something handled and doesn't want it traced back to the club."

"Why did Daniel tell you that the thing with him didn't pan out?" I pressed.

"I have no fucking idea," Jakob said, frustration creeping into his tone. "Like I said, nothing Daniel King does makes any sense to anyone besides Daniel King."

"But you have a guess, don't you?"

He nodded. "I didn't know Daniel knew who Mike was until that night. Now I think he might have known about Magnolia longer than I have and has been trying to pin it on Dad all along. I think he mentioned Mike because he wanted to see my reaction."

My brows crept up my forehead. "He thought you were in on it with your father?"

Jakob nodded.

"Does he still?" I asked.

"No idea," he said.

"Who did you think was watching us that first night?"

He laughed. "No one. I just wanted to get close to you and needed an excuse."

I snorted, remembering how much I'd wanted to get close to him too. "You wouldn't have needed an excuse."

He shot me a sly grin. "Yeah, I figured that out pretty quickly."

I watched him for a few minutes, mulling everything over. I had about ten million more questions for him, but all of them were minor, and only half of them were about trying to figure out what was going on. The rest could wait, I decided.

"Those were my biggest questions," I said. "Now will you tell me what you think is happening?"

"I think my dad has some involvement in it, but I'm not sure how much," he said. "This is too messy for him to be behind everything. It's too big, too volatile. If shit pops off between the Jokers and us, the bigger clubs will get involved, and it will start a war between them. Dad would never want that."

"And he wouldn't intentionally put you in this kind of danger," I said, remembering the concern on Liam's face earlier.

"No, he wouldn't," Jakob said.

"So what happened?"

"I think shit got away from Dad somehow, and we need to find out who the fuck Redding really is before I start making assumptions about anything else."

"Which is why you want to talk to Daniel."

Jakob nodded. "We need to get this out in the open. Daniel might have the missing piece of information we need, and if we don't figure this out soon, he and Dad might try to get rid of each other."

"Get rid of each other," I said, "like..."

He glanced over at me as we slowed to a stop at a red light. We were back in the nicer part of town, only a few miles from Daniel and Eva's house. "You know exactly what I mean," he said.

"Yikes," was all I managed to squeak out. No wonder Jakob was wound so tight. His gang leader and father had been about a heartbeat away from trying to kill each other this whole time.

He reached out and tipped my chin up, pulling me from my dark thoughts. "We should go somewhere when this is all over."

"What?" I asked, fighting the urge to lean into his touch.

"Get out of town for a long weekend. Unwind."

I arched a brow at him. "You mean fuck each other for three uninterrupted days."

His gaze dropped to my lips. "Yeah, that."

I grinned, but a heartbeat later, it fell. "I'm still mad at you for keeping me in the dark about everything."

He stroked his thumb over my lips, gaze drifting down to watch the movement. "I didn't know how long you'd stick around. No point in telling you anything if you only wanted a one-night stand, helped me get into Magnolia, and then bounced."

Okay, when he put it that way, his initial silence made sense but not his continued evasions.

"What about later?" I asked. "Like, anytime since you brought me home."

"I don't have a good reason for that. At least not one that doesn't make me look like an asshole, so I'm sorry."

That made three apologies in five minutes. He must have set a new world record for men.

"Be open with me going forward, and I'll work on forgiving you."

"Deal," he said.

The light turned green in my periphery, but I couldn't pull my eyes from him. The way he stared at my mouth, the ease with which he'd apologized, the fact that every moment I spent with him, I saw some new side of him—it was turning me into an addict. I never wanted to look away from him. Because it meant I might not see the way the ice in his eyes melted when he turned to me, or I might miss out on another hint of the dark humor I'd glimpsed the other day or the goofiness of this morning when he'd crashed down on top of me and started snoring.

Someone behind us honked.

Jakob gave my cheek a slow, lingering stroke like he had all the time in the world.

The honking grew more persistent.

"Jakob," I said, staring up at him.

Finally he let me go.

A few minutes later, we pulled into Daniel and Eva King's long driveway. The house looked different in the light of day, smaller, a bit grungier. The beer cans on the front lawn didn't help. A small army of people milled around outside, cleaning up. The front door stood open, young men and women moving in and out of it, carrying trash bags stuffed to bursting.

"New recruits?" I asked.

"Yeah, the poor bastards," Jakob said.

I shuddered, feeling bad for whoever pulled vomit duty. They'd need industrial carpet cleaner and a stronger stomach than I had to face that dining room.

Jakob parked the car right outside the garage and then turned to me in his seat. "Daniel's not like my dad. His temper gets the better of him sometimes."

"You're not going to try to provoke him, are you?" I asked.

He shook his head. “No, but his back is against the wall. And if he already thinks I’m in on it with my dad, anything might set him off.”

“Sounds like an injured animal,” I said.

“He is one. Let me take the lead?”

I nodded.

“And try not to get between us if shit goes down.”

“I’ll try not to,” I said.

Jakob pushed open his door. “Let’s get this over with.”



# Chapter Nineteen

Daniel King looked like shit. We stood in his front hall, deep enough into it that the sunlight streaming through the open front door didn't touch him. His eyes were bloodshot, skin ashen. Every time anyone moved too fast or spoke too loud, he winced. Jakob said there were no consequences for anyone's actions last night. Too bad for Daniel that didn't apply to hangovers.

"Good morning!" I yelled at him, because yes, I was vindictive enough that I liked seeing him flinch.

"What do you want?" he asked, voice rasping like sandpaper.

"We need to talk," Jakob said. Just then, a young kid in a Kings vest hustled past, carrying a box of empty beer bottles. Jakob waited until he was gone before saying anything else. "Somewhere quiet."

Daniel nodded, looking relieved at this respite from the busy hall. He turned and led us deeper into the house. As we passed the picture of him and Redding, Jakob reached out and snagged it off the wall, so quiet that all I heard was the soft sigh of leather. He shoved it inside his jacket before anyone else could see it, tucking his arm close to hold it there.

I thought Daniel and Eva would have to burn the house to the ground and start somewhere fresh after how trashed it was last night, but the new recruits took their cleaning duties seriously. They'd all been in the military, and if their first few years in service were anything like mine, they knew how to keep their heads down and get a difficult job done with minimal complaining.

Daniel weaved between bustling people and showed us up a back staircase. It deposited us into an upstairs hallway that looked as if it had escaped the worst of the party's perversions.

"In here," Daniel said, pushing open a door and striding inside. It was a large home office, painted a deep green. It looked like something more suited to an English country manor than a southern Texas ranch home, complete with a heavy wooden desk, bookshelves, and a trio of leather chairs. This must have been Eva's doing. It didn't fit Daniel. For starters, it was too nice. He looked more suited to holding court in a dingy clubhouse with Army and biker paraphernalia plastered all over the walls.

Daniel paced over to a vintage drink cart and poured himself a glass of whiskey. He didn't ask us if we wanted one. If it were anyone else, I'd assume they weren't trying to be an impolite host but were just too hungover to function. With Daniel, I knew this for the subtle power move it was.

*Asshole.*

Jakob sat without waiting for an invite, so I took the chair beside him. Daniel folded himself down across from us, whiskey balanced on his knee. He scrubbed a hand over his face, and some of the fog cleared from his expression.

"What's this about?" he asked.

"Who the fuck is Redding?" Jakob demanded.

I gripped the arms of my chair, muscles bunching, ready to spring free if I had to. Jesus, Jakob. So much for easing into this.

It was a testament to Daniel's nerves that he didn't so much as blink in response. "No idea."

Jakob pulled the picture from inside his jacket and shoved it at Daniel.

The man was a good actor. He frowned as he took it, looking it over for several seconds before the light of recognition dawned on his face. "Oh, this kid." He set the picture aside. "He's just some guy I used to serve with."

He lifted his glass and took another slow sip of whiskey like nothing was wrong, like this was just any casual conversation. It reminded me of that first night in Jakob's apartment. But his free hand slipped down the side of his chair, and his eyes gave him away. He must have had a weapon strapped beneath the seat.

I was just about to shout a warning when Jakob spoke.

"Don't even think about pulling a gun on me," he said. "I'm not in on anything with my dad."

Daniel's hand stopped. A dark smile spread over his handsome face. "I don't believe you."

Jakob let out a harsh breath. "I don't want to lead the club. I'm happy right where I am. I'm not going to tell you that again."

Daniel leaned forward in his seat so fast that whiskey sloshed over the side of his glass. "So why are you staying with Liam?" he demanded. "Introducing him to your fake girlfriend?"

I leaned back in my chair, surprised. Damn, he was good. He'd only pretended to fall for our ruse, had gone right along with it, had done everything in his power to splash it around town, and all along, he knew we were lying. Jakob had tried to play him, and he'd played us right back. I wouldn't underestimate him again.

"I'm staying with him because he forced my hand," Jakob said. "And there's nothing fake about Krista and me."

I nearly choked.

Daniel's gaze swiveled to me, eyes wild, the injured animal Jakob had warned me about a heartbeat away from snapping. "Are you in on it too?"

The door behind us opened with a click. "Enough," a soft, feminine voice said.

I turned to see Eva King stroll into the room. She had her dark hair twisted up into a top knot, leaving her striking features on full display. Instead of the business attire I was used to seeing her in, she wore a pair of slouchy sweats and a form-hugging T-shirt. Her cat eyes, a little less bloodshot than her husband's, took in the three of us at a glance.

She shut the door behind her and came over to stand next to Daniel. "Stop being a paranoid bastard. If Jakob were in on it, he wouldn't be here asking questions. Tell them."

Daniel stared up at her, a mulish expression on his face.

Eva narrowed her eyes and poked him in the shoulder. "Tell them, or I will."

Daniel heaved a sigh and leaned back in his chair. "Redding's a sociopathic little shit who was in my unit about a decade ago. He assaulted a local Afghani girl during a deployment, and I tried to get him court-martialed. His uncle was a senator or a state rep or some shit, and he pulled some strings and got him off on an honorable discharge. I haven't seen him since, but he made a parting comment all those years ago promising to get back at me, and here we are."

"What's he doing at Magnolia?" Jakob asked.

"What do you think?" Daniel said, looking at Jakob like he was an idiot. "Your dad found him and brought him in to fuck me over."

At that, Eva sank onto the arm of Daniel's chair and started rubbing his back. "Liam needs to stop doing this," she said to Jakob.

Jakob looked between her and Daniel. "You're sure my father is behind it?"

Daniel nodded. "Mike."

Jakob pulled his cell phone from his pocket and handed it over to Daniel. I caught a glimpse of the screen. Plastered across it was the picture of Redding and Mike.

Daniel just snorted, pulled out his own phone, and handed it to Jakob. I leaned over and watched Jakob thumb through a handful of photos of Redding and Mike that looked like they were taken over



the course of several weeks. Jakob was right; Daniel knew about this longer than he did.

“I still think this is too messy for Dad,” Jakob said, handing it back.

“The doctor tip you off?” Eva asked.

I frowned. “You mean Dr. Perez?”

She nodded. “Ordering a hit on an innocent woman isn’t Liam’s style.”

“I think Redding got away from him,” Daniel said. “He’s an entitled little prick with a vendetta against me, and he has no discipline. There’s no way your father could keep him in line for long.”

I closed my eyes for a second and took a deep breath. What a fucking mess.

“I need to go talk to Dad,” Jakob said.

Eva crossed her arms. “You need to tell him to stop meddling. This isn’t good for the club, this isn’t good for Kearny, and it really isn’t good for my family.”

Jakob shook his head. “He’ll never stop meddling. It’s what Dad does. He has it in his head that I need to lead a club, and he’s going to keep trying to make it happen.” He looked at Daniel. “It helps that you’re an asshole and he doesn’t like you.”

Subtlety, thy name is Jakob.

I tensed against Daniel’s reaction, but he just grinned. It wasn’t a nice look.

“Convince him to lay off,” Eva said.

“No one can convince that man to do anything he doesn’t want to,” Jakob told her.

I leaned forward. “Not even after this? After shit went sideways on him, and he jeopardized the very person he was trying to help?”

Daniel let out a low laugh. “Not even then.”

Eva looked down at him. “What if Jakob leaves town? Heads up to Hill Country and transitions over to the Specters?”

Daniel shook his head. “Liam might try to oust me out of spite.”

Wow, Liam *really* didn’t like Daniel. It made me wonder how far back the grudge between them went and how much shit he had put Jakob through to make Liam hate him this much.

Eva stood. “Then I’m done.”

Daniel stared up at her. “What?”

“I’m done,” she said. “In case you forgot, we have three daughters. I’m tired of sending them away every time you want to trash our house. I’m tired of worrying about when they’ll get caught in Liam’s cross fire.” She turned and headed for the door. “I’ll be at my parents with them if you need me.”

“For how long?” he asked.

She whipped around, hand on the door handle, fire in her eyes. “For as long as it takes you to fix this shit.” And with that, she was gone.

Daniel turned back to us, looking murderous. He sat forward in his seat and stabbed the air between him and Jakob with an index finger. “*You* need to fix this,” he said. “It’s your father destabilizing this town and bringing drugs into Kearny. All because of his spoiled prick of a son.”

“I’ll fix it,” Jakob said.

“How?” Daniel demanded.

Jakob eyed him. “You’re not going to like it.”

“I don’t like anything involving you lately, so just spit it out.”

“The Specters have been eyeing a club in Georgia that they want to patch in,” Jakob said. “If I talk to my dad, I might be able to convince him to let you patch them in as a subchapter of the Kings instead.”

Daniel frowned, a speculative look in his dark eyes. "My first subchapter?"

"Yes," Jakob said.

I glanced over at him, appreciating his mind for the second time in less than an hour. This was a good play. Daniel was greedy and power-hungry, and only a move like this might tempt him.

"So, I'd go to Georgia for a while," Daniel said.

Jakob nodded. "You could take Eva and the girls, get out of town, away from Dad's influence while I find some way to get him to back off permanently."

Daniel's gaze sharpened. "I want a truce between Liam and me in writing, with his signature and witnesses so he can't turn around and stab me in the back as soon as I leave Kearny."

"I'll get it done," Jakob said.

"That still leaves Redding."

"Leave Redding to me," Jakob said. "It's my dad's fuckup. He and I will find some way to fix it."

Daniel just stared at him. "You get one shot at this. If you can't get it done, you're out." He leaned back in his seat, dark eyes blazing. "I don't give a fuck who you are. Your membership is becoming a problem. I built this club from the ground up. These people are more loyal to me than your father. I'm not letting it go without a fight. If Liam doesn't back the fuck off, he's going to have a full-blown mutiny on his hands, and I know we're not the only club that's had it with his micromanaging and power plays."



"I NEED YOU TO EXPLAIN to me, in detail, why you put up with that asshole," I said when we were back in the car.

No response.

I finished buckling myself in and turned toward Jakob. His hands were on the steering wheel, knuckles white, leather creaking beneath his grip. The muscles of his arms popped. His eyes were shut, jaw clenched as he breathed through his nose. He looked like a man on the brink of committing murder, and the only thing keeping him in the car with me was his death grip on the wheel.

*Uh-oh.*

I reached out and grabbed his shoulder. It felt like iron beneath my palm. "You're okay," I said, trying to think of some way to talk him back from the edge. "You did so well in there. Stayed calm and rational even when he was a dick. That was good thinking with the subchapter in Georgia. I think Eva will like it too, and she'll help convince Daniel that it's a good move, especially considering their daughters will be safer there until things blow over with your dad."

He turned his head just enough to glance at me, and I went still in my seat. Somehow in the past few days, I'd forgotten how dangerous this man was. It was hard to focus on his ugly reputation for violence when he kept kissing me breathless. The look in his eyes made me want to sink down and try to make myself into as small a target as possible, and I wasn't even the focus of his rage. God help Daniel if he ever pushed Jakob too far.

Instead of shrinking away, I leaned forward and pressed my forehead to his. "Hey," I said. "You did it. You found out who Redding is and thought up a way to keep Daniel and your dad from going to war with each other. I'm really proud of you."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and some of the tension beneath my palm began to ease away.

"Seriously, Jakob," I went on. "I don't know how you did it. I would have gone off on Daniel within the first minute we were there. You have every right to be pissed. I hate the way he speaks to

you.”

Jakob cracked his eyes open again. The ice in them had melted enough that I didn't feel like he was about to freeze me in my seat.

“Wanna go back in there and defend my honor?” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “Har har.”

His lips twitched. “Maybe read him the riot act over his mistreatment of me?”

“Stop,” I said, but I was relieved that he was cracking jokes.

His eyes creased at the corners. “You sure you don't want to go beat him up? He's pretty hungover. You might only have to yell hello at him again before he caves.”

I grinned. “You caught that pettiness, huh?”

He nodded. “I've never seen you so perky before.” He let go of the steering wheel with one hand, leaving a perfectly preserved set of indents on it.

Yikes.

Those deadly fingers slid into my hair, surprisingly gentle as they curled around the back of my neck. His gaze dropped to my mouth. “You got a sadistic side I don't know about?”

I leaned into his touch, wanting to keep him distracted, happy that lust was an easy way to change his mood. “I must because I keep having this fantasy about tying you up.”

His eyes warmed as they met mine. “Come away with me after we fix this, and I'll let you tie me to anything you want.”

Just like that, my apprehension disappeared. Desire coursed through my body. My God, the *options*. A chair. The bed. Hell, maybe we could rent an older place, and there'd be exposed beams that I could string him to, arms strained overhead, unable to do anything but thrust as I dropped to my knees in front of him and—

“You got that look in your eye that makes me want to fuck you in public,” Jakob said.

“I'm imagining all the things I could tie you to,” I told him.

The wicked grin that spread over his face in response *did things* to me. “So you'll come away with me?”

I nodded. After all this stress, we both needed a break, and God help me, I wanted to escape for more than a weekend of wild sex. I wanted to spend time with this man, get to know him away from the club, find out who Jakob *really* was.

He leaned forward and pressed his mouth to mine in a toe-curling kiss. “Then let's get this shit over with so we can get out of here,” he said when he pulled away.

The engine turned over with a throaty growl, and Jakob stepped on the gas, tearing out of the Kings' driveway. I breathed a sigh of relief as we turned onto the main road, feeling like we'd all just dodged a bullet. Maybe literally.

“He's not wrong,” Jakob said.

“Who, Daniel?” I asked.

He nodded, shifting through gears as we picked up speed. “My father is overreaching. Working through Redding *did* destabilize Kearny. Our hard rule is no drugs, and he broke that rule just to make Daniel look weak. I'd be fucking pissed too if I were him.”

“Yeah, but does Daniel have to be such a monumental dick about it?” I asked, throwing my handbag into the back seat with a little more force than necessary.

Jakob chuckled and shot me a look. “You sure you don't want me to turn this car around?”

“No,” I said, an image of Jakob pummeling Daniel with his fists flashing in front of my eyes. “Too many witnesses.”

“Good point.”

“How much worse is the conversation with your dad going to be?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “Depends on what your definition of worse is.”

“Should I be worried?”

He nodded. “With my dad, you should always be worried.”

*Great.*

I settled back into my seat, drumming my fingers over my thigh. Anxiety crept into my mind, mixed with a healthy dose of fear. Even if the conversation with Liam went better than the one we just had with Daniel, and even if he agreed with Jakob’s terms of cease-fire between him and Daniel, there was still Redding and the Jokers to contend with. I’d been in Kearny long enough to witness how the Kings doled out retribution. Weakness was anathema to motorcycle clubs. The Jokers had made their hold on Kearny look weak. There’d be hell to pay for that. And with the Jokers’ presence at Magnolia Hills, so close to Kearny, I worried the violence would spill over into our town.

The men would want to make a show of power. They’d want to declare their dominance. Maybe beat on their chests and roar over the corpses of their enemies for good measure. But what if there was another way? One that didn’t involve violence. One where no one but Redding got hurt.

A plan was forming in the back of my mind, but if I went through with it, I might lose Jakob before I ever really had him.



## Chapter Twenty

I had plenty of time to stew over my plan after returning to the Larsons' house. Jakob wanted to speak to his parents together, let his mom know what his dad had been up to because he thought she could help talk some sense into Liam. It seemed like a discussion that should be reserved for family. They didn't need me acting as an unwilling voyeur to their drama, and between everything I'd learned this morning and the showdown with Daniel, my nerves were shot to hell. I needed a break.

Gran and I sat in the living room together, watching one of her favorite movies, *Steel Magnolias*. Molly was sprawled out on the floor in front of us, half on top of Gran's feet. Jakob, Liam, and Jennifer were holed up together in Liam's office, far across the house.

I knew things were bad when I heard Jennifer yell, "You did *what*?"

I snagged the remote from Gran and turned the volume up a couple of clicks.

Guess Jennifer hadn't been in on Liam's plans after all. I'd wondered on the drive back if she'd known what he was up to but kept my thoughts to myself. Jakob had plenty of shit to deal with without questioning his mom too, and I didn't know Jennifer well enough to voice that assumption. The only reason I'd gone there was that after this morning, I questioned everyone around me but Gran.

Who was telling the truth? Who was lying? Who was still trying to play us?

I even questioned what happened at Daniel's house. Had he been serious about Redding holding a vendetta against him? Or had it just been more lies, meant to distract Jakob away from him and instead place the blame for everything on Liam?

Those questions unraveled when we walked in the door, and Jakob said to his father, "We need to talk about why Redding is really here."

Liam's shoulders had stiffened, regret and steely resolve apparent in his expression. If that wasn't a look of guilt, I'd eat my shoe.

"Krista," Gran said.

I turned to her. "Hmm?"

"That was your favorite line, and you didn't even laugh. What's going on?" she asked.

I sighed. "Just tired. It's been a long day."

She cocked a brow at me. "Honey, it ain't even suppertime yet."

"I know, but it's still been a long day."

"You want to talk about it?"

Raised voices sounded from down the hall, and I shook my head. If we paused the movie, she might hear everything the Larsons said, and she didn't need to be dragged back into this shit show.

"You sure?" she asked. "You look like a woman who needs to get something off her chest."

"I'm sure. Just tired. I promise." The lie rankled, and something in my face must have betrayed my true feelings because worry creased Gran's brow.

She patted the couch cushion beside her. "Why don't you lie down next to me, like you used to," she said, "and I'll pet your hair."

I must have looked as bad as I felt. When I was little, Gran used to read to me every night before bed, running her fingers through my hair or lightly scratching my back until I fell asleep. It was a nighttime ritual that always made me feel safe and loved at a time when there was so much instability in my life. She'd stopped when I got to middle school and proclaimed I was too grown-up to be read to like a baby. Only in times of extreme hardship did she offer to pet my hair now, her way of comforting me when there wasn't much else she could do to help me out of whatever trouble I got

myself into. The last time she offered, I'd been waking up from surgery. If I accepted her now, she'd know things were really bad, but after the past few days, I desperately needed something familiar, needed to feel safe and loved, if only for a few stolen moments.

I nodded and lay down, resting my head on a throw pillow next to her thigh. Her fingers slipped into my hair, combing through the long strands, and I closed my eyes and let my mind drift back to simpler times when the only things I got worked up about were when she made me go to bed on time or limited my TV intake. She had a great one-liner about cartoons and brain rot that I used to roll my eyes at, but I was totally stealing it if I ever got around to having kids of my own.

I must have drifted off, the sleep deprivation of the past couple of nights finally catching up with me, because the next time I opened my eyes, darkness had fallen. Gran was gone. The sound of plates clinking over marble and the smell of sizzling meat drifted from the kitchen. Somewhere close, Molly let out a low *woof*.

Jakob strode into view and crouched down in front of me. The lights were still off in the living room, no doubt because Gran wanted to let me sleep, and what little illumination graced Jakob's body shone from the kitchen, bathing him half in light, half in darkness. Fitting.

His eyes gleamed like quicksilver when they met mine, and he lifted a hand and pushed the hair back from my face, his fingers lingering, tracing the back of my ear, before falling away.

"How'd it go?" I whispered.

In answer, he frowned and shook his head. I knew from the yelling that it hadn't started great, but I'd hoped things improved while I napped. Guess not.

"I'm sorry," I told him.

"Me too," he said.

Both of our words were heavy with meaning. I didn't know what weighted Jakob's, but mine were dragged down by what was coming. By what I felt I had to do even if it meant he'd never speak to me again.

After dinner, Liam and Jakob disappeared into Liam's office, Jennifer watching them go with wary eyes. Gran had already gone to bed, and it was just the two of us in the kitchen now.

"Where are they off to?" I asked.

"Off to plan how best to get themselves killed, no doubt," Jennifer answered, her tone bitter.

I glanced down the hall and then out into the darkness beyond the windows. "Can I talk to you for a minute, outside?" I asked. I didn't know how paranoid Liam was, if he bugged his own house, and I needed to say a few things to Jennifer without him overhearing.

She watched me for a moment before answering, her eyes roving over my face as if searching for something. When you looked at Liam, you knew right away that Jakob was his son. It was there for all to see in the color of their eyes, their tall statures, their full mouths. With Jennifer, the resemblance was more subtle. It was how she took in an entire room at a glance, the quiet way she observed those around her, and the scarcity with which she spoke, choosing to say something only when there was something that really needed to be said.

After a small eternity, she nodded.

I exhaled, feeling like I'd just passed some kind of test, and then went to snag us a couple of beers from the fridge. I had a feeling the conversation to come would call for a drink.

I stepped through the sliding wall, carrying them, and out into the night air. It was nine o'clock, but it had to be at least eighty degrees still, and I was thankful that I'd changed into a pair of shorts and a loose-fitting tank top before dinner.

"Here," I said, handing Jennifer her beer.

She clinked her bottle against mine. “Thanks. Cheers.”

I said cheers back and took a sip of my drink, wondering how to broach this conversation. “Jakob said it didn’t go well?” I hedged.

She shot a glance through the slider and then grabbed my elbow. “Not here,” she said, hauling me across the patio toward a screened-in summerhouse that sat right on the edge of the drop-off.

Holy shit, was their place actually bugged?

We stepped from the slate pavers onto a brick-lined path, and as the lights of the house fell away behind us, the night sky opened up overhead. The land was so flat here that it felt like the stars danced just out of reach, almost close enough to touch, so bright they shone like diamonds on a bed of black velvet. Crickets called out from the grass. Fireflies danced over the lawn like a living carpet of fairy lights. A cow lowed in the nearby field. It was peaceful, bucolic, completely at odds with the stress and worry that raged through me.

I kept my mouth shut until we were safely ensconced in the summerhouse. I could barely see Jennifer in the darkness, but at least the mosquitoes couldn’t get to us.

“One second,” she said, fumbling around near one of the wooden beams. A second later, a string of lights flicked on overhead, the antique-style bulbs bathing us in amber.

Jennifer let out a heavy breath and sank into one of the deck chairs.

I sat across from her and took another sip of my beer, waiting for her to speak.

“It didn’t go well,” she said. Her eyes were pinched, lips set in a hard line. “My husband, God bless him, thinks he’s smarter than everyone around him and can’t admit when he’s screwed up.”

I let out a shaky breath. So it was definitely Liam. But how much of it was him?

“He had my apartment trashed,” I said.

She grimaced. “Aye. I’m sorry for that. We’ll pay to replace everything.”

“It’s not about my stuff,” I said, my tone harder than I intended.

She sent me a sharp look. “I know. Maybe better than you might think. But it’s not me you should be angry at.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, rubbing a hand over my face. “I didn’t mean to sound like I was. I’m just angry, in general, at this whole situation.”

She let out a humorless laugh. “We’re fine company then.”

“What about that guy in the elevator?” I asked.

“Not Liam,” she said. “That little prick he brought in.”

“And Dr. Perez?”

“That was Redding too.”

Relief washed through me. Was I pissed at Liam? Yes, but it was the kind of angry I might be able to work through if given a heartfelt apology and time to forgive him—like maybe a few years. Being attacked or putting an innocent woman in the hospital were two offenses that I would never forgive.

“Where did he even find Redding?” I asked.

“Through a friend of a friend,” she said.

“And let me guess, he hasn’t interacted with him much personally?”

She shook her head. “Not at all, from what he claimed.”

“Seems like an oversight,” I said. “No way to accurately gauge someone if you don’t meet them.”

Her green eyes gleamed in the soft light. “Right you are. No way to tell, say, if someone is a dangerous sociopath, one turn away from derailing the entire goddamn train.”

“So Redding went rogue, and Liam’s been trying to reel him in ever since?”



She pointed her beer at me. “Bingo.” She took a sip of her drink and then shook her head, her bright red curls brushing her shoulders. “The problem with power is that you become used to it, used to the way that people respond to you. In the MC world, Liam is a known commodity. The men and women he interacts with on a daily basis know him, know his reputation, respect his authority, and for the most part, they do what he says. He’s accustomed to that, so when he deals with people outside our world, he’s a bit... *arrogant* isn’t the right word.”

I nearly snorted. It sounded like a good enough word to me.

“Blind is more like it,” she amended. “His expectations are skewed by his experience. He expects them to follow orders, do what he wants. He’s becoming ill-equipped to deal with the unexpected. He didn’t foresee Redding acting out or breaking rank, and even now, he’s treating him like he would a wayward biker, sending in Mike to straighten it out instead of cutting ties or fixing the fucking mess he’s dragged us into.” Her accent grew thicker as she talked, anger seeping into her words, and *fucking* came out sounding more like *fecking*.

Liam owed a lot of apologies to a lot of people over this. Hopefully, they came as easily to him as they did to his son.

I looked away from Jennifer, out into the night beyond, the wheels in my mind spinning. “And now that we all know about Redding, time has run out for Liam to take care of this quietly.”

“Aye,” Jennifer answered. “At least Daniel had the good sense to keep this shit to himself. His silence is the only thing giving me hope that this situation is fixable.”

I turned to her, frowning. “How so?”

“If he’d told the club what Liam did, they would have turned on my husband. Daniel knows how ugly that would get, so he’s giving Liam one last chance to make it right before he mounts a full-scale insurrection.”

“He made a comment about the club being more loyal to him than Liam,” I said.

She nodded. “That’s what happens when you start your own club. Liam’s made a cock-up of the whole situation. King members aren’t stupid. They see his microaggressions against their leader, and they don’t like it. If Daniel gives them marching orders, they’ll go to battle for him.”

“Did Liam agree to back off? Let Daniel patch in that club in Georgia?”

“Yes,” she said. “But only because I threatened to divorce him if he didn’t.”

“What about the cease-fire between him and Daniel?”

Her expression flattened. “He’ll sign it if he wants to stay married.”

I raked a hand through my hair, nails digging in, anger getting the better of me. “What a goddamn mess.”

“What a goddamn mess indeed. I could have married a nice Irish boy,” she mused, “like me mam wanted. But no, I just *haaad* to have the tall, handsome American.”

That got a laugh out of me.

Her eyes crinkled at the corners, belying her amusement. “Not too late for you, you know.”

I grinned. “I know that.”

“And yet you want to stick around?”

My smile fell, and I nodded.

“Then welcome to our world,” she said. “You sure you can handle it?”

“I can handle it,” I said. But would Jakob still want me in it after what I was about to do? I glanced toward the house, motioning toward it with my beer. “What do you think those two are planning?”

She followed the gesture, staring back toward their home, worry creasing her face. “Something violent. Something meant to send a message. Redding breaking rank makes Liam look weak, and he’ll want to make an example out of him.”

“To who?” I asked. “The only people who know about this are us, Mike, Daniel, and whoever Daniel told.”

Her answering smile was rueful. “That’s more than enough people.”

I shook my head. “What if there was another way to fix things?”

Her eyes sharpened. “What do you mean?”

“What if there was a way to fuck over Redding and the Jokers without dragging the rest of us into it?”

“How?” she asked.

“I can’t tell you. You need plausible deniability in this. All of you do.”

Her frown deepened. “Liam wouldn’t get his chance for retaliation?”

I shook my head. “No one could ever think he was part of it. Or Jakob. Or anyone in either club.”

“He won’t thank you for stealing his revenge away from him,” she said.

“At least he’ll be alive to be pissed at me.”

She studied me for a moment, reading me like she had earlier. Finally she nodded. “What do you need from me?”

“I need you to stall their planning for as long as you can and help me get out of here when the time comes,” I told her.

She nodded. “I can do that. What else?”

“Will anyone overhear me if I make a phone call out here?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“Then can you go back inside and give me a few minutes alone?”

In answer, she rose from her seat to leave. She paused when she reached me, placing a hand on my shoulder. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I do, but you should know, Jakob won’t want anything to do with me afterward.”

She surprised me by grinning.

I frowned up at her.

“You must really like him to go this far.” She squeezed my shoulder and left.

I waited until she disappeared inside before picking up my phone and scrolling through my contact list until I landed on the name Nicholas Nguyen-Forrester, a Vietnamese American Air Force intelligence troop I’d flown with in Syria. With resources in short demand, our role could change from attack plane to reconnaissance in a heartbeat, and he and a few other intel spooks had hopped a couple of flights with us, strapping an antenna array to our rig so they could collect comms data from Russian ground vehicles in the area.

He was a six-foot-tall dreamboat with wide shoulders, an incredible smile, and a body that just wouldn’t quit. Our flirtation had started the second we caught sight of each other, chemistry sparking between us in a way that couldn’t be ignored. We spent a couple of sleepless nights together back on the ground, and the sex was just as good as I hoped it would be. That was all it was though, and we’d lost contact after he and his crew switched to another plane.

We’d become Facebook friends a few years back, and now he was married with a daughter still in diapers and another baby on the way. We kept up with each other in the way that casual acquaintances typically did, liking each other’s posts only once in a blue moon or typing out LOL if one of us posted an exceptionally funny meme. He’d liked my status when I moved to Kearny and

surprised me by reaching out via Messenger. The fact that Jakob didn't know about him meant that he hadn't actually stalked me after all. Because if he'd known about Nick, I never would have been allowed into Charley's.

Nick answered on the second ring, his voice sleep muddled. "Krista?" he said. "Everything okay?"

I pulled the phone from my ear and looked at the time. It was almost ten. "Sorry for the late call," I said. "But what if I told you I had a way for you to screw over a motorcycle club, and all you'd have to do is go to coffee with me?"

"Give me the time and the place, and I'll be there," he said.



# Chapter Twenty-One

I woke before Jakob the next morning. Soft, golden light filtered in through the curtains, and I knew it must be early. The air conditioner whirred gently overhead, stirring the air in the room. Its chill didn't reach me. I was warm all over because Jakob, in his sleep, had edged over to my side of the bed again, his head on my pillow, one heavy arm banded around my waist. His soft exhalations heated the side of my neck.

He slipped into the room late last night, well past midnight, having stayed up with his father plotting world domination. His movements were careful, furtive, as if he didn't want to rouse me, but I had trouble sleeping and was already awake. I'd turned toward him when he slid beneath the covers, my hands roaming up his arms and then over his broad chest. I'd wanted to touch as much of him as I could while I could. He'd rolled toward me and started touching me back. Our hands fell, and we teased, kneaded, and stroked each other to completion.

We'd fallen asleep naked with only our arms pressed together beneath the sheets. It was kind of endearing that he kept snuggling up to me like this, as if his unconscious mind wanted to close the distance between us.

I sighed. If everything went to plan today, his conscious mind would want to put as much space between us as possible.

Sounds of life came from farther inside the house. Liam and Jennifer were early risers, which was good because so was Gran. I gave up on getting any more shut-eye and carefully untangled myself from Jakob. He rolled onto his back but didn't wake. I stood next to the bed for a moment, watching him, feeling conflicted. Sure, this was kind of creepy, but it might be my last chance to see him completely at ease, hair tussled, features softened by sleep. I drank in the beauty of his tattoos, the intricacy of their overlocking patterns, my gaze moving to the heavy muscles of his chest before dipping lower. The sheets had fallen to his hips, revealing the full expanse of his chiseled stomach. I lifted my gaze back to his face and studied his features, memorizing the sight of his lips, that slightly crooked nose, the hard line of his jaw, and those sharp cheekbones.

*Please forgive me for what I'm about to do*, I prayed. Because I didn't want this to be the last time. Jennifer was right; I went this far because I did care about him. I didn't want him hurt. I didn't want him to risk his life just to assuage his father's stupid ego or help him clean up a mess that shouldn't have been made in the first place.

It had only been a few days, but a few days was enough to make it clear that I wanted a few more days, a few more weeks, hell, a few more months with this man. He was mercurial, guarded, and yes, even a bit moody. His temper sometimes got the better of him. When he thought he knew best, he could be a pushy bastard. But he also knew how to apologize. He trusted me to take the lead even in dangerous situations. And he was funny, when he let himself be, that dry, slightly macabre, sometimes even goofy sense of humor peeking through when it was just the two of us. I wanted time to coax that side of him out. I wanted more mornings like this one, endless nights of exploration and pleasure.

He shifted in his sleep again, head turning toward me, and I moved away before he cracked his eyes open and saw me looming over him in the darkness like someone wondering what his bone marrow tasted like.

I got dressed quickly and slipped out the door. Gran, Jennifer, and Liam were in the kitchen, standing around the island, drinking coffee. My gaze went to my grandmother, and I studied her features, trying to read her like Jennifer read me last night. Was today a good day? Had she woken up

confused and alone and scared? Jennifer had the good sense to put her in a room right next to theirs. She said she was a light sleeper, and if Gran woke up and called out, she would hear her and be close by to help.

Gran's posture was relaxed. She smiled good-naturedly at something Liam said and then turned to Jennifer, catching sight of me standing at the mouth of the hallway. "You're up early," she said. "There's coffee."

The tension eased from my shoulders. She seemed okay. Lucid. Like she remembered who these people were and maybe even why we were here. Thank God. Her confusion had cut like a knife yesterday, and even though I knew I had done the right thing bringing her here, guilt still gnawed at me.

I plastered a smile on my face and strode forward, telling myself that yes, I might lose Jakob over this, but my actions could also ensure Gran's safety and allow her to return to the nursing home sooner rather than later.

"Morning," I said, pausing to give her a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Liam moved to the fridge. "How do you take it?" he asked.

I nearly cracked up laughing, remembering his son asking me that same question and the completely inappropriate comment I'd almost blurted. "Just cream," I managed. "Thanks."

"You're in a good mood," Gran said, picking up on my momentary burst of humor.

"It's a beautiful day," I told her.

She shot me a sly grin. "Yes, I'm sure it's that. I'm sure it has nothing to do with the tall drink of water you— *Oof!*"

I'd elbowed her.

Liam chuckled as he poured my coffee. Jennifer did a better job, turning away before Gran could see her grin.

"You two are only encouraging her," I said.

"Harassing children is half the fun of being a parental figure," Liam said, handing me my coffee.

The comment made me want to punch him. His tone was offhand, casual, his face just as relaxed, as if he hadn't completely fucked up the lives of everyone caught up in his scheming, including mine.

I nodded, my grin turning forced, and took my coffee before my mouth got the better of me. If not for Gran's presence, this would have been a completely different discussion, and when I caught sight of Liam's eyes before turning away, I thought he knew it.

"Come sit with me outside," Gran said, slipping her arm through mine. "You have to watch the sunrise over the mesa. It's so beautiful."

I let her lead me out the slider.

"Mind if I join you?" Jennifer asked.

"The more, the merrier," Gran said.

I saw Liam step forward out of the corner of my eye like he wanted to come too, but Jennifer turned toward him with a look of warning, her expression openly hostile, and he thought better about it. Clearly she wasn't ready to forgive him yet either.

*You reap what you sow, asshole.*

If, by some miracle, Jakob did manage to forgive me, there would still be the issue of his father. My parents taught me some hard lessons early on, and I thought the phrase "Blood is thicker than water" was complete bullshit. Every time I heard someone say it, I wanted to set something on fire. It kept people tied to toxic family members that they were much better off without. Liam's actions might

be rooted in his love for his son, but they were so twisted that I knew I would never trust him again, even if I eventually found a way to forgive him.

I didn't want to be around him, put myself in his path, but he was Jakob's father, a big part of his life, which meant I'd probably have to find some way to deal with him. It would be a struggle. I had no problem cutting ties with family, knowing I was better off without them, and it was hard for me to wrap my mind around a man as strong-willed as Jakob exposing himself to Liam's manipulations. But that wasn't his fault. It wasn't his baggage; it was mine. I needed to be more empathetic, more understanding. The problem was, I had an overprotective streak a mile wide. Say whatever you want to me, but hurt someone I care about, and I will nuke you from the orbit.

After what Liam already put Gran and Jakob through, I needed a hell of a lot of plutonium for the bomb he deserved.

"So much for your good mood," Gran said as she sat.

I blinked, coming back to myself. My face must have given away my homicidal thoughts. I plastered a grin on it and took the chair beside her. "Sun was in my eyes."

She harrumphed. "Sure it was."

I shoved my dark thoughts to the recesses of my mind and turned my attention to the view. It was early enough that the sun had barely cleared the horizon. A storm passed through late last night, and the lingering clouds were set on fire by its rays, bathed in vibrant pinks, oranges, and purples. Beneath our feet, the slate pavers were still wet, water droplets glistening in the golden light like a thousand glass beads had been spilled across them.

It really was beautiful here.

A gentle *whoosh* sounded behind us: the slider opening. Jennifer turned in her seat with a hard look on her face, but it softened immediately. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Jakob ambling toward us. He wore a pair of sweats and a loose T-shirt. His hair was still mussed, and his long fingers wrapped around a mug. Steam rose from it. He slowed his steps and lifted it to his lips, blowing on it before taking a careful sip. Something about the simple domesticity of the sight made my stomach flutter.

His eyes met mine over the rim of the mug and darkened, and my mind went right back to last night, his fingers spearing into me, my hand pumping his thick cock, both of us panting with need. He must have seen the thoughts flitting over my features because he pulled the mug away from his mouth, and, my God, the grin that curled his lips was *not* fit for public consumption. Anyone looking at him would see the sex in his smile.

I glanced toward Gran and Jennifer, but they'd already turned back around in their seats. Jakob was chuckling when I returned my gaze to him.

He leaned down when he reached me, whispering, "Your face always gives you away." From his tone, he liked that it did.

My stomach fell, and I steeled my expression against letting my feelings show now. This was what I risked. The way he sent my pulse pounding with a look. The way he riled me up because he liked how I reacted. The way he somehow made me want him and want to throttle him at the same time.

"Good morning," Jennifer said.

"Morning," Jakob responded, dropping into the seat beside me. He took another careful sip of coffee.

"I'm surprised you're up so early," Jennifer said. "You and your dad had a late night."

Jakob shrugged. "I woke up, and Krista was gone."

I shot him a look through my lashes, curious. I was gone, and he'd gotten up to what? Make sure I was okay? Check that I was still here? Or just because he wanted to see me?

Jennifer smiled, looking between me and her son, her expression a dead ringer to the approval that lit her face last night when she said I must really care about Jakob. Apparently she thought he really cared about me too.

I looked away from her, my heart falling. I'd warned her that Jakob might not want anything to do with me after I made my move, but the truth was, neither would she. That thought hurt because I liked Jennifer. Maybe that was because she reminded me of her son. Maybe it was because of how well she'd taken care of Gran. And yeah, maybe even a little bit because of how angry she was with Liam over what he'd done.

My phone buzzed in my hand, and I looked down to see a text from Nick.

*Boarding a plane now. We'll be ready by noon.*

*Roger that,* I texted back, falling into military speak before I could catch myself.

*Roger, Roger,* Nick responded.

Smartass.

I checked the time before locking my screen. It was seven a.m. That meant I only had a few hours to get out of here without Jakob in tow. Nick and crew might not be ready to meet until noon, but there was work to do on my end before their plane touched down. I needed to call Magnolia Hills. I needed to find a coffee shop in Hermannsburg, the town in between Joker and King territory, and then I'd have to drive at least an hour to get there.

Nick and I talked for a long time last night, going over everything. The plan was simple enough, but we'd made several contingency plans for when shit went sideways. If the military had taught us anything, it was that shit always went sideways.

"What's the nearest town?" I asked.

"Peterborough," Jennifer answered.

"They have a drugstore there?"

"They do," she said.

"I'll need to head over sometime this morning."

"I'll drive," Jakob said.

*Damn it.*

I cocked a brow at him. "You don't think I can get to the store and back safely?"

He met my gaze head-on. "Not with your track record."

"I've been doing just fine on my own these past twenty-six years," I said.

Gran snorted. "Keep telling yourself that, kiddo."

I leaned forward to look at her. "Don't you start in too."

Gran grinned, unrepentant.

"Let the woman go on her own," Jennifer said, coming to my rescue. "She hasn't had a minute to herself in days. She probably needs a break."

Jakob looked at me in question.

"Some alone time would be nice," I said. "It would give me a chance to clear my head a little."

He eyed me. "You'll call if anything happens?"

I feigned annoyance. "What could happen? I doubt the Jokers are posted up waiting for me."

"You never know," he said, his expression turning stubborn.

"Fine. I'll call if anything happens," I relented.





FIVE HOURS LATER, I sat in a tiny coffee shop in Hermannsburg. It was a hole-in-the-wall kind of place, geared more toward takeout than sitting in. I'd snagged the table closest to the window, paying a trio of high school girls to get up from it and move to one in the back. They sat there now, whispering together, throwing confused glances my way.

I did my best to ignore them, eyes trained on the street outside. Hermannsburg was a quaint little town. The original settlers were German, and like some of the bigger Germanic-founded Texas towns, the architecture looked more old-world European than modern-day American. Elaborate signs hung outside the stores, adding to the atmosphere. I sat in Hans 'Kaffee. Across the way was a bar called Der Platz. Google told me that translated to The Place.

It was a cool, eclectic little town, one that I wanted to come back and visit once my life returned to normal.

*If my life ever returns to normal*, I thought. There was a good chance that our little plan might blow up in our faces. Daniel King said that Redding was a loose cannon. He'd gone so far as to call him a sociopath. I thought about the look Redding gave me in the police station—that cold expression, those flat eyes, dead of emotion. He'd assaulted a girl in Afghanistan and ordered a hit on an innocent woman here. I didn't think Daniel was wrong to call him a sociopath.

I relayed all that to Nick last night, and most of our contingency plans revolved around how to react if Redding went off the rails. It was damn near impossible to predict the behavior of someone like him, and that worried me, especially because in less than half an hour, he would walk through the door of this coffee shop.

Another man entered it now. He wore a deep blue suit in a modern cut that was tailored to perfection. His black hair was artfully quaffed. Aviators hid his dark eyes. His head swiveled toward me, and he smiled, his teeth blindingly white against his tan skin. A chorus of sighs echoed from the table in the back. The high school girls must have caught sight of him.

I nearly turned to them and said, "All that and a brain." Nick was one of the smartest people I'd ever met. He'd gotten out of the military a few years before me and had his pick of job offers. CIA, NSA, a nice cushy desk job in DC—he could have done anything he wanted. In the end, he'd joined the FBI.

Nick had movie-star good looks and could charm the pants off anyone if given enough time, which was why, after just a few years at the Bureau, his department head had started pushing him out in front of cameras. He wasn't famous by any means. Not yet. He'd only made a few appearances on TV so far, for cases with low visibility at local levels. His boss wanted him to get his legs beneath him, get comfortable addressing reporters and speaking into a camera before he shoved him onto the national stage. Liam probably didn't even know who he was, and we were betting that Redding wouldn't recognize him either.

Nick worked in Organized Crime, a section of the Criminal Investigative Division that handled violent groups like the mafia and outlaw motorcycle clubs. It was why he contacted me when I moved to Kearny. The FBI had been trying to slip someone into the area for years, with limited success. The deal he offered me was pretty sweet: work somewhere local, like Charley's, and keep an eye on things. Every week I'd report to my commanding officer about what I heard and saw. That was it. I didn't have to get my hands dirty. I didn't have to do any skulking around or put myself in danger, and all that for a nice salary and a respectable benefits package.

I still turned him down. I'd gotten out of government work for a reason, and at that point, I'd already met several members of the Kings and didn't want to risk my neck just to fuck over fellow veterans. Nick asked me to reach out if I changed my mind or landed myself in danger, and so here we were.

Did I like that it had come to this? No. But I trusted Nick. I believed him last night when he said he missed the thrill of the hunt. He wasn't even here officially. The small crew of people he hand selected to come with him knew that this was an unsanctified operation, and they were okay with it. Getting charges to stick to motorcycle clubs was difficult. The club members wouldn't rat each other out, evidence was usually scarce, and clubs kept lawyers like Katherine Jenkins on payroll to bog down their investigations, bury them in legal fees, and then tear them apart in court.

It made agents angry, lose faith in the system, which was why Nick and company had no problem coming down here to aid a civilian like me in fucking over Redding and the Jokers. I was sure it helped that they'd be stopping a drug operation and preventing a war between MCs in the process. If the Specters and the Bandits got into it, a lot of innocent people would be caught in the cross fire, and the feds must have factored that into their decision to aid me.

Nick being FBI was the reason I couldn't tell Jennifer what I had planned. She couldn't know. None of them could. First off, they would have stopped me. Because you didn't work with the feds. Not if you valued your life. Club members who struck deals with FBI agents had limited life spans. The second anyone found out about what you'd done, you were dead, and it didn't matter whether you were a fresh recruit or a man with all the influence and power of Liam Larson.

This was why Jakob would end things when I told him what I'd done. Bringing Nick into the area was a monumental betrayal of his trust, and if it ever came to light that I'd called in the feds to fix his father's fuckup, I'd be kicked out of Kearny faster than you could say *rat*. The only reason I wouldn't be killed instead was because I wasn't part of the club.

I hoped none of that would come to pass. Nick told me he'd do everything in his power to keep my involvement a secret, and I was trusting him to pull it off somehow.

He shut the café door behind him and strode toward my table. "Hey there, stranger."

"Hey yourself," I said, rising from my seat. "It's nice to see you."

He pulled the shades from his dark, almond-shaped eyes and wrapped me in a hug. "You too. You look good, Skywalker."

*Skywalker*. I'd forgotten the nickname. Back when we'd been sleeping together, he heard a story from my crewmates about me hitting an impossible target "no bigger than a womp rat" and took it into his head that I would fit right into the *Star Wars* franchise.

We pulled away, and I smiled up at him. "You look good too. How's Elena?"

"She's great, thanks," he said, taking the seat beside mine.

I dropped down next to him. "When is she due?"

"Two months," he said, grinning so wide that his eyes crinkled at the corners. "How about you? How's the leg?"

"Bugging me today. I missed my last PT appointment because of all this shit."

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine," I said. "Everyone in place?"

He nodded. "We have three in the building across the street. There should be a van pulling up on the curb any minute."

Right on cue, a nondescript white van parked perpendicular to us.

"I don't want my face in any of the pictures," I said.

He pulled the chair out on his other side. It would put my back to the window. "Move over here," he said.

I switched seats. "Did you find out anything else about Redding?"

"Oh yeah," Nick said. "The man is a piece of work. They did a good job covering up the attempted court-martial, but his uncle wasn't as successful burying some of his other crimes."

It turned out his uncle was a state representative after all.

I raised a brow in question. "His other crimes?"

"Let's just say that no one will miss this bastard."

"Not even said uncle?" I asked.

He shook his head. "At this point, I think he'll be glad to be rid of Redding. He's gearing up for a run at the Governor's House, and if anyone finds out that he's been sweeping his rapist nephew's crimes under the rug, his gubernatorial dreams will be shot to hell."

My hands curled into fists beneath the table. If the Jokers didn't get rid of Redding, I would, whether or not I had Jakob's help.

A man passed by us on the sidewalk. He wore jeans and a T-shirt and had one of those forgettable faces that would be hard to pick out of a lineup. Nick watched him closely, close enough that I turned my head back around for another look. I just caught the subtle hand motion he made before he passed out of sight. Frowning, I turned back to Nick.

"Get ready," he said. "Redding's on his way in."



## Chapter Twenty-Two

The bell over the door of the café rang, and Spencer Redding strode in as if he owned the place. Like Nick, he wore a suit, only his jacket was unbuttoned and he wasn't wearing a tie. The top two buttons of his dress shirt were undone, revealing taut, suntanned skin and the elegant muscles of his neck. He had the kind of good looks that spoke of silver spoons and old-world money.

The girls in the back sighed again, and this time I wanted to turn toward them and yell "Run!" If we'd had more time to get ready for Redding's arrival, I would have paid them to leave, but of course he would be obnoxiously early to this meeting. Maybe he'd wanted to scope the place out first like we had. He must have had some ulterior motive for being here so soon because he looked annoyed to see that we'd beaten him.

Or maybe that was just his face.

Behind him was a tall white man with silver hair and broad shoulders. I'd gotten Redding here by telling him I wanted to sit down with our lawyers in a neutral place and try to deal with these charges outside a courtroom, see if we could come to some other agreement. Nick was posing as mine. The older gentleman must have been Redding's. He smiled good-naturedly when Nick and I rose from our seats.

"Howdy," he said, coming right over to us. He spoke in a twangy baritone and had the kind of "aw, shucks" look about him that made me think he called other men partner.

He extended his hand when he reached me. "Winston Beaufort, pleasure to meet you."

I shook his hand. "Krista Evans."

We let each other go, and Nick introduced himself to both Winston and Redding. I slipped my hand into my purse while the men were distracted and turned my phone back on. It had been off for several hours.

*Come on, Jakob. Don't let me down.*

"Can I get you fellas anything? Coffee? A bagel?" Nick asked, turning his megawatt smile on the men.

"No," Redding said and sat.

Winston shot Redding a sideways look, brows furrowed slightly, as if he was confused by Redding's rudeness. Guess he didn't know his client that well. It made me wonder if maybe he worked for Magnolia Hills and not for Redding.

The lawyer's confusion only lasted a second, his expression brightening again when he turned back to Nick. "I'll take a coffee, please. Cream, two sugars."

Nick nodded and strode toward the counter. I retook my seat, careful to keep my back to the window. Winston sat across from me and pulled the pocket square from the slit in the front of his suit jacket, using it to dab at his forehead. Beside him, Redding stared at me like I was the only person around. I wanted to crawl out of my skin. Nick just confirmed he was a rapist, and now here he sat, close enough to reach out and touch me. Close enough that I could *feel* his stare like a slimy caress along my skin. I nearly gagged.

"Can you believe this heat?" his lawyer asked. "It's going to be one scorcher of a summer if we keep on like this."

I latched onto the distraction. "Tomorrow is supposed to be even hotter."

Winston made a face that would have made me grin if not for the fact that I could still see Redding watching me out of the corner of my eye. I was just about to tell Winston the heat would break in a

few days when my phone rang inside my purse.

I feigned embarrassment. "I'm so sorry. I'll tell whoever it is to call me back, and then I'll silence it."

Winston nodded, understanding written across his features. Redding continued to stare at me, expressionless but utterly fixated, and my unease turned into full-blown fear.

I broke his gaze and glanced at my phone's screen. It was Jakob. Thank God. I swiped right to answer and brought the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?" he roared, loud enough for the whole café to hear him.

I yanked the phone away before he blew out my eardrum. Across from me, Winston's brows climbed up his forehead in shock.

"Um... will you excuse me for a second?" I asked the men, rising from my seat.

I took the phone outside, face turned down to hide my features from view, and walked away from the coffee shop, leaving Redding, his lawyer, and an FBI agent together inside. I could almost *hear* the cameras snapping across the street.

"Jakob?" I said.

"Where the fuck are you, and why has your phone been off for three hours?" he ground out.

"I'm having coffee with a friend," I said. Technically it wasn't a lie. "We bumped into each other while I was out. I turned my phone off inside the drugstore and must have forgotten to turn it back on. I'm sorry." Now that was flat-out bullshit.

"You just bumped into your friend, huh?" Jakob said, his tone as dry as the Sahara. "All the way down in Hermannsburg?"

I stopped dead in my tracks. How the hell did he know where I was? "Hermannsburg?" I asked, struggling to keep the panic from my voice.

"According to the GPS tracker on your car."

Oh shit.

"You put a GPS tracker on my car?" I said, picking up my pace again. The feds must have microphones trained on the coffee shop, and I didn't need them to hear any more of this conversation than they already had. "That is *not* okay, Jakob."

"I didn't put it there. Dad did."

Fucking Liam. "But you still used it to track me."

"Yes, after I spent two hours trying to get ahold of you and Dad finally told me what he'd done, I used it to track you. I thought the fucking Jokers or Redding grabbed you. Why didn't you text me telling me you were okay?"

Because I had planned this. I was no better than Liam, manipulating his son, intentionally scaring the shit out of him, banking on him calling me over and over, so that when I finally turned my phone back on inside the café, his call would give me an excuse to leave it.

Guilt wracked me. I felt terrible for not only betraying his trust but for—

Hold up. He'd freaked out for two hours before his dad told him about the GPS? But he said he knew it had been off for three. What had he been doing in the hour he'd been tracking me?

My stomach sank. *Sweet Jesus, no.*

"Where are you, Jakob?" I asked.

"Taking the Hermannsburg exit off the highway."

Fuck! Not even Nick could have predicted shit going *this* sideways.

"Turn around," I told Jakob.

"Tell me what you're really doing there," he countered.

“This is not a negotiation. You can’t come here.”

My trust for Nick only went so far. He and I had history. Hell, I’d damn near saved his life once when he tried to touch something on the plane that would have fried him to a crisp. The man owed me, and I believed he wouldn’t fuck me over. But Jakob? I’d left him out of my conversation with Nick for a reason. An enforcer for the Kings and the son of a founding member of the Specters might be too juicy a worm for Nick to resist. If Jakob showed up now, I worried that Nick might find some way to drag him into this, get photos of him, blackmail him into playing ball with the feds.

“I knew it,” Jakob said. “The second Mom started acting evasive, I knew you were doing something stupid.”

“I’m not doing something stupid. I’m doing something logical and calculated, and you *can’t* be here. Turn the hell around.”

“No.”

I was going to kill him.

I pulled the phone from my ear and took several deep breaths. How did I get him to back off right now? It was clear that he’d gotten it into his head that I either needed saving or that he needed to be in on whatever I was doing, and he had that intractable sound to his voice that told me there wasn’t anything I could do to change his mind.

But maybe there was one thing that would, one thing that would make him never want to come to my rescue again: the truth.

I put the phone back to my ear. “I *am* meeting with an old friend,” I said, dropping my voice so passersby wouldn’t overhear me. “I wasn’t lying about that. His name is Nick, and he works for the FBI.”

Dead silence came from the other end of the line.

“I lured Redding here with some bullshit about not going to court and letting our lawyers figure it out instead,” I said. “And yes, I know that’s probably not why he really agreed to meet me, and he likely has some ulterior motive for wanting to sit down face-to-face, but it was a risk I had to take. Nick is a known entity at the Bureau. As I speak, federal agents are taking pictures of him and Redding inside a coffee shop. We’re going to send the pictures to the Jokers and make them think that Redding has been a mole this whole time and that the feds know all about their little operation inside Magnolia.”

More silence.

I took a deep breath. “It’s a smart plan, Jakob. The Jokers will freak out and pull out of Magnolia. If we’re lucky, they’ll put Redding down themselves.”

Still more silence.

“Jakob, say something.”

“Have you been a mole for the feds this whole time?” he asked, his voice deceptively neutral.

“No. Nick asked me to work for him when I moved here, and I turned him down. If you don’t believe anything else I’ve ever told you, believe that. Trust me like I trusted you in the car yesterday.”

“If you’re lying to me, Krista...”

The fucking nerve of this man.

Calm descended on me then. It was the calm of battle. The kind of calm I only achieved when someone pushed me over the edge of pissed off and dropped me into real anger.

“I’m in this because of you,” I said. “You came into my bar and dragged me into your mess, and now both Gran and I are in danger. You’re the one who’s been lying this whole time. How dare you

lob accusations at me right now when all I'm trying to do is keep you and your parents and everyone else you've dragged into this safe?"

"My father—"

"Your father taught you well," I snapped. "You want to complain about him, but the ugly truth is that all along, you've been treating me like he treats you."

"That isn't fair," he ground out.

"It's not? You didn't manipulate my emotions and prey on my fear for my grandmother that first night? You didn't seduce me to get what you wanted the easiest way you could think of? You didn't lie to protect me or keep me from getting in so deep that I couldn't get out again? All while telling yourself that what you were doing was for my benefit in the long run?"

Silence again. I'd struck a nerve.

"And yet, after all of that, I chose to forgive you, Jakob. I chose to believe that you didn't mean to act like your father. That you didn't say anything sooner because you couldn't figure out how to tell me everything without losing me. That you wouldn't treat me like that again because you knew I would walk away. Because you actually give a shit about me."

"I do," he said.

Thank God for that.

"I give a shit about you too," I said. "I'm sorry for turning my phone off and scaring you. I'm sorry I brought the feds in, but I'm not going to apologize for doing what I think is right. For doing the only thing I could think of that wouldn't lead to more innocent lives getting caught up in this nightmare."

"You're right," Jakob said. "I'm sorry for not trusting you."

I stopped again and leaned against the side of a chocolate shop. Just like that, he gave in, admitting he was wrong. It was hard to stay mad at him when he was this self-aware, when he apologized so readily and seemed to really want to make things better.

"I'm pulling over now," he added.

"You don't need to pull over. You need to turn around."

"No."

I opened my mouth to argue with him, but now it was his turn to cut me off.

"I'm not close enough to downtown Hermannsburg for the feds to see me. No one will know I'm here. I might be pissed at you for doing this, but I'm trusting you to get it done. I'll never trust the feds though, and I sure as shit don't trust Redding. If he steps out of line, I want to be close enough to at least get a hit in before you kill him."

I almost laughed. Jesus, I must be close to snapping.

"Call me when you're done," he said. "I'll follow you back to the ranch, and we can figure everything else out there."

Holy shit, it sounded like he might be willing to give me a chance.

"What else is there to figure out?" I asked.

"For starters, we need to come up with a plan for what to do if the Jokers talk to Redding before killing him and find out that my girlfriend was the one to lure him into meeting with the FBI."

I skipped right over the fact that he'd called me his girlfriend and went straight to, *Oh fuck*. In all our planning, I'd somehow overlooked that possibility. I'd been betting on the Jokers having a knee-jerk response to the pictures. That they would act out of emotion and with extreme violence because that's what I'd come to expect from the clubs. I was treating them like they were nothing but a group of dumb criminals, just because I didn't like them. Hadn't Daniel taught me not to underestimate



people? And yet I'd nearly made another fatal error. What the hell was I going to do if they sat down and talked to Redding instead? And actually believed him over the pictures?

"I didn't think of that," I said in a small voice. I prided myself on being logical, on thinking things through and looking at plans from multiple angles. This was a monumental oversight that could have gotten me killed and made things worse for the very people I was trying to protect.

"You didn't think of it because you rushed into this and aren't used to our world," Jakob said. "But Krista?"

"Yeah?" I asked, his tone making me nervous.

"Nick *is* trained to think of shit like that. I highly doubt he overlooked the possibility. Maybe you should ask yourself why he didn't bring it up to you before you continue to blindly trust your old fuck buddy."

"How"—*shit, shit, SHIT!*—"do you know he's an old fuck buddy?"

"I told you I looked into you when you got to town."

With that parting shot, he hung up on me.

I pulled the phone from my ear, pulse pounding. Mother of God, Jakob had known about Nick all along.

Apparently I still wasn't done underestimating people.



# Chapter Twenty-Three

The white van was gone.

I stood fifty feet from the door of the café, staring at the spot where it had sat. The flow of traffic on the sidewalk bent around me, people throwing me annoyed or confused looks as they passed. Fair enough; I'd come to a screeching halt in the middle of the sidewalk, and now it must look like I was just standing here daydreaming.

Where the hell was the FBI van?

I blinked a couple of times and then looked up and down the street, wondering if the feds had moved it for some reason. Maybe they'd parked illegally and a pesky town official had threatened them with a ticket.

Sweat beaded on my forehead. The sun beat down, baking the pavement. Heat waves rose from it in a way that made me wonder if I'd finally snapped and was hallucinating. I checked the street again. No. I wasn't. The van was gone.

I frowned and forced myself to walk toward the café. Jakob had known about Nick. How? *Howwww*? And why hadn't he said anything sooner? Why had he let me into Kearny, into Charley's, knowing that I used to sleep with an FBI agent? Maybe Jakob had friends still in government work too, one at the NSA who agreed to illegally hack my Messenger account, and so Jakob knew I'd turned Nick down. Or maybe he'd told Daniel about the risk I posed, and they agreed to let me in only so they could teach the FBI a lesson. Through my violent murder. Now wouldn't that be a hoot after everything I'd already been through?

I barked a laugh. It sounded as hysterical as I felt. The nice old white lady passing me on the sidewalk shot me a look and then picked up her pace to get away from the crazy woman. I wanted to apologize to her, tell her I was fine, but I didn't know if I was. Jakob was right; I wasn't used to his world. As warped as I thought I was after surviving two wars and a plane crash, I still had morals. My mind might have some dark corners, but there was light in there too. I looked for the good in people. Jakob was proof of that. My first instinct was to befriend someone, not to sniff out ways to manipulate them.

I was in way over my head with all these devious motherfuckers.

With that thought ringing through my mind, I pulled open the café door and stopped dead in my tracks for the third time in less than five minutes. It was silent as the grave inside. The gentle music that had filtered down from overhead was off. No quiet conversation met my ears. No tinkling of ceramic mugs, no whirring of machinery, no scraping of chair legs over floor tiles. Nothing.

The door opened into the middle of the shop. Straight ahead was the service counter. When I'd walked in earlier, three people had been manning it. A pimply teenage boy worked the register. Two baristas were behind him, foaming, whipping, and pouring coffee. The counter stood empty now, and it freaked me out. I jerked my gaze away and took in the rest of the space.

The entire goddamn café was empty.

What the fuck was going on?

A motion caught the corner of my eye. I turned to see Nick emerging from the back.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

He smiled that megawatt smile at me, like everything was okay. This time I didn't fall for it.

"Come sit with me," he said, pulling out a stool at the table we'd shared earlier.

I stood rooted to my spot by the door. "Answer my question, Nick."

“I will,” he said, still smiling. “Just come sit down.”

The only reason I obeyed was because it felt like my legs were about to give out. Too much shit had happened in the past few hours—*hell*, the past few days—and my mind was unraveling. Calm, logical Krista Evans, who, if she’s honest with herself, thinks she’s smarter than the average bear, had gotten everything wrong again and again, and now she was in the middle of an empty café with an FBI agent having a full-blown existential crisis. Maybe the sky wasn’t blue. Maybe it was purple. And really, what *is* life?

I dropped down hard on the proffered chair. “Where the hell is everyone?”

Nick smoothly took his seat beside me, looking unflappable. “They’re out back, taking their fifteen-minute break together.”

I eyed him. “You didn’t have them all killed?”

He laughed, his whole face lighting up with amusement. “No. They’re fine.”

“Where’s Redding and his lawyer? What happened to our plan?”

He sobered. “Redding said something about you I didn’t like, so I arrested him.”

*What the fuck?*

I eyed him. He didn’t look like he still held a torch for me. From all appearances online and in person, he seemed to really love his wife. I didn’t think him arresting Redding was born from jealousy or overprotectiveness, so what was this about?

“Do you even have jurisdiction?” I asked. “A reason to hold him?”

In answer, he pulled his cell from the inside pocket of his suit. “I did more digging into him after we got off the phone last night.”

“Yes, you said.”

He tapped his phone screen and then slid it over to me. “Take a look at these.”

I picked it up. A woman stared back at me. I frowned at Nick. “What is this?”

“Keep going,” he said.

I dropped my gaze to his phone and dragged my finger to the left, moving to the next picture. And then the next. A pattern started to emerge as I riffled through the photos. They were all women. Women who had long dark hair, tan skin, full lips, and brown eyes. Women who looked a hell of a lot like me.

Nick straightened the cuffs of his suit jacket. “You can’t tell from the photos, but they’re all taller than five eight.”

“Are these... are these Redding’s victims?”

Nick’s eyes rose to mine. “Yes. We can’t prove them all. He’s gotten much better at what he does since leaving the military. But I checked his known whereabouts against unsolved violent rapes of women who fit his profile, and he was within driving distance of every one of them.”

It felt like the floor dropped out from under me. I thought back to the first time Redding laid eyes on me, at Magnolia Hills, and my idle thought that he looked like he was checking my features against some internal database. He had been. This was Redding’s ulterior motive. He’d agreed to meet with me because he wanted to canvas his next rape. Not only did I fit his profile, but I was dating a man close to Daniel King. What better way to taunt Daniel, to make him feel hunted, than by raping a woman who people thought of as under Daniel and the Kings’ protection?

A wave of nausea rolled over me as I remembered the way Redding looked at me in the police station. That sick smile. And here, in the coffee shop, the burning intensity of his stare.

My fingers shook when I handed Nick his phone. “This is why you didn’t say anything about what would happen if the Jokers talked to Redding instead of killing him.”

Nick nodded, slipping his phone into his pocket. "I knew they'd never get the chance to. Once I realized that you fit his profile, I wasn't willing to take the risk that he would slip out of their grasp and come after you."

"Do you have enough to hold him, or do I need to worry about him slipping through *your* grasp instead?"

"I have enough to hold him for a long, long while," he said. "Dr. Perez woke up an hour ago."

Finally some good news. "Thank God."

"Redding was the one who beat her up."

Rage swamped my relief. "Fucking piece of shit. Please tell me he didn't..." Like Beth at the bar the other night, I couldn't bring myself to say it.

"He didn't sexually assault her."

Some of the tension eased from my shoulders. Thank heavens for small miracles. "How did he think he would get away with all of this?"

Nick shook his head. "I don't think he expected the doctor to survive. She sustained a lot of damage. As for the rest..." He shrugged. "Sociopaths tend to get sloppy the longer they're active. They inflate their own egos. The more they get away with, the more they tell themselves they can never be caught. They're too smart for us dumb law enforcement officers. It helps that he has family members in power helping him. When I arrested him, he made some crack about how the charges would never stick."

"Thanks to his uncle, the state rep."

"And another one, who's a federal judge," Nick said.

I stared at him. "Seriously?"

Grimacing, Nick nodded. Redding was even more of an elitist prick than I first assumed.

"Please tell me you have proof they've been covering for him," I said.

"Not yet. But we will by the time Redding goes to trial for what he did to Dr. Perez."

He sounded so confident I almost believed him.

"What now?" I asked.

He pulled something else from his pocket and slid it over to me. It was a thumb drive. "All the photos you need are on there. You might not get to take Redding out, but once the Jokers see him with me, they'll pull out of Magnolia."

"Thank you," I said. "I'll figure out some way to get it to them."

He grinned. "I'm sure your boyfriend's father will know how."

Goddamn it. Everyone knew everything but me. Why the fuck had I even gotten involved?

Nick's smile slipped. My stupid, expressive face must have given me away.

"Don't take it personally, Skywalker. We've all been watching each other for years. It's our business to know every move the other player makes." He eyed me for a second before continuing. "Once everything cools down, you might want to take a step back and give yourself some space to think about whether or not you really want to be involved in this world. You're not in so deep that you can't get out."

The *yet* at the end of that sentence was heavily implied. The longer I stuck around, the more complicit I would become, the more shit I would see, and the harder it would be to break free. Nick made a good point. Everything had happened so fast this week. It was like that movie *Speed*, and Jakob and I were Keanu and Sandra. We'd been thrown together under duress. The dangerous circumstances had forced us to form a quick bond, working toward a mutual goal, with disaster dogging our steps. I knew from my time in the military how strongly these situations could bond

people. Add in our chemistry, and I had fallen for him hard and fast. Once the threat of imminent destruction passed, what was left? And did I even want to stick around and find out if anything was?

“Think about it,” Nick said, rising from his seat to leave.

I nodded, staring out the window, looking back on the madness of the past few days. The stress of it all had wreaked havoc on my body. Everything hurt, not just my leg. My brain felt foggy. I didn’t know up from down anymore, and a strange sort of detachment was settling into my psyche. Anticipatory fear lingered in the back of my mind. What would happen next? Who else had I underestimated? Would I leave this café only to learn that Jakob had been working with his father all along? Or that Daniel hadn’t gone to Georgia but stuck around to start World War III? If I’d learned anything since getting involved in all of this, it was that I was god-awful at anticipating the next swerve in the road.

Nick paused beside me, hand on my shoulder. “You okay?”

I shook my head. “No, but you know me. I’ll be fine.”

He squeezed me once and let me go. Then he was gone.

I should leave too. I didn’t want to be here when the café workers filed back in, wondering what the fuck had happened after Nick ordered them to leave. I was so out of it that I might blurt the truth.

I shoved my chair back and stood. The heat slapped me in the face when I stepped outside, and my whole body instantly broke out in sweat. I needed to call Jakob.

He answered on the first ring. “What happened? Are you okay?”

The fact that he was even asking meant that he must still care about me at least a little bit. It might have given me hope if I wasn’t so fucked up about everything. Did I want there to be hope? Or was it better if I simply walked away? God, I didn’t want to walk away, but I felt like I might need to, at least for a little while, if I had any chance of clearing my head.

“I’m okay,” I said.

His harsh exhale was audible over the phone. Yes, he cared. Maybe more than he should.

“You were right about Nick keeping things from me,” I told him. “I got back, and the café was empty. He arrested Redding.”

“What?” Jakob bit out.

I filled him in as I walked back to my car, starting with Dr. Perez being conscious and working my way backward. I had to yank the phone away from my ear when I got to the part where Nick showed me Redding’s victims.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU FIT HIS PROFILE?”

“Would you stop yelling? You’re going to make my ear bleed.”

He dropped his voice. “Where are they holding him?”

I shivered despite the heat. Maybe him yelling was better than the terrifying calm he’d descended into. It was like we were back at the police station when he’d casually mentioned assaulting a government facility to get to me. He couldn’t find out where Redding was. He’d get himself killed.

“I don’t know where they’re holding him, and even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Call Nick. Find out.”

“No, psycho. I’m not going to aid you in your suicide attempt.”

His voice dropped into a low, amused rumble. “You need to stop underestimating what I’m capable of.”

I nearly slapped myself in the forehead. Good Lord, hadn’t I *just* said the same thing to myself?

“You’re right,” I told him. “I do need to stop doing that. Speaking of which, how’d you know about Nick?”

“I looked through your Facebook friends and did a little digging on all the ones with prior military or law enforcement experience.”

“Yeah, but how’d you know I’d slept with him?”

“We live in a small world. I still have friends in the service, and I asked the right people the right questions.”

“But you didn’t know he’d asked me to work for him?”

Jakob sighed. “No. But I assumed.”

“And yet you still let me into Charley’s. Why? To make an example out of me?”

His laugh was humorless. “I’m not that fucked up. I let you into Charley’s because I saw the way you interacted with club members. You didn’t seem like the kind to rat us out, and I went with my gut.”

“Your gut is good,” I said, parroting his father from the other night.

“Don’t give me too much credit. Half of why I gave you a pass was because I was into you.”

“Into me?” I asked. He could have said, “because I wanted to sleep with you,” but he didn’t. His choice of words made it sound like he’d had a thing for me long before I’d had one for him, that it had been more than just sex for him since the very beginning.

“Yes, into you,” he bit out, sounding like this was a confession he didn’t want to make.

I nearly grinned, feeling that messed-up side of me come to attention. “Aw, you had a crush on me, and it took you three months to work up the courage to ask me out.”

“Stop it.”

“That is adorable, Jakob. I knew you were a softie deep down.”

“If I promise to go deep down on you when we get back, will you shut up?”

“No. You’re never living this down,” I said. “Anything else you want to confess while you’re at it?”

“Your parents came to town about a month ago.”

I wasn’t ready to hear that, and I tripped over my own feet and nearly face-planted onto the sidewalk. “*What?*”

“I drove them off before they could fuck up you or your Gran’s lives again.”

Jesus Christ. “Okay. That’s enough. I’m not sure how many more plot twists I can survive.”

He laughed. He actually laughed.

“How did you know they would fuck up our lives?” I asked. I couldn’t help myself.

“I saw their arrest history. I saw the child services complaints.”

“Oh,” I said, voice soft, thinking of that nice CS woman asking four-year-old me where my mommy had punched me.

“You seemed like you were doing pretty good, and I know firsthand how parents can wreck your life.” He was obviously talking about Liam.

“Why do you put up with him?” I asked.

“Because it’s better to stay close to him so I know what he’s up to. If I break off ties, he might snap. I might not see the next manipulation coming.”

Well, that explained that then. I felt stupid for ever thinking of him as a victim to his father.

“And because of Mom,” he added in a softer tone.

“I understand,” I said. I’d want to stick around for Jennifer, too, if she were my mother.

We fell quiet as I walked the rest of the way to my car. There was so much I wanted to say to him, to ask him, but I couldn’t seem to find the words. It was one thing to agree with Nick that I needed to take a step back, another thing to hold to that when talking to Jakob. I could feel my willpower

slipping. The low rumble of his voice brought back too many memories: him whispering delicious sexual threats into my ear our first night together; us snapping at each other outside Magnolia; his deranged smile when he asked me if his psychosis turned me on. It all made me want to stick around a little longer to see what he would do next.

That and the physical pull he seemed to have on me. I was keyed-up again with no outlet to vent all my fear and anger and anxiety, and I needed another hit of life. I needed to revel in the fact that Redding hadn't gotten to me. Stripping Jakob naked and tracing all his glorious muscles with my tongue seemed like a great way to achieve that.

But was that healthy? I'd taken a couple of psy-ops courses in the military. I knew enough about human psychology to understand that we craved the unknown. It was why so many people were glued to their social media accounts. It was less a popularity contest and more brain hacking. What would we see when we logged in? Ten likes? Twenty? Or none? The fear of the unknown kept us coming back for more, and the endorphin spikes we got from it were quickly turning us all into addicts. It was the same reason that some women were attracted to unstable assholes—not because they liked being treated like shit but because they couldn't resist the draw of the unknown.

Was that what this was between Jakob and me? He didn't treat me like shit, but he was definitely unpredictable.

I reached my car and stopped, breathing deeply, solidifying my will. I needed to step back. At the very least, I needed a couple of stress-free days to unwind from this insanity and unpack all my feelings. Only with a clear head could I really know how I felt about Jakob, and my head was far from clear right now.

"I'm at my car," I told him. "I assume you want me to meet you so you can follow me back to your parents' house?"

"Yeah, but first I want you to drive by where I'm parked so I can make sure the feds aren't following you."

"Good thinking," I said. After everything that happened today, I didn't think I would ever trust anyone again, and I was glad for once that he was three steps ahead of me.

I climbed into my car and followed Jakob's directions. He was still tracking me through GPS.

"Take the next road on your left," he said.

I made the turn.

"I'm in the lot to your right. Keep driving straight. When you get to the end of the street, make a left and then circle back around."

I raised my hand and waved to him as I passed.

"Hi," he said. "I'm glad you're okay."

Tears filled my eyes. "I'm glad I'm okay too," I said, wondering why I was lying to him.

I wasn't okay. I wasn't okay at all.





## Chapter Twenty-Four

We got off the phone when it was clear that no one was trailing me. Jakob drove the bugged van, no doubt so his father could track us both, and I kept picturing Liam bent over a phone screen, watching our little GPS dots bounce around Hermannsburg like an old-school arcade game.

Once Jakob gave the all clear, I jumped on the highway. He fell in behind me as soon as I merged, and from that point on, he stuck to my tailpipe like glue. What did he think I was going to do? Push my shitty car to the limit, which was about seventy miles per hour on a good day, and try to lose him? Unlikely. Plus his parents still had Gran.

Every now and then, I glanced in my rearview only to be met with Jakob's stony expression. He'd been curt, bordering on short-tempered before we got off the phone, and now that his *fuck you* face was back full force, I realized how much I *hadn't* seen it in the past few days.

Maybe I wasn't the only one who could use a break. Jakob might have sounded willing to give me a chance earlier, but he should take some time to really think about it too. My betrayal was monumental. Unforgivable to a lot of people. I knew how wrong it was to bring the feds here, and yet I'd done it. Sure, I'd made the call because I wanted to keep everyone safe, but my intentions didn't matter. Liam's intentions had been good too, and look where that had landed everyone.

I worried my lip as I drove, wondering what might come of what I'd done. Nick knew who I was sleeping with, and I had a feeling I hadn't seen the last of my old pal. It was one thing to know I worked in one of the club's establishments, another thing entirely for him to learn how deep I really was in Kings business.

I glanced in the rearview again. Jakob had his phone pressed to his ear, hopefully filling his father in so I wouldn't have to. I'd had enough excitement for the day, and I had no desire to relive each humiliating moment as I explained how I'd underestimated everyone and misjudged every situation.

Seeing Jakob on the phone reminded me that I needed to make a few calls of my own. The first one was to Charley's wife, Lisa. She was in charge of scheduling shifts at the bar, and I needed to ask for the night off. I braced myself for a frustrating conversation. Usually, she was as much of a hard-ass as her husband, but her tone was soft when she answered the phone.

"Hey, honey," she said. "How you holding up?"

"I'm good, thanks. You?"

"Can't complain. How's your gran doing?"

I frowned at the road ahead of me, wondering who'd told her about Gran, before remembering how bad the Kings gossiped. We had several of them with us at the nursing home the other day. At this point, rumor of what happened must have spread to the entire club, inflating with each retelling so that Jakob had come to my rescue like a white knight and I became his damsel in distress. The tale she heard probably had him single-handedly defeating the Jokers in a firestorm of a shootout before throwing me over his shoulder and riding off into the sunset like the conquering hero they all thought he was.

"My gran's okay. Thanks for asking," I said. "Listen, I'm calling because I need to take tonight off. I know it's last minute, and I'm sor—"

"Already done," she said.

I blinked. "Oh, okay."

"Jakob called this morning and said you might need a few days. I took you off the schedule until Friday. Will that work, or do you need more time?"

Wow, she was being really nice about this. What the hell did Jakob tell her? Or was she being so agreeable just because it was Jakob who'd asked? Either way, I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"That works," I said. "Thank you, Lisa. I appreciate this."

"No problem, honey."

We said goodbye and got off the phone. Having until Friday off was good. It would give me time to see what I could salvage from my apartment, find a new place to live, and get Gran settled back into Magnolia. In the interim, I could take her up north to her sister Iliza's little homestead outside of Austin. They hadn't visited for a while, and the last time I spoke to Iliza, she told me we were always welcome to stay.

I called her, and sure enough, she was thrilled to have us.

The tension in my shoulders eased after I hung up. Iliza and her husband Fred's farm was a little slice of heaven in the Texas countryside, and I couldn't think of a better place for me to step back, relax, and figure my shit out. I couldn't stay with the Larsons another night. First off, I'd end up sleeping with Jakob again, and my thoughts were muddled enough without adding a shot of sex-drunk hormones to the mix. Secondly, Liam would probably kick me out anyway. If not for what I had already done, then definitely for the conversation I planned to have with him.

I spent the rest of the drive practicing what to say. I wanted to make as much of an impact as I could without the conversation going off the rails. As tempting as it was to indulge in an imaginary scream fight that ended with me scissor-kicking Liam in the throat, I knew how unhelpful that was. How unhealthy. Plus he was as tall as his son, and I doubted I could jump high enough to hit him in the neck. At least not without a running start, and he'd see that coming from a mile away.

Katherine Jenkins had to be my inspiration for this. Her unshakable calm during my interview in the police station was something to aspire to. If I could manage to keep my cool and say all the things that Liam needed to hear, I might be able to stop a civil war and keep a relationship from imploding. It was too late for my parents and me, but I saw firsthand how much Liam loved Jakob, and I thought he might still have time to fix what he had broken between them.

By the time I parked in the Larsons' driveway, I felt, well, not calm but centered, focused on what I had to do. Jakob pulled up beside me and was out of the van before I even got my seat belt unbuckled. From the way he stalked toward my car, I knew he was still pissed. Instead of getting out, I met his hard gaze and slowly reclined my seat, disappearing from his view.

I just caught sight of the exasperation spreading over his features before I ended up flat out in the seat with nowhere else to go.

"Get out of the car, Krista," he said, his voice muffled from the other side of my window.

"No. You have your scary face on," I yelled back at him.

He pressed his forehead to the glass and stared down at me. "This isn't my scary face. This is my worried face."

"You promise you're not about to violently murder me?" I asked.

He shot me a look that said he was tempted. "No. Now stop acting like a child and get out of the car."

I stuck my tongue out at him.

He closed his eyes and looked like he was praying for patience.

I knew I was being childish, but it was the only way I could think of to break the tension. The only way that wouldn't end up with us naked, at least.

"Krista," Jakob said, breath misting my window.

I gathered my courage and hit the Unlock button. Jakob yanked my door open the second he heard the click, and then I was out of the car and into the heat, the metal of the rear passenger door hot on my back as Jakob pushed me into it. I opened my mouth to tell him to wait a second, but he shut me up with a brain-melting kiss. His fingers dug into my scalp, big hands holding me in place. With a kick at my good foot, he had my legs spread enough that he could shove himself into the gap, closing the distance between us. There was passion here, sure, but I also felt something else in his embrace. It was like he had to be in my space to reassure himself that I was still here. That I was safe.

His tongue stroked against mine, and I moaned into him, losing myself for minutes on end. He pulled back just enough to nip at the edge of my mouth before pinching my lip between his teeth. And then he was diving back in, tongue plying mine, fingers pressing as he tilted my head back for a better angle.

Wait, what was I doing? I needed space. *Space, Krista! Remember?* But my goddamn hands had a mind of their own, and instead of pushing him away, I twisted his T-shirt in them and hauled him closer.

“Don’t ever fucking do that to me again,” he said against my lips.

“I won’t,” I said.

“I mean it. If this is going to work, you need to be as open with me as you want me to be with you.”

I hesitated.

He pulled back enough to look at me. “Now your face is scary.”

“Is it?” I asked. I didn’t feel like I was making a *fuck you* face at him. I felt like I was about to cry.

He nodded. “Say it.”

“Say what?”

“Whatever it is that makes me feel like you’re about to walk away.”

He thought I was about to walk away, and that’s why my face had scared him. *Oh, Jakob.* Just when I got up the courage to do what was best for both of us, he had to go and be sweet again.

“I am going to walk away,” I told him.

His eyes hardened, that intractable look spreading over his features.

I rushed on before he could say anything. “At least for a few days. I need a break, a chance to think, and I can’t seem to do that when I’m around you.”

“Doesn’t that tell you everything you need to know?” he asked. “Your gut is good. Your gut doesn’t want to leave. Trust it.”

My laugh was bitter. “I can’t trust myself right now. I’ve been wrong about everything the past few days, so obviously, my gut isn’t as good as you keep saying it is.”

“It is though. You’ve just been operating with limited information and making decisions based on the shitty intel we’ve given you. It’s not your fault for getting it wrong half the time.”

I shook my head. “It’s not just that. It’s not just us. I’ve been in a constant state of hyperawareness this whole time, feeling like I was a heartbeat away from danger, and I need to give my body a break from the stress.”

He pulled back a little more, smirking down at me. “Do you?”

“What? Yes, of course I do.”

His smirk sharpened. “I’ve been watching you throughout all this. Tell yourself whatever you want, but you’re the one who wanted in. You’re the one who asked to help, to be part of getting revenge on the Jokers.” He leaned in again, lips brushing my ear, voice dangerously low. “And you

loved every fucking second of it. So don't act like this isn't the most alive you've felt since you stopped flying."

I went still beneath him. God-*fucking*-damn it. Now that was a hard truth I didn't want to hear. As stressed out as I'd been, as scared, as worried about Gran and myself and the entire town of Kearny, I'd felt like... like my old self. Like the Krista who had hung half out of an open bay door, a thousand feet off the ground, laughing into the rushing wind as we flew above the battlefield.

But did I want to be her? Was I so jaded that I was willing to give up what little light I'd clung to? Descend with Jakob into the darkness and revel in the seedy underbelly of society? I didn't know. He was too close. I was too close, to him, to all of it, and this revelation only reinforced the fact that I needed to back off.

"If you two are done fornicating in my driveway, get your asses inside!" Liam called from behind us.

I glanced around Jakob to see him standing by the front door, arms crossed over his wide chest, his face a thundercloud.

I looked up at his son. "Please tell me you filled him in on the way here."

Jakob nodded and took a step back, ignoring his looming father, eyes locked on me. "This isn't over between us."

"I'm not saying it's over. I'm saying I need a couple of days."

His jaw flexed. Without another word, he turned on his heel and strode inside.

I got my stuff out of the car and followed after him a few minutes later. Liam blocked the doorway. Jakob was nowhere to be seen.

"Where'd he go?" I asked.

Liam met my eyes with the same unflinching focus as his son. "Probably down in the basement, kicking the shit out of a punching bag."

"Good. You and I need to talk."

He held out his hand. From the look on his face, he was as mad at me as I was at him. "Give me the thumb drive first."

I fished it out of my handbag and passed it over.

He turned in to the house and headed toward his back office. I followed him, pausing to check in on Gran and Jennifer playing cards in the living room.

"How's it going?" I asked.

Jennifer snorted. "She's kicking my ass."

I met Gran's eyes over her head and grinned. "I told you she was a shark."

Gran smiled back. "You want to join us?"

I shook my head. "Iliza invited us to stay with her and Fred for a few days."

Gran's expression lit up. "Really?"

I nodded. "Want to pack your things? I want to head out soon so we get there in time for dinner."

"As soon as we finish this hand," Gran said.

Jennifer let out a pained groan and laid her next card. From the hungry gleam in Gran's eyes, she was about to finish her off.

Liam was at his desk when I walked into his office. He sat behind a computer screen with a pair of glasses perched on his nose. The sight did the trick of reminding me that he was human after all, aging and fallible as the rest of us. Gran and Jennifer were just in the other room, Jakob downstairs only a yell away. I had nothing to fear from Liam. The only way he could hurt me was with words, and I knew from experience that people only hurt you if you let them. The good thing was that I didn't

care enough about his opinion to be bothered by what he thought of me, and as I focused on that thought, I readied myself to go to war with him.

“There,” he said, closing his laptop. He set his glasses aside and turned to me. “I sent the pictures to Mike. He’ll get them to the Jokers. They should be out of Magnolia in a few hours.”

“Good. Thank you,” I said. No harm in being polite.

“What you did,” Liam started.

I cut him off. “Nope.”

He frowned. “Excuse me?”

“Nope,” I repeated. “You don’t get to sit there and pass judgment on me for what I did. Not after all the shit you put me and Jakob and my gran and your wife and God knows how many other people through.”

“Now you listen to me,” he said, brow creasing in anger.

“No,” I told him, voice even but firm. And then I said, just as calmly, “You’re going to lose your son.”

He blinked. I’d caught him off guard. Good.

“I don’t speak to my parents,” I said. “They’re terrible human beings, and I’m much better off without them in my life. Jakob is about a heartbeat away from feeling the same about you. I should know. I recognize the warning signs.”

“My relationship with my son is none of your business,” Liam ground out.

I shrugged, beyond caring anymore. Not even his angry tone could get a rise out of me. I’d been through too much, and I was going to say what I needed to say and then get the hell out of here.

“It might not be any of my business, but I’m making it my business because no one else will say this to you, and you need to hear it. Your relationship with your son is fifty shades of fucked up. Jakob didn’t bring me here to meet the family. He didn’t want to show his girlfriend off and see if his father approved because he doesn’t give a shit about whether or not you do. He brought me here because he knew you were manipulating him, and he wanted to manipulate you right back by playing into your hand. He didn’t come here to spend time with you; he came here to spy on you. Let that sink in. And while you’re at it, I think you should know that he told me the only reason he has anything to do with you at all is because he wants to see the next manipulation coming.”

Liam rose to his feet and braced his knuckles on the desk. “How dare you try to tell me about my own son like I don’t know the first thing about him? Who the fuck do you think you are?” he asked, voice nothing but a growl. His eyes raked over me dismissively. “You just met him. This time next month, he’ll be fucking someone else.”

I bit back the sharp response that rose to my tongue, forcing myself to stay calm. “Maybe,” I said. “But I’ve been around Jakob enough to see both sides of him. I see the public face he wears, but I’ve also seen him relax around the people he trusts. He laughs. He cracks jokes. Sometimes he even stops scowling.” I braced my knuckles on the other side of Liam’s desk and leaned in, refusing to be intimidated. “Tell me, when’s the last time your son smiled at you, Liam?”

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. I doubted anyone but family had spoken to him like this in recent memory, and he didn’t know how to deal. Jennifer was right; the power had gone to his head. People did what he said without question, and when someone swerved right when he told them to swerve left, he couldn’t just roll with the punch and adapt. The sadistic side of me howled in glee to see that my hits were landing. That I was getting through to him. But more than that, it was happy to see I was hurting him like he had hurt me.

“It’s not too late,” I said. “But it will be soon. You have to let this thing with Daniel go.”

At Daniel's name, Liam's expression turned ugly.

"Trust me, I get it," I told him. Lord, did I get it. "I've spoken to Daniel less than five times, and each and every one of them he's said something or done something that made me want to punch him in the mouth hole. I've seen the way he treats your son, and I don't like it. I imagine you've seen enough by now to warrant hating the smarmy bastard. But he's not your problem; he's your son's and the Kings'. Let them handle it. No one will thank you for meddling but especially not Jakob. Have you ever stopped to think that every time you get involved, you make him look weak?"

Liam blinked.

I pressed on. "Like he can't handle his problems without Daddy's help."

"That's not what I'm doing," Liam said, but from his tone, I could tell that he no longer bought his own bullshit.

"That's exactly what you're doing," I countered. "And if you continue down this path, if you keep pushing Jakob into a role he doesn't want, you will lose him."

Liam stared at me like he was trying to set me on fire with his eyes. "Anything else?" he growled.

I'd said everything I needed to say, but now that I'd managed to get through it all without snapping, there was still one thing left that I *wanted* to say.

"Yeah, fuck you for ordering your goons to trash my apartment."

He reared back like I'd hit him.

I kept going. "Fuck you for endangering innocent people like my grandmother. And fuck you for not even having the decency to apologize for any of it."

He straightened to his impressive height, hands flexing at his sides like they wanted to curl into fists. "Get the hell out of my house."

"Already three steps ahead of you, asshole," I said, turning on my heel. I paused by the door. "Oh, and before I leave, I'm going to need you to write me a check for ten thousand dollars."

He took a step back, incredulous. "You *what*?"

"You ordered someone to break into my apartment, trash everything I own, scare the shit out of me, and make me feel unsafe going back there. So now you get to pay first, last, and security on my next place, pay to replace all the shit you broke, and pay a little bit extra to help with some of the emotional trauma you caused me."

He snorted. "Emotional trauma?"

"Yup. Emotional trauma," I said, meeting his hard gaze. "Have that check ready by the time I leave."

Feeling like a gladiator who'd just survived ten rounds in the pit, I turned on my triumphant little heel and marched out of there.

Straight into Jennifer.

She stood just outside the door, and from the look on her face, she heard every last shitty thing I said to her husband. I nearly cowered. I'd just faced down an enraged Viking giant without flinching, but the thought of her disapproval sapped my bravery. Because unlike Liam, I cared what she thought. I wanted her to like me, but now she probably hated me for what I just did. I mean, sure, she was pissed at Liam, but the man was still her husband. I wanted to punch Daniel for being mean to Jakob. She was probably about to flay me alive for what I just put the man she loved through.

She pressed a finger to her lips, indicating silence, and jerked her head to the left in a command to follow her down the hall. I dragged my feet after her, feeling like a woman walking toward the executioner's block.

She stopped when we reached the kitchen. I winced, waiting for her slap to land. Lord knew I'd earned one. Instead, she pulled me into a hug.

"Thank you," she said.

*Thank you?*

Belatedly, I hugged her back. "Um... you're welcome?"

She let me go and stepped back. "He needed to hear that. I think he might have even listened to you."

"You sure I didn't just make everything worse?"

She shook her head. "Only the fear of losing Jakob could snap him out of this, and I think your comment about Jakob never smiling around him drove that point home."

"You're not mad at me?"

She gave me a sad smile. "I can't like the way you spoke to him, but the hard fact is that someone needed to say it."

I nodded, feeling like I'd dodged a bullet. "Where's Gran?"

"Packing. Will she be okay at her sister's?"

"Yeah. She'll probably be better there. No offense."

"None taken," Jennifer said. "I'm sure all the memories she has of her sister and brother-in-law will help ground her. It was the same with my mam. She always did better when we had family visiting from the old country."

"Thank you so much for taking care of Gran the past few days," I said. "I was so worried about so much, but knowing she was here with you helped me more than I can say."

Jennifer grinned. "You're a sweet girl underneath that tough shell. Just like my Jakob. Make sure to say goodbye to him before you leave."

"I will."

"And give him a chance, will you?"

I smiled back at her. "I'll think about it."

Jennifer laughed. "Go ahead and take all the time you think you need." From the way she said it, it sounded like she thought I was silly for taking any time at all. She moved past me back down the hall toward Liam's office. Pausing, she threw over her shoulder, "And don't worry. I'll make sure Liam signs your check before you go."

"I heard that!" he shouted.

Jennifer's face hardened as she turned back around. "You're about to hear a lot worse!"

I fled from the sound of their raised voices, down into the basement. The stairs dropped me in the middle of a wide-open space. To one side was a living room with big, comfy couches, a huge flat-screen TV, a pool table, foosball, and even a small bar in the corner. The other side was taken up by a home gym.

Jakob had changed into shorts. The tattoos covering his upper body were slicked in sweat and gleamed in the overhead lighting as he beat the ever-loving shit out of a punching bag. He hadn't noticed me yet, so I paused for a few minutes and watched him. The muscles of his arms and back flexed as he landed a punch, an uppercut, and then a cross. He stepped back, opening space between him and his imaginary opponent, then spun on his planted foot and aimed a roundhouse kick at the punching bag that hit hard enough to take someone's head off.

Jesus.

I swallowed back a wave of lust. I must be edging closer toward darkness all on my own because standing here watching him didn't make me fear him. It made me long to see how much damage this



amount of training and power could do to another human.

Of course *that's* when he caught sight of me and turned around, and I knew, I *knew* from the way he sucked in a harsh breath that I was wearing my Fuck Me In Public face.

I shook my head and tried to clear my thoughts. Why had I come down here again? Oh right. "Gran and I are about to take off."

Jakob stayed where he was, chest heaving, sweat streaming down his big body. Thank God. I didn't trust myself if he came any closer.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To my great aunt and uncle's place up near Austin."

"Will you text me the address?"

"Can't you just follow the GPS tracker on my car?"

He met my gaze. "Not unless there's another emergency. I'd rather you give me the information on your own."

I sighed. He didn't make this any easier by being so goddamn decent. "I'll text it to you."

He nodded. "And you'll call if anything feels off or you run into trouble?"

"They live in a quaint little town in the middle of nowhere. I doubt there'll be trouble."

He raised his brows. "With your track record, anything is possible."

I shook my head. "You just can't help but push my buttons."

He lowered his head and looked at me beneath his eyelashes, heat sparking in his eyes. "I like pushing your buttons, remember?"

Oh, I remembered. He liked it because of how I reacted. If I stayed down here much longer, he might even get the reaction out of me he wanted. It was a struggle to keep my eyes on his and not ogle him like the horny teenager he turned me into.

"You have two weeks," he said.

My confusion helped clear some of the fog from my thoughts. "Two weeks?"

He nodded in response and then went back to beating up the punching bag. I frowned at him. Guess he was done talking. I had two weeks until what? The way he said it sounded like he was threatening me.

I probably should have been afraid.

I wasn't.

God help me, I was excited to find out what he would do when my two weeks were up.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

“I hate hospitals,” Gran said beside me.

“Since when?” I asked. As far as I knew, she’d never been admitted to one. She had both her kids at home, and Grandpa died in his sleep. The only time I could even remember her being in one was when I— *Oh*.

“Since you,” she said, elbowing me in the ribs.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and tried to speak past it. “You’re the one who asked to come with me.”

“I know I did.” She paused and looked around. The nurse’s station was to our backs. Doctors and orderlies moved with swift efficiency up and down the hall. A man in a gown held on to his IV stand for dear life as he shuffled toward us. Gran leaned in and dropped her voice. “That was because I didn’t realize how hospitaly it would be.”

She must be really uncomfortable if she was making up words.

I slipped my arm through hers and gave her a tug. “Then let’s quit dawdling out here and go see the doc.”

Together, we moved toward the now-familiar door halfway down the hall. Gran stayed glued to my side, looking slightly queasy. Dr. Perez had been moved from the ICU a few days after she woke up, and I’d started coming to see her as soon as her attending physician granted visiting rights.

A tall, beefy Latino man in a guard uniform stood outside her room today, and the sight made me frown.

He held a hand out to stop us when we approached. “Names?”

“Krista and Izzy Evans,” I told him.

Gran tugged on my arm. “You didn’t say she was being guarded.”

“Because she wasn’t,” I said.

This new development worried me. Had something happened?

The guard spoke into the walkie-talkie strapped to his shoulder. Someone radioed back that we were clear to go in, and he nodded and opened the door for us.

“Thank you,” Gran and I chorused.

We slipped inside and found Dr. Perez sitting up in bed. Beside me, Gran sucked in a sharp breath. I’d warned her what she was walking into, but this was my fourth visit, and even I flinched when my eyes landed on the doctor. Deep purple, green, and yellow marred the skin of her face from her left jawline all the way to her scalp. A line of bruises ringed her neck, from where Redding tried to strangle her. Medical tape was stretched across her swollen nose, and she had two black eyes because of how badly it was broken. Half her head was wrapped up like a mummy to cover the staples holding her scalp together. Her right leg was broken and so was her left arm. She sat stiffly because several of her ribs were fractured.

“Oh, Maria,” Gran said, stepping forward.

Dr. Perez lifted her head at the sound of her name. She’d been reading, holding the book aloft in her unbroken hand. I snuck a look at the cover. It was one of those old-school bodice rippers that were usually as problematic as they were addictive. She quickly set the book aside.

I noticed that she placed it with the cover facing down and grinned. “Whatcha reading, Doc?”

From her sheepish expression, she knew she’d been caught. “Oh, just something one of the nurses lent me.” The words came out a little slurred. Between the drugs they had her on and the pain in her

jaw, she was still having trouble speaking. She couldn't smile yet, but her eyes brightened when she shifted her focus to Gran. "Izzy, it's so nice to see you."

Gran went over and gave her the gentlest of hugs. "How are you holding up?"

"I've been better," Dr. Perez said.

I made sure the door was shut behind me before joining Gran by the bed. "What's with the guard?"

Dr. Perez's eyes darkened. "Redding made bail."

A hazy red veil of rage tinted the edges of my vision. Bail had been set for half a million dollars. It was one of the reasons Nick thought he'd be able to hold on to Redding. Guess not.

"When?" I bit out.

"A few hours ago," she said. "The police told the admin here, and they thought there was enough of a danger that I warranted twenty-four-hour protection."

She met my eyes for a few seconds, and a world of unspoken words flowed between us. We'd talked a lot during my visits, well, I had at least. We'd only briefly touched on what Redding had done to her. She saw a nice hospital therapist once a day to work through her emotional trauma, and nothing I could say would be helpful. All my words about him were tinged with my desire to see him dead. My advice would be, "I bet you'd feel better if you killed him." Instead, I'd been helping her in what way I could, devoting a lot of our time to my own recovery after the plane crash, what had worked for me, what hadn't, what might work for her too.

"Are you okay?" I asked her. "Want me to see if they'll let me sleep in here with you tonight?"

I'd done it before. The first day I visited her was rough, and she hadn't wanted to be alone, so the nurses, grudgingly, let me stay. I had to work tonight, but I'd call in sick in a heartbeat if she wanted me to.

She shook her head. "No, thank you. I should be okay knowing there are armed guards outside."

"You'll call me if you're not?"

"I will," she said.

My hands itched with the desire to curl into fists. "Can you excuse me for just a second?"

Gran waved me off, saying, "Sure, kiddo," but Dr. Perez eyed me for a long moment before nodding. She was a good read of people—it was what landed her in trouble in the first place—and she must have seen something in my expression that worried her.

I broke her gaze and beelined for the door before I gave anything else away.

The guard shot me a questioning look when I reemerged from the room.

"I just need to step away and make a phone call," I told him. "I'll be right back."

He nodded. "You'll need to go outside. They're pretty strict about cell phone usage in here."

"Okay, thanks," I said, heading toward the elevators.

One of the nurses at the station, a plump middle-aged black woman who'd been helping Dr. Perez the past few days, recognized me and smiled. "Hey, Krista."

I forced myself to smile back at her. "Hi, Michelle."

"Here to see the doctor?"

"Yup. Just need to make a quick call." I widened my grin a bit, coaching myself to act normal.

"You lend her that bodice ripper?"

Michelle barked a laugh and pushed her short braids back from her face. "Lend? Honey, I wheeled our mobile library up to her, and she picked it out herself."

"I knew it."

"Don't tease her too hard now," Michelle said.

I snapped her a salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

Michelle’s laughter faded as I stepped into the elevator. No one else was in it with me, and I dropped my mask the second the doors closed and indulged in some low-level growling. I was pretty sure that if I let out the scream that threatened, someone would hear it and come running. Fucking Redding. That goddamn shit had slipped through Nick’s fingers, and if Redding was vindictive enough to go after Daniel *ten years* after Daniel wronged him, I had no doubt that he was coming back to Kearny to finish what he started here.

No fucking way would I let that happen.

I punched the ground floor button and stepped back to wait. The walls around me were steel, so shiny that I saw my reflection in them. I looked scary. My eyes were wild. The left side of my lips kept trying to curl up into a snarl. The hospital was only six stories tall, and Dr. Perez’s room was at the top. I spent all six of those stories, entertaining a brief but vivid fantasy of dismembering Redding piece by piece with my bare hands. Maybe I could hide him away somewhere in one of the Kings’ forgotten warehouses. If I took my time, I could drag it out for *months*.

A chime sounded when I reached the bottom floor, and I did my best to school my features before walking through the lobby. My phone was at my ear the second I stepped outside.

“Pick up. Pick up,” I said.

Over a week had passed since I’d stormed out of the Larsons’ house. In that time, Gran and I had gotten a little R & R at Iliza’s farm, I’d found a new apartment, settled Gran back into a now Joker-free Magnolia, and gone back to work at Charley’s. Jakob and I hadn’t spoken that entire time—he was giving me the space I asked for—but every night I worked, without fail, he came to the bar. He sent a flunky to order his drinks, staying put in a booth in the back. His eyes never left me. I could feel their intensity every minute of every shift.

Other people had started to notice. They knew something was up between us, but since neither Jakob nor I would tell them what, they were left to make their own assumptions. Apparently the assumption was that I’d done something to piss the Viking off, and now people were avoiding me like the plague, which I would have welcomed if not for the fact that it meant that hardly anyone was ordering drinks from me, so my tips had plummeted. Good thing I still had a couple of grand left over from Liam’s check squirreled away. I could live off of that until people came back to their senses and realized that Jakob wouldn’t kill them just for speaking to me.

The phone rang several times before Jakob picked up. “Your two weeks aren’t up yet,” he said. “You throwing in the towel early, Evans?”

I ignored his goading and got right to the point. “Redding made bail.”

He sucked in a sharp breath. And then he laughed. “Halle-fucking-lujah.”

The line went dead.

I pulled my phone away and stared down at the screen. I had four bars, so I didn’t drop the call. Jakob must have hung up on me.

I called him back. He didn’t pick up. I tried texting him.

*What are you going to do? I want in!*

He didn’t text me back. Goddamn it. I texted him again.

*Be careful. Nick must be watching him.*

Still no answer.

I ground my teeth and turned on my heel, heading back inside.

“Everything okay?” Gran asked when I walked into Dr. Perez’s room.

“Yup, fine,” I said, grinning ear to ear.

She frowned at me. I must look deranged. I felt a little deranged.

Jakob was right about me. I heard that Redding made bail, and my reaction was to formulate a plan to track him down and kill him. Not let the law deal with it, not trust the police to guard Dr. Perez, but to see that Redding got the punishment I thought he truly deserved. And my plan wasn't some hypothetical revenge fantasy. I was deadly serious about wanting to kill him. Jail wasn't enough. The man needed to die for what he'd done to Dr. Perez. For what he'd done to all those other women. For what he wanted to do to me. If Jakob let me in on whatever he was obviously about to do, I would gleefully take part and lose not a minute of sleep afterward.

The fact that Jakob was right didn't come as some new revelation. I'd realized it within a few hours of walking away from him. Iliza and Fred welcomed Gran and me with open arms. We'd had a wonderful dinner, reminiscing about past visits and how good it was to see each other. Afterward, I went outside and sat on the front porch of their farmhouse to drink a couple of beers and unwind. Iliza had those quaint café lights strung across the porch ceiling. Their place was so set back from the road that I heard not a single hum of human machinery. Crickets kept me company. Every now and then a sheep would bah, or a horse would neigh from the nearby barns.

It was peaceful, even more tranquil than the Larsons' screened-in porch near the river. I'd enjoyed it for half an hour. And then I got bored. Then I started wondering what Jakob was doing. Was he thinking of me? Had he left his parents' house and gone back to his tidy little apartment? Did Jennifer tell him what I'd said to his father? Would he be proud that I stood up to Liam or annoyed? I pictured Jakob's scowling, disapproving face and grinned.

My smile slipped a few minutes later when I realized the past few days with him *were* the most alive I'd felt in years, and it had as much to do with the man I'd spent them with as it did the batshit-crazy events that took place. How, after all of it, did I duck my head back down like a good little civilian and go back to tending bar and visiting Gran and going home, alone, to my empty apartment?

The answer was that I couldn't.

But I still took my time. I still stayed away from Jakob and thought about it endlessly while we were apart. Nothing changed, despite how much I willed it to. I didn't suddenly become a decent person. If anything, those days with my great aunt and uncle out on their farm only reinforced how much I didn't *want* to be a decent person. I didn't want to live a contented, stable life. I wanted violence, passion, upheaval, a new surprise every day. In short, I wanted in, with Jakob, and maybe even with the Kings, which made me wonder if I had more of my parents in me than I thought.

We'd left the farm and gone back to Kearny a few days later. I settled Gran in at the nursing home and went to sign a lease on a new apartment across town from my old one, closer to the bar and club territory. The first thing I did afterward was head to a furniture store and pick out a California king. It would take up most of my small bedroom. I didn't need something that big for just me, but I pictured Jakob's massive body and knew that nothing smaller could comfortably hold him. The clerk at the store eyed me funny when I started yanking on the headboard, wondering how much of a pounding it could take, but I ignored him and went on with my stress test. I was done giving a shit what anyone thought of me.

That night, I had my first shift back at the bar. I held my breath during the beginning of it, trying to keep my cool, surreptitiously sneaking glances out into the crowd, looking for him. And then there he was, as if I'd summoned him, staring at me through the sea of bikers spread out between us. I'd shivered when I met his gaze, awareness and anticipation coursing just beneath my skin, threatening to break the surface and make it obvious to anyone watching how desperately I wanted this man.

I nearly went to him but stopped myself. What if I didn't cave? What if I took all two weeks before answering him? I was already wound tight enough to snap, but God, the way he looked at me. I wanted him to *keep* looking at me like that, like he had just stumbled out of the desert and I was the first drop of water he'd seen in days. How would he react when my two weeks were up? How much tension could I build between us until then?

I wanted to find out, and my desire to drag it out for as long as possible was driven by more than just that small—okay, probably larger than I was willing to admit just yet—sadistic side of me.

I'd started smiling at random men during my shifts, just to get a rise out of him, but he only sat there, stonily, wearing the same expression but with a spark in his eyes like he thought it was cute that I was trying to make him jealous. A few nights ago, a pretty redhead sat down at his booth, pressing her hip right against his, and *he let her*. I'd nearly vaulted the bar, but then I saw his lips twitch. No one else would have noticed, but I'd become a connoisseur of his expressions, sniffing out his moods like a sommelier with a rare vintage of wine, and I knew he'd seen the possessiveness on my face and liked it. As payback, I didn't look at him once for the rest of my shift. Nina told me he looked like he wanted to kill someone by the time he left, and I decided that meant I'd won the night.

We continued on like that, our little game of brinkmanship gaining more and more attention. Last night, Nina leaned into me and told me we needed to cut it out before we started a brawl.

I'd frowned down at her. "What?"

"The tension between you two is infecting everyone else," she said.

I'd looked out into the crowd with fresh perspective, noticing the pinched expressions and hunched shoulders, like everyone was holding their breath right along with me, waiting for whatever was happening between Jakob and me to boil over.

As I chatted with Gran and Dr. Perez, I began to wonder if holding out for all two weeks was a bad idea. I might not be the best human being, but sitting here with the doctor in her hospital bed made it clear that I wasn't willing to let someone else get hurt just because Jakob and I were having fun torturing each other.

I spent the rest of the visit convincing myself that it was okay to cave, to be the bigger person if it meant keeping other people safe. We said goodbye to Dr. Perez just before suppertime. I dropped Gran off, went home, changed, and headed in for my shift, prepared to suck it up and act like everything was fine between Jakob and me. I needed to speak with him tonight. He still hadn't called or texted back, and we needed to figure out what to do about Redding. He'd promised that I could be in on payback, and he seemed like the kind of guy who didn't give his word lightly.

But he didn't show up at the bar that night.

And he wasn't there the next night either.

Nor the one after that.

I called and texted him half a dozen more times without hearing back from him and was starting to really worry by the time Friday rolled around. What if he'd gone after Redding and Redding put up more of a fight than he'd anticipated? Redding was ex-Army, like Jakob. Who knew what kind of training he had? Jakob could be in trouble. He could be hurt somewhere at that sociopath's mercy.

I finally caved and called Jennifer Friday morning.

"Hi, Krista," she said.

"Hi, Jennifer."

"What's up?"

I took a deep breath. "I know I'm probably not your favorite person right now, but I'm having trouble getting ahold of Jakob. Have you heard from him?"

“I have,” she said.

“When?”

“Last night.”

“He’s okay?” I asked.

“He’s okay.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“No,” she said, worry creeping into her tone. “Should I be concerned?”

“I don’t think so,” I told her.

“You’ll let me know if that changes?”

“I will. Thank you for talking to me.”

She chuckled. “Relax, Krista. You and I don’t have a problem.” The laughter slipped from her voice. “But break my son’s heart, and I’ll come for you.”

Uh... yikes. She sounded deadly serious. This must have been where Jakob got his scary side.

“I’ll try not to,” I told her.

We said goodbye and hung up, and then I let myself get *mad*. I might not want to break her son’s heart, but right now I’d settle for breaking a few of his bones. Teasing me at the bar with some rando redhead was one thing, but if this was another one of his games, it was too much. I’d been truly worried about him. Sick to my stomach worried. Worried enough that if Jennifer hadn’t heard from him, I would have driven to the Larsons’ house and worked with The Enemy, aka Liam, to try to find Jakob via GPS or spy satellite or whatever the hell else Liam had at his fingertips. But his mom just confirmed that he was fine, so what the hell was he doing, and why wasn’t he responding to me?

I set my phone on my kitchen island and turned around. The main living area in my new apartment was open concept, kitchen spilling into dining and living room. A slider was set in the far wall with a small balcony looking out onto a much nicer pool than the one at my old place. I started pacing as I mulled everything over. All this time I’d been so focused on my own shit, on working through everything that had happened and how I felt about it. I’d interpreted Jakob’s taunting in the bar as playfulness. That, like me, he was weirdly enjoying this little separation. He said he liked riling me up; it was a fair assumption to make. But what if I’d misread the situation like I’d misread everything else? What if instead of teasing me to get a rise out of me, he was being mean? I’d forgiven him, I wanted him, all his baggage included, but had he forgiven me? Did he still want me?

I kept pacing. My leg barely protested. I had physical therapy a few days ago, and the new set of exercises my therapist recommended were working out pretty well. Plus I’d been taking it easier. After all my revelations over the past week, I couldn’t keep lying to myself. I wasn’t one hundred percent, and I probably never would be again. Pushing myself too hard proved nothing and only hurt me in the end. It was time to stop acting like I didn’t have chronic pain.

I’d started sitting on a padded stool in between customers at the bar, and miraculously, no one gave me shit for it. Before getting into bed each night, I worked through a long series of stretches and then massaged the stiffness from my joints and muscles. I repeated the routine every morning, iced my knee more to prevent swelling, and was quick to pop an aspirin if I felt I needed a bit more help. Barely a week had passed, but I already noticed a difference, and I wanted to kick myself for being so stupid about my leg for so long.

A knock sounded from my door.

My feet were already moving in its direction before my brain fully processed the noise. Was it Jakob? I stopped midstride. Or Redding? I’d spent the past several days paranoid in the extreme, checking over my shoulder any time I felt exposed, having a coworker follow me home every night



and stand in my doorway, ready to press 911 while I searched my apartment for signs of forced entry or an intruder.

I had weapons stashed all over the apartment, and with Redding in mind, I turned and grabbed a gun from the kitchen before moving to the door. I glanced through the peephole and let out a breath when I saw Jakob standing on the other side. God, he looked good, looming there in the brightly lit stairway like a little slice of night.

I threw open my door, and he strode inside without being asked. He shut it behind him, turning, and we faced each other in silence. His eyes roamed over me, taking in every tiny detail. My focus stayed fixed on his face, searching out any clues about how he was and how he felt about me. He arched a brow down at my hand. Whoops. I was still holding my gun. I set it on the kitchen counter and turned back to him.

“Where have you been?” I asked.

“Getting everything ready for our long weekend,” he said.

It was good to hear his voice again. A flash of relief shot through me at his words, but I couldn’t let it distract me. “Is that why you hung up on me and couldn’t be bothered to send so much as a text the past few days? I’ve been freaking out, Jakob.”

His smile was sharp. “How’s it feel?”

I sucked in a breath. Shit. This was payback for turning my phone off when I went to meet Nick? Maybe he hadn’t forgiven me after all.

He caught sight of my face and relented. “I’m sorry if I freaked you out.”

“What were you really doing?” I asked.

His expression hardened, and this time I recognized the warning look in his eyes. “Setting up our trip,” he repeated slowly.

Huh. For some reason he didn’t think he could be honest with me right now. Why? Did he think that someone was watching me? Liam or Daniel or maybe even... Nick. If it was Liam or Daniel, Jakob wouldn’t worry about how they’d react if he said “What I was really doing was violently murdering a sociopathic piece of shit,” so he must have thought that Nick might be watching.

*Jesus Christ.*

Just when I thought I’d finally get a break, shit went sideways again. Was Redding a setup? Had Nick *let* Redding go to see what I would do? To see what Jakob would do? If we killed him and Nick found out, he would either throw us in jail or, the more likely option, blackmail us into working for him to take the Kings or the Specters down.

*This was what you wanted*, I reminded myself.

I took a deep breath. Yes, it was. And I realized now how fucked up that probably made me, but screw it. I’d decided I was in, so I was in. I’d have to trust Jakob to tell me the truth when he felt like he could.

“Okay,” I said.

He gave me a pointed look. “Okay?”

I nodded.

He glanced past me for the first time, taking in my apartment. “I like your new place.”

I looked over my shoulder, following his gaze. It was still a little sparse; the only piece of furniture in the living room was a couch. I hadn’t gotten around to replacing my TV yet, and there were no little side tables or area rugs or throw blankets to make the space feel safe and cozy yet, but it would get there. I was determined this time to make a real home for myself.

“Thanks,” I said, turning back to him.

He nodded. "Was Dad's check enough to cover everything?"

"And then some," I said. "So, when are we going on our trip?"

"Right now."

I frowned. "I can't. I have to work all weekend."

He shook his head. "I had Lisa switch out your shifts."

Well, that settled that.

Excitement bloomed in my chest, and I tried to tamp it down before it got away from me, and I ended up doing something stupid like giggling. "Does that mean you've forgiven me?"

He stepped forward, finally closing the distance between us. His eyes were steady on mine as he stared down at me. "You did what you felt you had to do. I might not like it, I might not agree with it, but it worked. It solved most of our problems. Even my father has been acting less fucked up."

Holy shit, maybe I'd actually gotten through to Liam.

"Plus," he said, hand dropping to cup my cheek, "after everything I put you through leading up to that point, I'd be a hypocrite not to forgive you."

I leaned into his touch. "Yes, you would."

"I don't want to turn into my father," he said.

I gripped his wrist and stared up at him. "You won't."

A small crease formed between his brows. He was on the verge of scowling. "I'm not perfect. I'm not even a good person, but I'm going to try not to treat you like that again."

I angled my face up, gaze dropping to his mouth. "No more bullshit."

"No more bullshit," he agreed, sealing his lips over mine.

I swayed into him. He still cupped my cheek, using it to tilt my head back even farther as his tongue delved into my mouth. His other hand snaked around my back, bicep flexing against my side as he pulled me closer.

In that moment, I knew I'd made the right decision. I'd never felt like this about anyone else. He drove me crazy in the worst *and* the best way, and now I couldn't imagine myself settling for anything less.

He gave me one last lingering caress and then pulled away just enough to speak. "Are you in, Evans?"

"I'm in," I told him.

His arm fell from my waist as he stepped back. "Then pack a bag and let's get the fuck out of here."

I wanted to, God I wanted to, but I couldn't leave town without knowing if there was a risk that Redding might get to Dr. Perez or Gran. I couldn't ask him outright, not if Nick might overhear somehow—if he'd bugged this apartment, so help me God, I would find a way to make him regret it—so I spoke to Jakob like I had after finding out Liam bugged the van.

"Is it okay to leave town right now?"

Jakob nodded, leveling his gaze at me. "Yes."

From the conviction in his tone, I believed him.

"Okay, I'll pack," I said. "Where are we going?"

He grinned. "Somewhere that no one will hear you screaming for the next three days."

I blinked. "Is that supposed to be sexy or scary?"

His grin turned deranged. "Yes."

I laughed. It must have been the reaction he wanted because his smile went back to normal. Better than normal actually. He smiled at me wider than he ever had before. So wide that two little dimples

appeared on either side of his lips.

I turned away from him and went to pack. It was either that or tackle him, and if I got my hands on him now, we'd spend the whole weekend humping each other in my empty apartment. That wouldn't work. I hadn't forgotten his promise to let me tie him down, and there wasn't anything strong enough to hold him in here.

I called Gran while I packed, telling her that I'd be gone for a few days.

"With Jakob?" she asked, and I could *hear* her smiling.

"Yes," I said, shoveling clothes into my duffel bag.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," she said in a singsong voice.

I snorted. "You've told me enough traumatizing stories that I know damn well how little you wouldn't do."

Gran cackled. "Then have fun."

"I will. I'll call you when we get there."

"Okay. Love you, kiddo."

"Love you too," I said.

We hung up, and I called Nina to cancel our plans for tomorrow morning. She was supposed to come over and test out the pool with me. She sounded bummed at first, but her tone changed the second I told her why I needed to bail.

"You better tell me every sordid detail when you get back," she said.

"Deal."

"Drive safe then."

"We will."

I frowned after we got off the phone and quickly finished packing. "Hey," I said when I reemerged from my bedroom. "Are we taking my car? I can't handle a long trip on the back of your bike."

He shook his head. "We're taking my truck."

I hadn't even known he had a truck. It reminded me how little I actually knew about his life. I felt like I knew *him*, what made him tick, how his mind worked, but the day-to-day details were something else. Something I looked forward to learning over the coming days and weeks and hopefully months.

We kept our distance as I locked up the apartment. I couldn't touch him right now, and from the way he kept looking me over, he couldn't touch me either, not without us ending up naked on my floor.

He grabbed my bag from me and slung it over his shoulder as we headed down the stairs.

"Awfully light," he said.

"That's because it's nothing but lingerie and high heels."

The toe of his motorcycle boot caught on the next step, and he nearly tripped. Score one for me.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered, the words almost a groan.

My laughter echoed through the stairwell.

His truck was parked in the space next to my car. It was an older model Ford pickup, and it was, unsurprisingly, black. He'd added an after-market lift kit to it, and it was tall enough that we wouldn't have to worry about traffic on the way to wherever we were going because he could just drive over everyone else.

He opened my door for me and chucked my bag in the back. "You got it?" he asked.

I looked up, and up, at the seat. "Give me a hand, and I should be fine."

He held his hand out, and I gripped it with one of mine and grabbed the handle on the doorframe with the other. I hauled myself up with my arms, my good foot planted on the footrail.

“Piece of cake,” I said, settling myself in.

He lingered at my open door. “You’ve been taking it easier lately at the bar. Leg acting up?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m just done acting like it doesn’t hurt me all the time.”

“Good,” he said.

He shut my door and climbed in next to me a minute later.

“I’m assuming it’s okay to talk in here?” I asked as he pulled out of the parking space.

“Yes, and before you ask, no, I didn’t kill Redding. I told you that you could be in on revenge, and I’m not about to break my word to you again.”

“But you’re sure it’s okay to leave? The hospital posted a guard at Dr. Perez’s door.”

“It’s okay to leave,” he said. “I have eyes on Redding. He’s nowhere near Kearny right now, but if that changes, you’ll be the first to know.”

“What if he slips through the cracks again? What if he’s able to shake whoever you have trailing him?”

He shot me a look as he drove. “You really think he slipped through the cracks?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I want to think he did. I want to believe that Nick wouldn’t set a rapist free just to try to entrap either of us.”

Jakob let out a grunt. “Don’t underestimate your old friend. You might have shared something once, but his loyalty is to the Bureau now.”

“Do you think my apartment is bugged?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I’ve been away for a few days. No telling what happened while I was gone. Your apartment might be bugged, or you could have a second GPS tracker on your car.”

“Great,” I said, glaring out the windshield. How the hell was I going to enjoy this weekend without being stuck in my head the whole time?

“Hey,” Jakob said, reaching out to thread his fingers through mine. “Just let it go. Let it all go. I swear to you that Redding isn’t going to hurt anyone while we’re gone, and all this other shit can hold for a few days without imploding. We’ll have plenty of time to deal with it when we get back. You promised me a weekend, and I didn’t think you were the kind of woman to go back on your word.”

“I’m not,” I said, sighing. “And I’ll try to let it go.”

He nodded. “Good enough for now.”

“So, where are we going?”

“Lost Maples,” he said. “A friend of Dad’s has a cabin out there in the middle of the woods.”

I watched his profile as he drove. “Right. Where no one will hear me scream.”

He glanced my way and sent me a look that smoldered. “Or moan, or pant, or beg.”

I lifted a brow at him in challenge. “The only one doing any begging will be you. Remember what you promised me.”

He jerked his head sideways toward the truck bed. “I remember.”

I turned in my seat and froze. Coiled up in the rear of the truck was a length of off-white rope.

“It’s made from flax,” Jakob said. “The woman at the sex shop said it wouldn’t chafe as much as the others.”

The woman at the sex shop? Oh my God, the *visual* of him picking out his own rope, some poor, unsuspecting woman staring up at him while he tested its tensile strength.

I doubled over in my seat, laughing. Maybe it would be easier to relax this weekend than I thought.



# Epilogue

JAKOB

Krista Evans was going to be the death of me. In those heels, she was six feet of sin draped in darkness. The silk robe she wore barely covered the tops of her thighs. She'd cinched it tight around her waist, somehow both accentuating and obscuring the curves that had driven me crazy since the day she strolled into town. If she knew how long I'd wanted her, how badly I'd wanted her, she'd never let me live it down.

The sun was sliding toward the horizon, and the small cabin we were staying in was bathed in shadows. She stalked toward me out of them, hips swaying, and I raked my gaze over her from head to toe. Her dark hair fell in waves to her waist. She didn't usually wear makeup, but she had some on now. I could tell because her eyes were rimmed in black, and her mouth looked fuller than usual, lips glossed over like she'd just sucked me off. She hadn't yet, and I was sure that had something to do with the evil little grin on her face.

I nearly growled. We hadn't done *anything* yet, besides throwing our bags into the bedroom, and if she didn't put her hands on me soon, I was going to start testing these restraints.

I'd been half joking about letting her tie me up, even after buying the rope. I thought it might just be another one of our games, but then she'd dropped her voice into a husky purr after we'd ditched our bags, asking me nicely, and now here I was, buck-ass naked in the middle of the living room, arms straining overhead. She'd tied me to a goddamn beam. And I ended up helping her because she wasn't tall enough to do it herself.

So yeah, I was gone for this woman. And I should just stop pretending that I wasn't. I'd spent the past two weeks trying and failing to give her the space she asked for. I managed to keep from calling or driving over to her new place, but every night I still found myself at the bar. I kept telling myself to stop, to back off, but then I saw the way she looked at me through the crowd, and I thought maybe, just maybe, she was twisted enough that she enjoyed our little games too.

"You going to do anything?" I asked her. "Or just leave me here until my arms go numb?"

She stopped a few feet away, head tilted to the side as she looked me over. "Can't I just enjoy the sight of you for a minute without you getting cranky?"

I huffed out a breath. "I'm not cranky. I'm impatient. You're probably naked under that robe, and I can't touch you. The sooner we play out your little fantasy, the sooner I can fuck you the way we both want me to."

I got the response I wanted. Her full lips parted, and black edged out brown as her pupils dilated. Fuck, she was gorgeous. The male members of the Kings, and hell, quite a few of the women too, had been in a frenzy when she started working at Charley's. She'd shot them all down one after another. But she hadn't shot me down, and that made me feel way fucking better than it probably should have. It made me feel way more possessive over her than was healthy. I felt like a fucking caveman every time someone else smiled at her.

*Her strong. Make pretty babies. MINE. Smile at her and I get club.*

Maybe that was why I liked leading her around by her hair so much that first time we fucked.

She smirked at me. "I should have thought to bring a gag. You're just as mouthy as I am."

I arched a brow at her. "You just happen to have gags lying around? You really into this bondage shit?" I wasn't, but if she was, I could try to make it work.

She shook her head. “No, and not really. I just like the idea of teasing the hell out of you without you being able to manhandle me.”

I lowered my voice. “You like the way I manhandle you.”

She shivered. “Yes, I do. But I like driving you crazy almost as much.”

Her hands fell to the robe’s sash. With a flick of her fingers, it was free. She shrugged, and the black silk fell from her shoulders to pool on the ground behind her. I sucked in a breath that rattled my chest. She *was* naked under it. Her eyes met mine as she stood there, unabashedly, gloriously bare. Sunlight slanted through the windows at a sharp angle, bathing her half in shadow, half in light. I didn’t know where the hell to look. Everywhere she was lean and taut. It was obvious that the woman worked out, but she still had some deadly curves. Her full breasts and flaring hips called to me like a siren song.

She stepped forward, and I realized why she’d put on heels. We were almost of a height now. All I had to do was tilt my head down to reach her lips. I closed the distance between us and sealed my mouth over hers. She swayed up into me, soft breasts pressing against my chest, fingers braced against my stomach. Our kiss was chaste, close-lipped, and when I tried to deepen it, she pulled away. The growl that ripped from my throat was animalistic. She stepped back and laughed. I was losing this round to her, but goddamn it, I hadn’t been able to touch her in two weeks, and it nearly drove me crazy. To have her so close now but not be able to do what I wanted... She must be more sadistic than I thought to be enjoying this. I probably shouldn’t be so turned on by that, but my dick strained between us like it had a mind of its own.

She turned away from me, and I groaned. That ass. Fucking hell.

I watched her stalk toward the couch on those towering heels with barely a hiccup in her stride. It was good that she’d been treating herself better, being kinder to her body. Good for her, but also, selfishly, good for me. It meant we could probably screw around more. I had weeks of pent-up tension to vent. If her leg started bugging her halfway through this weekend, it didn’t matter. I’d find some way to carry her around the place so she could save her energy. I’d gather up every pillow in here and make a little throne for her out of them. I’d find ways to get her off where she wouldn’t even have to move. I was greedy for the noises she made when she lost herself, desperate to hear my name on her lips as she came.

She grabbed a throw pillow from the couch and came back to me, tossing it at my feet.

“Come here,” I said, tilting my head down.

I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to tease her with my tongue, work her into the same frenzy she’d driven me to, but she just grinned that wicked grin and shook her head.

In a fluid motion, she dropped to her knees at my feet. I almost asked her if she would be okay like that but stopped myself. She was a grown-ass woman who knew her own physical limits. If she thought she’d be fine on her bad knee for a little bit, I had to trust that she would be.

Her nails gently scraped up my thighs. My dick stiffened again, a bead of pre-cum shining on the tip. She ignored it, turning her head to kiss my inner thigh, so close, but so goddamn far away.

She dropped another kiss on my leg, a little higher this time, and murmured into me, “I meant what I said that morning.”

“What morning?” I ground out. The woman was going to give me a heart attack at this rate.

She looked up at me beneath her lashes, and I nearly imploded. *So fucking beautiful.* I flexed my arms, testing the restraints. This place was old and seldom used. The beam she’d tied me to groaned, and I stopped. Termites could have gotten to it, and I wouldn’t be able to touch her if I brought the roof down on our heads trying to get free.

“At your parents’ place,” she said, bringing my full attention back to her. “When I told you that you should always be naked. I meant it.”

“You can get me naked whenever you want. Just say the word.”

She grinned and went back to tormenting me. Her lips pressed a little harder, her nails dug a little deeper. Those beautiful tits hung full and heavy, nipples tightening with desire. I wanted to suck them into my mouth and lavish them until she cried out. Her fingers finally lifted and stroked up my shaft. My balls tightened, and pressure built low on my spine. I was a heartbeat away from coming into her hand like a fucking teenager.

She rubbed her thumb over the head of my dick, using my pre-cum to ease her way as she stroked back down. Her fingers tightened around my base, and my chin hit my chest as I groaned. Finally she leaned forward and took me into her mouth. I stared down at her, watching my dick slide past those full lips, feeling her tongue slick over my heated skin. Her eyelids fluttered shut, and she made a noise in the back of her throat that sounded like a stifled moan.

God bless women who take pleasure from giving it.

The tip of my dick nudged against resistance, and I felt her throat convulse. She slid her mouth back up my length before that convulsion turned into a gag. So, deep-throating wasn’t going to happen. That was fine. I was big enough that I didn’t expect it, though if she was willing in the coming days and weeks and hopefully months, I’d be down for teaching her how to take all of me. For now she took as much of me as she could, using a hand to work the rest. Her other one cupped my balls, fondling their weight, gently tugging in a way that made my jaw clench.

I strained my arms again, unthinking, the rope burning against the skin of my wrists. I wanted out of these goddamn restraints. I wanted to touch her, slip my fingers into her hair and guide her. Overhead, the beam made another troubling sound. I took a deep breath and forced myself to relax.

Her cheeks hollowed as she sucked me in again. Tied up like this, all I could do was thrust. I pulsed my hips forward, carefully, not wanting to choke her. Having to be careful only ramped up my frustration. She was driving me fucking crazy. I could come right now, but she’d wanted this, and I wanted to make it worth it for her. If I came right out of the gates, she might not feel like she’d had the chance to torture me enough, and then I’d probably end up tied to the next inanimate object that caught her fancy.

She swirled her tongue around the head of my dick, and I nearly choked.

*Baseball. Think about baseball, you stupid asshole.*

I filled my head with thoughts of America’s greatest pastime while she went to work on me. I had no idea how many minutes went by, but then she did something with her tongue that brought me gasping back to reality.

*Or croquet. Yeah, think of a bunch of stuffy English fucks hitting balls through hoops on their front lawn. Nothing sexual about that.*

She started working her mouth and her hands faster, and my control finally snapped. I thrust into her mouth with more force. She made a greedy sound and stroked me harder.

“Krista, I’m going to come in your mouth if you keep this up,” I snarled. It was my way of warning her, of giving her the option of pulling back and letting me come somewhere else, like on those pretty tits.

In answer, she took me deeper, her throat having loosened up a little. It was too much. My head fell back, and I lost myself. I stopped trying to talk myself back from the brink. It was futile when she sucked me down like this. Instead, I let myself feel everything, the wet embrace of her mouth, the gentle, barely there scrape of her teeth, her tongue, stroking, stroking, and her hand, pumping my base.



My heart felt like it was trying to break out of my chest. Pressure built inside me. She started to work her mouth and hand even faster, and my dick went rigid between her lips. There was an undeniable pulse low in my abdomen, and then stars exploded across my vision. I came, hard, losing the rhythm as I thrust into her. The pleasure passed as quickly as it rushed in, and my legs decided they were done holding me up. Suddenly my full weight rested on my bound wrists. Yeah, no, this definitely wasn't my thing. I mean, her teasing the hell out of me was, but now my wrists fucking hurt, and there was zero pleasure involved in that, only annoyance.

"Cut me loose," I said.

She didn't fight me. Swiping a thumb over her glistening lips, she rose from her knees and grabbed a pair of scissors from the kitchen. She ended up needing a chair to reach the rope, and she stood on it next to me, putting my nose level with her navel. I went up on my toes, but her tits were too high for me to reach. Fine, I could adapt. I leaned down instead, but I couldn't reach her pussy either.

"Faster, Krista," I growled, dick already stirring back to life.

"I'm trying," she said, sounding harassed. "What kind of fucking rope did you buy? The scissors are struggling to cut through it."

"I don't know. The one the sex lady told me to."

Above me, she choked. "Sex lady," she said, dissolving into giggles.

I turned my head up to scowl at her and forgot whatever the hell I'd been about to say. Now I understood all those people who were obsessed with underboob.

"I keep picturing you in a sex shop, asking that poor store clerk for rope," she said, glancing down at me. "She must have been in danger of fainting dead away at the thought of you all trussed up like a present."

"She certainly blushed more than I thought someone with her job would."

Krista lost herself to another fit of giggles, the scissors forgotten.

"I swear to God," I said. "I will flip upside down and saw through this rope with my goddamn teeth if you don't hurry up."

She gave me a little salute. "Yes, sir!"

Fucking smartass.

Several curse-filled minutes later, the rope finally gave. My arms dropped like a canon; all the feeling had gone out of them. Blood rushed back into my deadened limbs in a painful wave. I gritted my teeth and bared it, then shrugged out of the bonds the second I got control of my hands back.

And then I was on her. We'd had a glorious conversation on the way here. She was on birth control, and both of us had gotten tested recently and were clean, so we'd agreed to forgo condoms. I wanted in. Now. The thought of shoving my dick into her hot, wet pussy with nothing between us had been torturing me worse than she ever could.

Despite the fact that she'd just made me come so hard I almost blacked out, I was more than ready for round two. The bedroom was miles away, but the couch was right here, so I dumped her onto it. She let out a shriek as she fell, but it turned into a laugh when she landed on her back in the soft cushions, already reaching for me. I covered her body with mine, careful not to crush her beneath my weight. Our lips met for a quick, burning kiss, and then I moved lower, biting and licking her skin. I was so hungry for her that I felt like I could devour her whole.

She gasped when I sucked her nipple into my mouth. "Jakob."

I moved to her other nipple and tongued it until she started squirming beneath me.

"I need you," she said.

I'd had just about as much delayed satisfaction as I could take for the night, so I rose above her and surged inside with one hard, brutal thrust.

She cried out, fingernails digging into my shoulders. "Again."

I pulled out and then rammed back in, bottoming out. This time we both moaned. Christ, it was even better than I could have imagined. She was so warm and so wet, her tight little pussy squeezing me like her body was trying to draw me deeper.

Being inside her felt like coming home.

Her grip on my shoulders tightened. "Come here," she panted.

I dropped down, resting my elbows on either side of her head. She lifted her hips, and the angle changed. The next time I surged forward, my lower abdomen slicked over her clit. From the way she gasped, this was exactly what she needed. I fisted my hands in her hair and started fucking her in truth, remembering the steady, relentless rhythm that would send her tumbling over the edge.

She stared up at me, those deep brown eyes piercing, even as they started to lose focus. Her brows creased, a little line forming between them. I pounded into her and watched from inches away as she started to unravel. Sweat beaded her brow. Her hands fell to my ass, fingers gripping, urging me on.

Her pillowy lips parted on a moan. "Jakob, *oh God.*"

She squeezed her eyes shut, and deep inside, her inner muscles squeezed too. The noises she made were throaty and desperate and unevolved, and I couldn't hold out any longer. I shifted up as she came, angling deeper. She scrabbled at my back like a wildcat, crying out. I gripped her good hip in one hand and rammed home for the last time, spilling myself inside her.

"Fuck," I ground out. Other words fell from my lips, but I had no idea what the hell I said. I was nearly delirious. Coming inside her was like seeing God.

I all but fell on top of her, cheek planted between her breasts. Her chest heaved beneath me. The thunder of her heartbeat was loud in my ear.

She shook, and I realized she was chuckling.

"Like seeing God, huh?" she asked.

Shit, I'd said it out loud.

I nodded in response. I didn't trust myself not to give more away if I opened my mouth again. I didn't trust myself not to ask her to get rid of her brand-new apartment and move in with me so she could make me see God twenty-four seven until we both starved to death because we were too busy fucking to remember to eat.

She kissed the top of my head, arms sliding around me, holding me close. We needed to get cleaned up. Hell, we'd probably just ruined the couch cushions. But her body was so warm, and I was suddenly so tired that closing my eyes and taking a nap on top of her seemed like an excellent idea. She couldn't get away from me again if I kept her trapped like this.

Maybe tying her up was something I could get into after all.

"Uh... Jakob?" she said. "Not that I don't want to snuggle, but you're sort of crushing my bladder."

I heaved a sigh and pushed off of her. "Shower?"

She nodded, holding a hand up to me. I ignored it and scooped her straight off the couch. She frowned and opened her mouth, probably to make a smartass remark about how I hadn't dicked her so hard that her legs stopped working, but I sealed my lips over hers before she could get it out.

After the shower, we unpacked our things and got dressed. This rustic cabin had charm to spare, but if we wanted to eat while we were here, we needed to head into the nearest town and pick up some food.

The postcoital bliss faded from Krista's face as she tugged on a pair of leggings. I watched her out of the corner of my eye. I always watched her. She looked distracted as she slipped a low-cut tank top on. I knew something was bugging her when she sat down to pull on a pair of sneakers because she was full-on frowning.

"What is it?" I asked.

She straightened and looked up at me. "I don't know if I can relax, knowing he's out there."

I heaved a sigh. Fuck, we were going to have to do this now. I knew from the look on her face that she wouldn't give; she could be even more stubborn than me when she put her mind to it. I wanted to at least get through the weekend, have one last, brainless hurrah before shit went sideways again, but it was clear that wasn't going to happen.

"He's not out there," I told her.

Her brows rose. "What? Jakob! You promised me you didn't kill him!"

She sounded mad, borderline petulant, like she wasn't upset that I *might* have killed Redding but that I hadn't let her be part of it.

*Please God, let her want to be part of it*, I thought. If I'd misread the situation, if I'd misread her, then what I was about to do would send her screaming away from me forever.

"Come on," I said. "I got you something."

She frowned. "What?"

I held out a hand. "Just trust me, okay?"

With a wary expression, she put her hand in mine and let me pull her up. I tugged her through the house and led her out the back door. This cabin wasn't much, but it was secluded, and that made it priceless right now. I hadn't been lying when I told her no one would hear her scream out here. The land around us was part of a conservation easement, and there wasn't another human being for a hundred acres in all directions. This was Mike's summerhouse. Yeah, *that* Mike. Dad's Mike. And all the shit that Dad didn't want tracked back to him usually ended up out here. And by shit, I meant bodies.

There was a narrow path between the trees out back. I dropped Krista's hand and led her up it. The sun was disappearing beneath the horizon, throwing long shadows across the trail, and I made sure to call out when I stepped over a root or a rock, so she didn't trip. A few hundred feet into the woods, a small, low hut came into sight. It was barely more than a lean-to, paper-thin walls holding up a metal roof that was covered over in rust.

Krista stopped behind me. I turned and saw her looking around, wariness being edged out by fear. "You're not about to whack me, are you?"

I frowned at her. "Whack you? Who even talks like that?"

She grinned sheepishly.

"No," I said. "I'm not about to whack you. Would you come on? I want to get this over with so we can go back to enjoying ourselves."

She huffed out a breath and started walking again.

I stopped her just outside the door and put my hands on her shoulders. "Close your eyes, or you'll ruin the surprise."

She stared up at me for a moment, gaze searching my face, but then finally her eyes fell shut.

I pushed the door open and guided her into the shack. "Okay. You can open them."

She did what I said and let out a strangled gasp.

There, tied up in the far corner, was Spencer Redding. He sat on the dirt floor, arms behind him, head lolling to the side. He looked like he'd spent the past couple of days getting the shit kicked out of

him. Because he had.

In my defense, he'd earned it. He wanted to go after my girl. He had successfully gone after countless other women. The only reason I hadn't carved him into fucking ribbons was because I was keeping my shit together for Krista.

I'd gone through hell and back to get him without getting caught. Nick had been watching him, and my closest buddies in the Kings had come with me and run interference, distracting the feds while I snagged him. It had been some *Ocean's Eleven* shit. Krista probably would have loved it, but I didn't know how close Nick was watching her and couldn't risk involving her at that point.

She'd been confused as hell on the way down here. We'd switched vehicles several times, swapping out my truck for a minivan, an SUV, and then finally a midsized sedan. She shut up when I'd told her we were shaking off the tail Nick put on her. Even with the vehicle swaps, I'd doubled back several times, my buddies and my dad's flunkies running even more interference for us, creating traffic jams in our wake. Only when I was convinced that we were free of the feds did we finish the drive.

"Oh," I said. "I almost forgot."

I fished a crumpled bow out of my pocket, pulled off the sticker backing, and slapped it down on top of Redding's head. His eyes cracked open, and he looked up at me with loathing. That was all he could do. It was too hard to talk with a freshly broken jaw and several missing teeth.

"Surprise," I said.

Krista didn't respond. She just kept standing there, staring at Redding.

I held up my hands. "Before you get mad, I want to point out that technically, I didn't lie to you. I told you he wasn't a threat to anyone in Kearny, and clearly," I added, motioning toward him, "he wasn't."

She blinked a couple of times. Shit. She looked like she might be about to go into shock. I'd misread her after all.

*Fuck it, I thought. In for a penny, in for a pound.*

In case it wasn't abundantly clear what my intentions were, I pulled the gun from the back of my pants and handed it over to her.

I held my breath as she turned to me. This was it. The moment she realized what a fucking psychopath I really was and went running back to Nick for protection.

She lifted her eyes to mine. They weren't full of fear; they were full of warmth. A radiant smile split her face, and she stood on tiptoes and planted a gentle kiss on my cheek. "Oh, Jakob," she said, taking the gun. "This is the nicest present anyone has ever given me."

She dropped back to her heels and faced Redding, her grin turning into something sharp enough to cut.

"Hello, Spencer," she said. "It's so nice to see you again."



THE END



# Acknowledgments

This book came to be in a very different way. Back in 2014, I wrote a few chapters of what can only be described as bad *Sons of Anarchy* fan fiction and put it up on my website. It ended up on my author page on Goodreads, and the admins over there refused to take it down. Even after I told them it was an abandoned project that would never be completed or published anywhere. Even after I pointed out that they'd taken down similar works from traditionally published authors with much larger followings than I have.

Out of pure pettiness (Krista has nothing on me), I decided to turn TKoK into a smutty short story. But three chapters turned into ten, and several months into writing it, I fell in love. With Krista, with Jakob, with Kearny, and even with the Kings. Now I think it might be my favorite thing I've ever written.

So yay for pettiness, I guess?

This book was so easy to write, in part because, like Krista, I served in the US Air Force, only in a role more like Nick's than hers. I signed up for the free education and to see the world but spent my entire enlistment in southern Texas, in towns much like Kearny.

This one is for all the men and women I served with.

And for Angela and Sarah, my die-hard beta readers and besties. I have to give special thanks to my Patrons and website subscribers who read TKoK in serial format as I wrote it, especially Mónica and Pernille for their superb early feedback.

Lastly, thank you so much for reading. As a fellow bibliophile, I know how many books are out there, and yet you chose to spend your time and money on mine. That means the world to me. Indie authors like myself rely on readers like you. If you loved TKoK and want to help spread the word, please consider leaving a review on Goodreads or Amazon.

And if you'd like to keep up with my latest projects and read early chapters of my next book, visit my website—<https://navessaallen.com>



# About the Author



NAVESSA ALLEN LIVES on a two-hundred-year-old farm in the hills of northern New England with her husband, their cats, and an assortment of farm animals. She posts her books in serial format to her website via Patreon. To catch up on her latest work in progress, read exclusive stories and bonus NSFW scenes, please visit: <https://www.patreon.com/navessaallen>