



ALONE ON EARTH

THE SIGNAL BEND SERIES
BOOK FOUR

SUSAN FANETTI

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**By
Susan Fanetti**



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Dedicated with everlasting love and devotion to my dear friends in the
Freak Circle. You enrich my life beyond measure.

Extra hugs to Jess, Sarah, and Elena, for always reading and giving it to me
straight.

All that and a cherry on top for Shannon, my daily writing partner, who sees
my words, and my mind, in their roughest state, and yet still seems to love
them and me. Love you back, my friend.

And to those who've read my fan fiction—there's a little nod in this one to
my fanfic life, my training ground for Signal Bend and anything that might
come after it.

Finally, to Anthony, who totally “covered” my ass. You rock!

*we shall always be alone,
we shall always be you and I
alone on earth,
to start our life!*

Pablo Neruda, "Always"

CHAPTER ONE

Blinding bright light tore Riley out of deep sleep, like someone had ripped the roof off her dream. She groaned and rolled over, tucking deeper into her comforter and grabbing for the shelter of one of her big, square pillows.

The pillow was yanked away. She clapped her empty hands to her face instead.

“Nope! Nope, nope, nope! Time to bounce that tiny hiney right out of bed!”

Trevor? What the fuck was Trevor doing in her bedroom? And why the fuck had he turned on all the lights?

Riley peered between her fingers and saw, fuzzy from the obscured view and her sleep-thick eyes, Trevor Ramirez, her personal trainer and occasional DVD-and-junk-food heartbreak buddy, standing at the side of her bed, wearing black lycra running pants and a bright yellow Under Armour baselayer top. Pretty much every muscle on his lean, cut frame showed—among other things. Which was, she was sure, the point.

He was standing there with his hand on his popped hip, looking sassy.

Riley wasn't feeling sassy. Riley was feeling stabby. “What the fuck are you doing here? In my bedroom? Before fucking dawn?”

“Girl, you get the salty talk going when you're cranky! What would the tabloids say if they heard you now? ‘Riley Chase, America's Sweetheart, Abuses the Help.’ We got to get your workout in early today—you're flying out to Petticoat Junction at noon, remember? And who *knows* how you'll get a workout in out there. Unless cow-tipping is cardio.” He popped the other hip. “I should look that up!”

Riley rolled to her stomach and pulled another pillow over her head. Trevor smacked her ass. “Up, up, up, Thumbelina! Wasting daylight!”

She lifted the pillow and scowled at him. “Daylight hasn't even started yet, moron. Fuck off.”

“Oh, snap! Better be nice to the Trevor, darling. Or he'll take all the good stuff off your travel menu!”

He sashayed out of her room, grabbing a bottom corner of her comforter on his way past and pulling it off the bed, leaving her lying there in nothing but her underwear and an old, tight, belly-baring t-shirt.

“Cute panties! Very Strawberry Shortcake! Kitchen in five, gorgeous!”

~oOo~

When Riley came to the kitchen about fifteen minutes later, she found Trevor sitting at the island and Marta, her housekeeper, emptying the dishwasher. Everybody was up and at ‘em crazy early this morning, it seemed. She greeted Marta with a kiss on the cheek, and then sat down next to Trevor. He handed her a banana.

“Here, darling. Potassium first. Good for the muscles.”

Like she hadn’t heard that and all of his other platitudes about food and fitness five days a week for the past four years. Sometimes seven days a week, when she had to bare some skin for a scene, or if an episode was especially athletic.

She snatched the banana out of his hand and pulled the peel back. “I remember when I ate food for breakfast that required teeth. I vaguely remember that.”

“Oh, cry me a river, cupcake. You want bacon for breakfast, go right ahead. And you can give up this house on the hill, and your tiny blue Ferrari, and your Hermes bags, and your Louboutins. And you can put Marta out of work, and me, and all the other minions who trot around making your life sunny and bright.”

Trevor always spoke his mind, but still, Riley was a little shocked. She didn’t think she deserved that. She wasn’t a diva. She was grateful for what she had. Most of the time. But it wasn’t even five in the morning, and she wasn’t allowed to moan a little over the billionth banana she’d eaten in her life?

And who was he to talk, anyway? Like he toiled in a salt mine all day.

She sat and sulked, sucking on her banana. Wow, she was in a bad mood. She didn’t quite know why. Sure, she wasn’t thrilled to be going to a town in the absolute middle of absolutely nowhere—a town so small that she was bringing only Prudence, her cousin and personal assistant, with her,

because there weren't enough hotel rooms for any of the actors to bring more than one companion—but there were worse fates. And she was thrilled to have this part. A part with meat. Something she could get her teeth into.

Not that playing Desdemona, girl demon and demon fighter at Hades High, was all that fluffy. She liked that part, too. But the demographic skewed young, and she wanted to break free of the teen typecasting. She was twenty-six years old, dammit. People kept telling her to be glad she could play young, that she would miss these days when they were gone. She believed it, but she was still tired of playing teen angst. The more grown-up her life got, the thinner pretending to be a teenager wore.

And her life had been very grown-up this past year.

Playing the part of Lilli Carson, a real woman, an actual, real-life warrior who'd fought in an actual, real-life war and then had played a pivotal role in the events on which this movie was based—that was meat. That was grown-up. Considering the director and the rest of the cast, there was maybe award season possibility here. Riley could show people that she was, in fact, an actual, real-life actor.

So she should be excited to be traveling to Signal Bend to meet Lilli and spend time with her and the motorcycle club that was the focus of the film.

The truth was, she was scared. She hadn't been on her own for so long, she wasn't sure how she'd handle it. Pru would be there, but Pru was not someone who went out into the world. She was happy managing Riley's calendars and email and social media accounts. She expected Pru to spend most of the week or so in Signal Bend in the hotel—no, not a hotel. A bed and breakfast. Oh, geez. A bed and breakfast. Riley imagined one of those creepy Victorian houses full of cats and flowered linens.

“That banana is rotting in your hands, darling. I'm sorry I was mean. I'm secretly a Grumpy Cat this morning, too. I was up at half-past three so I could be here to shake your cute little booty out of bed. Dante yelled at me for waking him up. I hate starting the morning being yelled at.” He pouted and looked sidelong at Riley.

She felt a little guilty that she had also yelled at him. “I'm sorry, Trev. I do wish you'd have told me to expect you so early, but I'm sorry I yelled.”

“And used bad language.”

“And used bad language.”

Apparently satisfied, Trevor got up off his stool and sidled over to give her a squeeze and a Hollywood kiss, his cheek to her cheek. “Good. Now let’s asana your ass till it cries! And then—kiwi and honeydew smoothies for breakfast!”

~oOo~

After a grueling two-hour workout, Trevor made the advertised kiwi and honeydew smoothies, and they took them out on the terrace. Riley sat, a towel draped over her neck, and let the cool morning air dry the sweat from her body. It was one of her favorite things, to just sit out here after a workout and let the breeze and the view ease her body and spirit.

She loved this house, tucked into the Hollywood Hills. By celebrity standards, it was small, but it had a spectacular view of the city, and a gorgeous terraced lawn with a cozy terrazzo patio and a small pool. Wide windows and doors in the kitchen, living room, and master suite opened onto this view. When she was feeling neck deep in vapid Hollywood bullshit, she need only come out in the morning or evening, when the sky was banded with color, and be restored.

This particular moment was not as restorative as she would like, because Trevor was detailing the menu he’d prepared for her sojourn in the country. Left to her own devices, Riley tended a bit toward plump. Well, not plump, really, not by any standards away from Southern California, anyway, but her thighs got a bit heavy, and her belly pooched. So she was on a strict diet. The part of Desdemona was something of an action role, so she had to be strong, too. She couldn’t just eat grapefruit, or do a juice cleanse, or any of the other strange trends that had made the rounds. Trevor, with a degree in nutrition, worked hard, she knew, to make sure her vexingly liquid diet was truly healthy as well as calorie-conscious.

He’d just gone over the meals he’d arranged for ten days of travel. She should be home before then, but he wanted to make sure she wasn’t stranded without a meal plan. A lot of fruits and nuts and seeds, as usual. Riley missed hamburgers. Ooh—and chili cheese fries. With sour cream.

She sighed.

Trevor stopped and looked up, his brown eyes sharp. “You’re being quite the pouty puss about food today. What’s gotten into you? I’d know if

you needed medicinal chocolate. Wouldn't I?"

The one thing Trevor gave total gustatory carte blanche for was heartbreak. His philosophy about that was the heart wants what the heart wants, and when it can't have that, it should get anything else it wants. And it should bring a friend. Over the course of their friendship, the two of them had several times destroyed whole pizzas, pints of Cherry Garcia ice cream, bricks of chocolate, over her broken heart or his—while watching the tear-jerkiest of films in recorded history. But Riley's heart wasn't broken—or, at least, it wasn't a new break. It was on the mend. She didn't have any idea why all of a sudden she was waxing nostalgic about chili cheese fries, which she hadn't eaten since she was a teenager.

She shrugged. "Yeah, it's not that. I don't know. Just feeling out of sorts today. Not looking forward to this trip."

"A whole week surrounded by country boys and bikers? Girl, you need to change your perspective! All that leather! And ink! And oh, do you think they wear Stetsons? And go shirtless? If they do, you better get snaps!" Trevor sighed dreamily.

"Okay, okay. I'll try to send you clandestine beefcake snaps of shirtless cowboys and bikers. Are we done with the menu?"

"We are, ducks. I sent this to the manager at the hotel, and she's going to make sure that the kitchen has everything you need. As long as you behave yourself, you should be fine. I know I can trust you. No use having to work two months to undo a week of slip, right? We've learned that lesson, now, haven't we?"

Hades High had finished shooting for the season just more than a week ago. For the first couple of years of the show, Riley had taken some time off right after shooting ended—which meant that she'd stopped working out, stopped watching what she ate quite so closely, stopped setting her alarm, and just had a couple of weeks of whatever she wanted. But it had always been difficult to undo that damage and get back in the groove. So last year and this year, she kept on her schedule, her only change setting her alarm to two hours later in the morning.

"I'll behave." At that moment, her phone began playing a pop tune. Recognizing the assigned ring tone, Trevor rolled his eyes, picked up their empty smoothie glasses, and sauntered inside before Riley accepted the call.

"Hi, Mother."

Her mother jumped in with her usual chirpy gusto. “Morning, muffin! Did Trevor come this morning? I asked him to come early, so you’d be sure to get a good workout in before your trip.”

Of course her mother had set that up, and of course she hadn’t said anything to her. Riley had been working since she was four years old, and Eleanor Piedmont, her mother, had been her manager from the very first audition for a canned-spaghetti commercial. Eleanor kept twenty-six-year-old Riley in the loop about as much as she’d kept four-year-old Riley there.

As a child, she’d modeled, too, but when she stopped growing at just shy of an inch over five feet, the fashion industry stopped calling. Now, as a celebrity, she modeled a bit again, for makeup and hair product lines. She hated that a lot. The money was really great for not very much work, but there was no quicker way to understand that no one cared what was going on inside her head than to spend a day doing an ad for hair color.

“Yes, Trevor was here. Yes, he worked me out before sunrise. It would have been really awesome if somebody would have given me a hint about that plan, so maybe I would have gotten to bed before two o’clock.”

“Well, goodness! What were you doing up so late when you knew you were traveling today?”

She didn’t want to say. It wasn’t anybody’s business. But that argument never worked with Eleanor. “Reading, Mother. It was a good book, and I didn’t want to stop.”

“Ooh! Have a rec for me, then?”

She hadn’t actually been reading, so she almost stumbled over that dilemma, but she was a trained thespian, after all. “It was a murder mystery.”

“Ugh. I don’t know why you like those. With the guns and the crime and all that nonsense. Okay, well, I was calling to say that I changed the arrangement for the driver, and he’ll be there at nine-thirty instead of ten. I don’t know why you had Pru schedule for ten. That’s cutting it much too close.”

Riley sighed. She didn’t like getting to LAX too early, because she felt vulnerable and exposed at the airport, even in the first class lounge. She should have driven herself. But she didn’t want to leave her car in long term parking.

“Fine, Mother. I need to go. I need to shower and get ready, especially since I’ve just lost half an hour of prep time.”

“Okay, sweetie. I’ll talk to you in a bit. Remember—the weather changes a lot in the Midwest. Make sure Pru’s packed layers for you! And for her, too! Kisses!”

~oOo~

Once she’d gotten Trevor out of the house, with a full complement of hugs and kisses and fretting, Riley went in search of Pru. She hadn’t heard her come in or seen her lurking about, but her Prius was out front, her bags were in the foyer, and Riley had a good idea where she’d find her.

As expected, Pru was in the office, sitting at the glass desk with her Mac open in front of her. “Hey, Prudie. You snuck in this morning.”

Pru was two years younger than Riley and, in Riley’s estimation, just as pretty. She had glossy brown hair that she always wore doubled up in a messy ponytail, and she shared Riley’s light grey-green eyes. She was a few inches taller and, without Trevor kicking her ass regularly (not that she couldn’t join them if she wished), about twenty pounds heavier. On her right cheek, she had a small, light brown birthmark that looked quite a lot like a maple leaf. Riley had always thought that was the coolest thing about Pru’s looks. Pru hated it, though.

Their mothers had been sisters. Pru’s mother, Riley’s Aunt Blythe, had died when Pru was eleven. From then on, Pru and Riley had been raised as sisters. Except for the fact that Riley’s mom had big plans for her and not so much for Pru.

Pru closed the Mac and pushed her glasses up onto the bridge of her nose. “I did. I saw you outside with Trevor doing things with your body that looked unpleasant. So I just got to work. The prep packet the studio sent mentioned that internet and cell coverage was unpredictable in Signal Bend, so I wanted to try to get a jump on as much as I could, in case we end up radio silent.” She came around the desk. “I’ve set stuff aside, but I haven’t started packing yet, in case you wanted in on that. But we need to get moving. Your mother changed the pickup.”

“I know. Eleanor always knows better. Yeah, I want to pack my own clothes. Let’s get to it.”

~oOo~

Riley and Pru packed, and then Riley showered, dressed, and primed. She'd have loved to travel in comfy clothes—she envied the women who traveled in yoga pants and t-shirts—but she lived in fear of being the subject of one of those awful paparazzi shots, looking like a slob and wearing no makeup. So she never, ever left the house undone. Ever. Maybe if her house ever caught fire. But only then.

So to travel to the middle of the country in fall, she wore her softest pair of skinny jeans, a sheer, slub-knit tunic tee with a black camisole underneath, a funky scarf looped around her neck, and her favorite suede coat. She almost wore her matching suede boots, but they had 4-inch heels, as most of her shoes did (got to get height somewhere). She was heading to the country, and who knew what kind of terrain she'd have to walk on—did they even have paved sidewalks? So she instead grabbed a pair of cowboy boots she'd worn for Halloween a couple of years back.

Marta knocked on the open door as Pru and Riley were closing up the bags. “Miss Riley, the car is here.”

“Thanks, Marta. We'll be down in a few minutes.” The housekeeper nodded and picked up two of the bags that were closest to the door.

When Riley and Pru lugged the rest of the bags down and out to the front, a black limo was parked outside, and Joe, her favorite driver, was leaning against the rear fender, waiting.

He smiled and opened the rear door, the trunk of the limo coming up at the same time. “Hello, lovely ladies.”

“Joe! Glad it's you!” But as Riley approached the door he'd opened, she saw that the limo already had a passenger. Her mother. She cast a betrayed eye at Joe, who'd been around long enough to know very well that Riley treasured her moments free from her mother's keep. He shrugged, abashed, but said nothing. She understood. Nobody said no to Eleanor. Not for long.

“Mother. Why are you in my ride?” The thought that Eleanor had somehow finagled her way onto this trip had Riley feeling suddenly panicked. She slid in and sat at the side. Pru followed her and sat next to Eleanor. Riley gave her cousin a good, hard look and decided that her mother had surprised them both. Good. At least they weren't all in cahoots against her.

“Don't worry, muffin. I'm just along for the ride to the airport. I wanted to make absolutely certain everything was in order, and I wanted to

give you a proper goodbye. I can't remember the last time we've been apart so long."

Because it hadn't happened before. Eleanor always came everywhere. It had caused a substantial amount of drama when it became clear that there would be no convenient accommodations for an entourage larger than one, and Riley had worked her best persuasive magic to make Eleanor think that it was her idea to have Pru go instead of her. "Mother, I am capable of packing and getting myself to the airport. Especially since I have Pru with me."

"Oh, please. I know. I just want to go over what the studio is expecting and what I've set up with the people in that town. Sign Post or whatever it's called. The manager of the bed and breakfast you're staying in will be your main contact point. Shannon Ryan is her name. She will liaise with the motorcycle people and with the woman you're playing—Lilli. Who owns that bed and breakfast, by the way. Everything seems very tangled together in that place. I double checked, and Shannon has your menu. There's not a gym anywhere around, but the motorcycle people have a workout room at their...clubhouse, I think she called it. I don't much like the sound of that, but if you have your yoga mat, maybe you can just do some yoga in your room."

Riley had been trying to block her mother's chatter out, but she couldn't. She was tired. She had it handled. She wasn't going to Siberia or something, and she was sick of listening to all the ways everybody had her life worked out for her. "Mother! Enough! Everything's arranged. I'm going to be gone a week. I'm sure I'll manage any hardships that arise. I'm not exactly roughing it."

Eleanor laughed at that. "Oh, sweetheart. Wait until you see. It's not the Marmont, that's for sure. And I don't know how in touch we'll be able to be while you're gone. I keep hearing that cell reception is a bit spotty in most places out there."

That was the best part, as far as Riley was concerned. She might just turn her phone off. If she could convince Pru to do so as well, it might be an okay week.

Finally, they arrived at LAX, checked their bags with a skycap, and sent Joe and Eleanor away with a wave.

Riley gave her long, blonde hair a flip and hooked arms with Pru. "Okay. Onward to the heartland."

CHAPTER TWO

Bart sat at the bar, alone in the dim Hall of the Night Horde MC clubhouse, his main laptop open in front of him. He wasn't working. Mostly he was daydreaming, bouncing around entertainment and gossip websites, killing time until Isaac, the MC President, showed up. Isaac liked to be the last one in. He wanted to walk in and get straight to work. Waiting around pissed him off mightily, so pretty much all the Horde made a point to get in early when they were meeting the boss or were due in the Keep. Bart didn't have far to go; he still lived in the clubhouse. He'd never had much interest in finding a place of his own. There was an eighty-inch television on the wall and a fully stocked bar right here. And chicks to do his laundry and clean his room. Seemed stupid to lay money out for something else.

He was perusing the results of a Google image search when the front door opened, and Isaac walked in, hooking his shades into his kutte pocket. Quickly, Bart minimized the photo of Riley Chase wearing a very small bikini, then turned and stood. He was six feet tall, and he worked out, but he always felt like a shrimpy little shit when he stood next to Isaac, who had seven inches on him and maybe eighty pounds, all of it muscle. "Hey, boss."

"Morning, Bartholomew. Got an update?"

He did. Isaac sat on an adjacent stool, and Bart took his own seat again. "Everything's good to go. Tanner Stafford and Riley Chase are due in this afternoon. Douglas Warness and Peter Gruen are in the day after tomorrow. Everybody else is coming in just for a night or two, next week. The only snag is Lindy Timmons."

"Who's that again?" Isaac had gotten impatient with the movie a long time ago, and he was relying on Bart more and more to be the one in charge of the details. Frankly, it scared the crap out of him. He'd already fucked up once this year—or, at least, Isaac thought he'd fucked up—by not finding out that Showdown's old lady had put a kid up for adoption when she was eighteen. Not that he would have found the info on a twenty-year-old closed adoption by hacking. Those records were probably still paper—or, at a minimum, even assuming that an adoption agency twenty years ago had been digitized, records that old were probably stored offline. But still, intel was his job, and as far as Isaac was concerned, he'd dropped that ball.

“She’s playing Daisy. They made that role bigger in the rewrite, when we made them pull back on the details about what Lilli went through. She’s coming in to talk to people about Daisy. She’s only staying a day or two, but Show doesn’t want to meet with her.”

Daisy, Show’s oldest daughter, had been killed horribly in the violence with Lawrence Ellis, the powerful druglord Signal Bend and the Night Horde had ultimately defeated—all of which was the focus of the movie coming to town. Lilli had been kidnapped and tortured. Neither she nor Isaac—nor anybody else—wanted to make the details of that ordeal public. Show had offered to cooperate, giving Hollywood Daisy’s story in detail. He’d talked at length with the screenwriters several months back. But the prospect of sitting down with the girl who would play his daughter had him unsettled.

Isaac nodded. “I’ll talk to him. Won’t lean on him—if he doesn’t want to talk to her, then she’ll have to figure it out on her own. But I’ll talk to him. What else?”

“That’s pretty much it. The gossip sites have been pretty quiet about this trip. The studio has the lid on, I guess, so I don’t think we’ll see reporters around this week. It’ll be a different story if they do any location shooting. But for now, it’s just the actors and whoever they bring with them. The B&B is booked solid. I’m going to take the B&B van and pick up Riley and Tanner, and their people, this afternoon.”

Isaac lifted an eyebrow at that, and Bart felt his cheeks warm. Everybody else in the clubhouse hated the idea of the movie, but Bart was excited. He was online a lot. It was his job to be online a lot. And he was a geek. He loved movies, and television—especially cult shows—and video games. Not ashamed of it, either. So he knew who all these people coming into town were. He was a fan of *Hades High*, and he thought Riley Chase was fucking hot. Pretty badass, too. To top it all off, she’d voiced a main character from one of the best video games of all time. She had a sexy damn voice. And she was single. She had been since her last boyfriend, Devon Gaines, frontman for The Laughing Warriors, had fatally OD’d, not long after Christmas.

Bart didn’t know if that meant anything for him, but it was probably the best shot he’d ever have. Even if she was still in mourning, he thought he could work that. He could try, anyway.

“The studio *asked* somebody to pick them up. This week is supposed to be about them getting a feel for the town. No limos. They’re supposed to blend in.”

“With the riffraff, yeah. Okay, whatever.”

“Tanner’s going to want to meet you as soon as possible. And Riley will want to meet Lilli. I know she’s pissed, but—”

“They cast a tiny teen Barbie to play her. Pissed isn’t quite the word. But we’re both in.” He grinned. “Omen’s babysitting again, right? He can bring ‘em to the clubhouse tonight. They want to see what it’s like to be Horde, we’ll show ‘em.”

They were having a Friday night party. Bart thought that was a singularly horrible idea. “We really want to start their stay here off like that?”

Isaac got a look that Bart knew well. It said, *I meant what I said, asshole*. So he shrugged. Okay, then.

“Anything else?” Isaac’s tone indicated that if there was anything else, it should be crucially important. Isaac was a good guy and a great President, but he did not have the world’s coolest head. His patience was always short, and where the movie was concerned, it had lapsed some time ago. Bart, whose job it was to keep abreast of that situation, had become a focal point for Isaac’s frustration.

“Nope. I’m heading to Keyes to finish a tranny job, then I’ll grab the B&B van and get to the Springfield airport.”

With a terse nod, Isaac stood. “Good. You need backup?” He smirked. His patience might have run out, but his enjoyment at ribbing Bart had not.

Bart was just going to have to ride the ridicule out. Everybody knew he was into the Hollywood invasion. And fuck, fucking *movie stars* were coming to town to play *them*. Peter fucking Gruen was playing him. Tanner motherfucking Stafford was playing Isaac. And Riley Chase, last year’s Sexiest Woman Alive, was playing Lilli. Come on! How could he be the only one who thought this was cool?

But he was. Everybody else was either suspicious about the movie, or contemptuous, or both. He was totally alone in his enthusiasm, and he was getting buried in heaps of shit. It wasn’t the first time. There were a few things that separated Bart from the rest of the Horde. His love of gaming, his collection of comic books and science fiction and fantasy

books, his lack of interest in football (he liked soccer and rugby), his college degree, and the fact that Signal Bend was not his hometown.

He was the black sheep, for sure. But he was essential, and he held his own. He could hack almost anything, fix just about any engine ever made, build almost anything out of metal and rubber, and ride faster and surer than anyone save Isaac and Len.

And he had blood on his hands, just like the rest.

~oOo~

The morning's conversation with Isaac ate at Bart a little while he worked. He knew he had the respect of his President and the whole club. He'd proven himself handily, and he knew it. Fuck, he'd pretty much saved Lilli, finding her and then getting the Horde into the building she was being held in. From a hundred miles away. He was good. But he still felt just a step outside the circle.

He wasn't truly an outsider, even though he hadn't been raised here. His father had been, and his grandparents had lived here until they died, within days of each other. His father had joined the Navy right out of high school and had never moved back home. Bart's family—parents, brother, sister, and him—had moved around a lot, finally settling in Kansas City after his father left the service, when Bart was in middle school. From the time he was twelve until his second year of college, Bart had spent summers in Signal Bend, helping out on the farm. In high school and college, he'd hung around the clubhouse. He knew these guys. And they knew him. Wyatt had taught him to ride, and Hav had helped him rebuild an old shovelhead. His first Harley. He didn't ride that beauty now, but sometimes he'd go out into the bay it was stored in and pet it a little. His baby.

After he graduated from the University of Kansas, he'd gotten a straight job in K.C., writing code. Living at home with his folks. He'd fucking hated it. God, he'd hated it. He'd hated the people, he'd hated how everything was covered in grey carpet, he'd hated it all. All of it. He'd never been so miserable in his entire fucking life.

One day, about a year into that hell, while he was sitting in a staff meeting, not listening to some midlevel fuck droning on about some midlevel policy change, wondering how the universe had managed to allow

writing fucking code, which to Bart had always been like having a magic key to everything, to be so unbelievably boring, he heard the roar of a Harley. They were seven stories up and locked behind a bank of stiflingly grey windows, the kind that didn't open so you couldn't throw yourself out, but he could hear that roar like the bike was in the room with him. Nothing else sounded like a Harley. When he was younger, he'd dallied briefly with the European racing bikes, the Ducatis and BMWs, but then he'd found somebody online offering the dismembered bones of a '67 Harley Electro Glide for \$200. He'd hauled the parts to Signal Bend that summer, the summer right before his senior year of high school, and Hav had helped him build it. It was Harleys from then on.

Which was good, because the Horde didn't ride anything but.

On that grey day in that grey room, hearing that bright, fiery, ferocious sound, that red-hot sound, Bart just stood up and walked out. He said nothing. He went to his workstation and grabbed his coat and nothing else, and he walked out, knowing full well that he was fucking any chance he'd have to get another straight job like this. And he didn't care. The next morning, he was on his shovelhead, all the belongings he cared about in his studded leather saddlebags or in the pack on his back. He headed for Signal Bend. Hav sponsored him, and he was a Prospect within the week. That was seven years ago. With the exception of a 15-month stint inside for computer fraud, he'd been settled in Signal Bend and with the Horde since.

So he wasn't an outsider. But he wasn't quite one of them, either. He hadn't experienced the deep decline of the town in any direct way. He'd known his folks were keeping his grandparents afloat, and he knew most of the farmland his Gramps had owned had been sold off to an agricorp, but not until Gramps was too infirm to work it. So he'd been no more than a witness to the losses, not a victim. That, if nothing else, set him apart. He wasn't fighting for his home the way everybody else was.

But until the shootout that had garnered so much attention from outside the town, no one had treated him like he was not fully one of them. In fact, going to prison for the club tended to have a cementing effect—which was good, because his blood family had more or less washed their hands of him over that. When the town was in decline, he was just one of the guys. He had skills the others didn't, and he had interests they considered “citified,” but he felt like he fit in pretty well.

It was the resurgence of the town that had drawn the distinction most clearly. He lived in the twenty-first century. Signal Bend had been stuck somewhere around 1960. In the past two years, they'd been yanked forward into the present. And Bart had done a lot of the yanking. Or, more accurately, the Horde had done the yanking, but with Bart's ideas, for the most part. The things Bart knew about and could do set him in stark relief, even to Isaac, who was pretty tech savvy, all things considered.

It had all started with his Kickstarter idea. After the fallout, when they were trying to get back on their feet, it had been Bart's idea to use Kickstarter to capitalize on the town's renown. It had been huge success, pulling in a lot of money to fund repairs to the town. But a lot of the Horde, even while they were approving the idea, thought it ran against the grain of the club and the town. Maybe they were right. They probably were. But change was necessary. It was that or continue dying. The Kickstarter and the movie were making the public's attention do something good for the town. Even if it also meant that they had to run things in new and unfamiliar ways.

Even if it meant welcoming strangers to shop in their stores and stay in their bed and breakfast and eat at their restaurants. Even if it meant letting Hollywood people come in and make a movie about the worst and best day in the town's long history.

He knew that most of the Horde—everybody but C.J.—hadn't questioned his ideas because he had been so instrumental in Lilli's rescue, and he had been riding a high of his brothers' regard. What he could do with a keyboard was as much like magic to most of the Horde as it still kinda was to Bart himself. He hadn't known he could do half the things he'd done that awful day, and he'd done it literally with one hand tied up—he'd been shot in the shoulder in the earlier firefight. He had some whiz-bang shine left over after that success, and they hadn't questioned his ideas.

But once those ideas were in place and doing exactly what he said they'd do, the Horde and the town experienced some hard growing pains. They'd been dying, but they'd been doing it privately, just the few hundred souls who'd been sticking it out. Now they were reviving, which meant that they needed to be more open and welcoming, and they'd needed to cool it with some of the colorful local customs—like bar fights as entertainment, for instance. That wore hard on the men of the town, the Horde especially.

They were working on solving that problem.

In the meantime, Bart, who was excited about the changes and openly enthusiastic about the movie deal, was getting a lot of heat for bringing all this new shit into town. He was hoping one day that heat would become credit. He knew everybody knew, deep down, that what they were doing was a good thing. Some day they'd act like it and stop bitching about people wanting to take their picture. He hoped.

He let his thoughts wander around in that territory, feeling prickly and morose, as he worked on Bob Sanderson's tractor—his straight job these days, a mechanic at Keyes Implement & Repair. When he finished, he was running later than he liked. He was grease to his elbows, and scrubbing with Lava soap and the never-hot water in the squalid garage john wasn't getting him clean. So he booked it to the clubhouse and showered in his room, where he had a good hand brush.

He needed to get to the B&B to pick up the van—the club van was too ratty for the likes of Riley Chase and Tanner Stafford—but he took a couple of extra minutes and put some goop in his hair, finger combing it sort of messily straight up. Then he put fresh jeans and a clean white t-shirt on and shrugged on his kutte. One more look in the mirror. That was as good as it got. He grabbed his watch from the dresser and wrapped the wide leather band around his wrist. He liked wearing a watch. It was old school.

Bart took a look at that watch as he closed the buckle. Shit. Shit. He was going to be late.

CHAPTER THREE

The flight, for the most part, was uneventful. On the first leg, Riley and Pru sat directly across the aisle from Tanner and his assistant, Mark. There were no direct flights from LAX to Springfield, so they laid over in Dallas for a couple of hours. In the Dallas first class lounge, Tanner, who'd barely made the flight in L.A., came over to Riley and Pru's table with drinks and managed to send Pru packing in short order. She wandered over to chat with Mark, and Tanner made himself comfortable on the bench seat next to Riley.

She had not worked with Tanner before. Film-wise, he was a class above her, routinely headlining Oscar-bait films, while Riley worked primarily in television and cranked out a rom-com during her hiatus. Fame-wise, though, they were on the same level. And they were represented by agents in the same agency. So they moved in many of the same circles and thus were fairly well acquainted with each other. Not friends, not pals, but they'd chatted a few times at parties and dinners and events.

Tanner had a storied reputation for romancing his leading ladies. Probably the last eight or ten movies had had him linked hotly with his co-star. By all accounts, he was pure torrid intensity and a truly epic lay, until about a week after the premiere, at which point he was gone. A few of those blazing and brief "relationships" had become public relations tangles for him (he'd left a pregnant non-industry girlfriend for one co-star), but in the end he always managed to come out unmussed. People liked bad boys far better than they liked bad girls. Beautiful British bad boys whose eyes crinkled when they smiled could probably drown puppies by the basketful and still get a pass.

The gossip press was already anticipating the "Rilanner" show, but Riley was not interested in that kind of drama. It helped that she also didn't think he was all that hot. Sure, she could appreciate that he was beautiful—tall and chiseled, with bright green eyes and shampoo-model-gorgeous dark hair (it was long now, for the role, she guessed, so all the more shiny and shampoo-y). But that was kind of the problem, as far as Riley was concerned. Too pretty. And much, much too aware of it. He wasn't a bad guy, overall, if you weren't sleeping with him, but he was vain. Even by Hollywood standards. He was extremely good looking and extremely

talented, and that somehow made the vanity even worse. The guy could spare a little humility. Honestly.

Riley liked her men a little more used. Like Devon. Devon had been gorgeous in her eyes. With his dreads and his moth-eaten, stretched-out sweaters, and his pierced lip—she'd really loved that pierced lip—and his lean, spare frame. And his eyes. God, those big, brown eyes. She'd really loved the way he'd looked. She'd really loved him, period.

Best not to spend too much time dwelling there. She'd spent plenty of time there the night before, playing Laughing Warriors videos until the wee hours, sitting in the middle of her bed with her MacBook and her silly box of relationship keepsakes.

He'd died almost nine months ago. She was supposed to be ready to move on, apparently. She thought she might be. And then she thought she might not. A death was not a breakup. It wasn't the end of a relationship, the death of feeling. She could be angry at him, and she was. He'd only been out of rehab for barely more than a week, and he'd promised her. But she couldn't stop feeling. She couldn't move on, because he couldn't move on. There was no closure to be had. Only finality.

She seriously needed to stop thinking about this. She was getting herself caught in a loop. Maybe this trip to Hicksville was what she needed—away from her life, her mother, her keepsake box. She hadn't wanted to come, but maybe there was some head-clearing to be had.

But in the immediate, Tanner was sitting next to her giving her meaningful looks. He was going to be disappointed; she was going to break his streak. She wouldn't be moving on with him, not even in a reboundy way. Because he was not her type.

She didn't have a type, *per se*, though—not a physical one, anyway. She had a personality type, an emotional type. She wasn't sure she understood what it was, exactly, but she knew it when she saw it. And Tanner Stafford did not have it.

So she was on her guard when he shooed Pru away and then stretched his arm across the back of the booth, behind her, and leaned in.

“Riley Chase. You and I are to be lovers.” He gave her a crinkly smile and picked up a loose curl of her hair from her chest—just above her boob—and laced it through his fingers.

She pulled her hair free from his grasp. “You mean our characters. Yes. It appears so.”

He leaned in a little closer. “We shall have to spend some time together, of course, to find the seed of our chemistry.”

Shall. Did people in the twenty-first century actually say *shall* in casual conversation? Maybe it was a British thing. She smiled at him and leaned away. “You know about Debra Winger and Richard Gere in *An Officer and a Gentleman*?”

He cocked his head and crinkled at her some more. “Indeed. Quite the grand love story, that. What say you and I aim even higher?”

“They hated each other. All that intensity on the screen was loathing, not love. Maybe we should try that.”

His crinkles faltered for a second and then recovered. “Are you saying you *loathe* me, love? I can’t believe I’ve done anything to deserve that.”

“You haven’t. I’m saying that I’m not interested in anything but the job. You’d have a better chance getting me to loathe you than love you, especially with this shtick. So let’s just stick to pretend.”

He lifted his hand and tucked it underneath the scarf she had loosely looped around her neck, laying his palm on her chest, his fingers lightly at her throat. It was an offensively intimate gesture. What he said made it worse: “Ah, right. The grieving heart. But that was some time ago. It’s time you healed.”

Fed up with his little seduction game and now pissed the fuck off, Riley slapped his hand away. “Don’t underestimate me, Tanner. Nothing about you is attractive to me. But I’m a good actor. So are you. We don’t need to be in love to play lovers. We need to be good actors. So this whole thing you’ve got going on here is a waste of your time.”

It had been her relationship with Devon that had taught Riley this important fact, among other things: never try to throw somebody out of a fight—or, in this case, a disagreement. Trying to control somebody else’s actions was too difficult, and invariably resulted in the other person getting the last word. If you needed to be apart, you had to be the one to go. So she scooted out off the bench and went to the bar to grab Pru and drag her to the bathroom, leaving Tanner sitting alone in the booth.

She snuck a peek on their way to the ladies’ and was gratified to see him looking confounded. Good. What a douchebag.

While he wasn't exactly chastened, Tanner did leave her alone during the rest of the layover. During the flight, when he and Mark sat in the row in front of Riley and Pru, they both turned around a couple of times to talk to the women, but only in a cordial way. So he was on much better behavior. Still, Riley put her earbuds in and closed her eyes. She didn't turn any music on, but the pretense was enough to give her some alone time, and she made the most of it until she landed in...she couldn't remember the name of the town where the airport was. Not Signal Bend. But somewhere in Missouri.

The foursome walked unaccosted through the airport. Riley had girded herself for the usual gauntlet, and she sensed Tanner do the same, but no one seemed to recognize them—or, if they did, no one seemed to care. As they approached the baggage claim, Riley did notice a group of young women standing near a gift shop, and it looked like they did, in fact, recognize them. But they kept their distance and only stared and giggled amongst themselves. Strange. In the major cities, people gawked openly and were always bold about asking for—or even demanding—autographs and photographs. But here they were left alone. Huh.

When they got to the baggage claim, they looked around but saw no one there to greet them. That was unusual, but so was this whole trip, so Riley and Pru went to the carousel and collected their bags. Tanner huffed and had Mark do the same.

Riley was deciding that maybe her impression of Tanner Stafford as an okay guy, overall, had been excessively generous. At least today, he was behaving like a toad.

Not sure quite what to do, they stood in a little cluster around their bags, several feet away from the baggage belt. Pru and Mark both had their phones out, trying to track down whatever transportation had been arranged. Riley realized that she didn't even know who or what was supposed to pick them up. She never knew details like that, but standing here in this little airport, she felt like she should know. Like she was beginning to understand why everybody else controlled her life.

She caught a flurry of movement out of the corner of her eye and turned to look. A man in black was striding quickly toward them, almost a trot—their ride. She just knew. Instead of a suited driver with a pre-printed card, this was a man holding a piece of cardboard which looked like it had

been torn from the side of the box. Neatly hand-lettered with black marker was the notation: *Signal Bend Crew*. Was that them? Were they the Signal Bend Crew? Considering the grin on the face of the man holding the sign and running toward him, she supposed they were.

He had a sweet, open smile. A little crooked. Straight, white teeth, but not Hollywood straight and white, all bleach and caps. His were natural. Nice. That nice smile led her to look him over more fully in the few moments it took him to reach them. Short-ish, dark blond hair, sort of intentionally messy, sticking up in all directions from his head. Long sideburns, but otherwise clean-shaven. On the tall side, but shorter than Tanner. Broader, though, across the shoulders. Nice shoulders, in fact, under a bright white t-shirt.

He was wearing a black leather vest with a narrow, rectangular white patch on the left breast and a larger, curving patch on the bottom right. The smaller was embroidered with the phrase: *Never Say Die*. The larger with the word *HORDE*. Yep. This was their guy. Riley's first encounter with an actual outlaw biker. She wondered which one this was. He was pretty cute.

He took the last few steps toward them, dropping the sign to his side and holding out his right hand, first to Riley. "Hi, I'm Bart. I'm your ride into Signal Bend. Sorry I'm late."

She took his hand, noting the muscular forearm with the elaborate tattoo on the inside, from wrist to elbow, the three thin, braided leather bands around his wrist, and the glint of the heavy rings on his fingers. His grip was strong, and his hand felt hot and almost like sandpaper.

His eyes were grey. She smiled up at them. "Hi, Bart. I'm Riley. This is my cousin, Pru." Aggravated with Tanner's cocksure behavior, she intentionally put Pru before him; that arrogant d-bag needed a timeout.

Bart held out his hand to Pru with the same wide, crooked smile. "Hi, Pru. Nice to meet you." Pru smiled and nodded as she shook his hand, but she said nothing.

Riley had expected something different from her first encounter with a big, scary biker. More growling and less grinning, she supposed. She'd googled bikers at home and had seen lots of pictures of older, angry-looking, heavysset men with wild beards, weird tattoos, and weirder scars. Bart was young, in his late twenties or early thirties, maybe, and practically

fresh-faced, though there was something serious in his eyes. His very nice eyes.

Tanner had given Bart's offered hand a perfunctory shake. Mark had been more polite. Then Tanner walked away from the stack of bags without picking up a single one, and Bart did something wonderful.

He said, "Hey, buddy. I'm your ride, not your bitch. If you can't manage, there's carts over there. Van's right out front. I'll meet you out there."

Then Riley's new favorite biker turned, smiled sweetly at her, and picked up her bags and Pru's—all of them. "This way, ladies," he said.

Riley couldn't resist one smug smirk sent Tanner's way. He was staring stupidly. It wasn't often that Tanner Stafford got put in his place so nonchalantly.

~oOo~

The van was long and white, with a sign on the side that read *Keller Acres Bed & Breakfast, Signal Bend*, and a phone number below that. It took Tanner and Mark several minutes to work out the luggage cart and get their bags onto it. They probably didn't need the cart, but neither of them had the sense to realize it. By the time they were out at the curb, Bart had Riley and Pru's bags in the back, and Riley had taken the shotgun seat and Pru the window seat immediately behind Bart. Bart sat behind the wheel and watched Tanner and Mark in the rearview mirror as they got their bags in back themselves. He was grinning. He looked over at Riley and blushed when she grinned back at him.

Finally, Tanner and Mark climbed in and sat down. Tanner looked vexed, but he said nothing. Mark was texting—probably to Tanner's agent and/or manager to complain. She couldn't imagine the leather-clad guy with the long wallet chain and the heavy boots who was driving this bus cared much about the complaint being lodged.

"Okay, everybody. We're about an hour out, little less if I can get some clear road. How 'bout some tunes?" He turned on the stereo, and AC/DC started banging out "Highway to Hell." Riley snorted, then put her hand up to her mouth, embarrassed. Bart didn't look her way, but he was still grinning.

He pulled away from the curb and followed the road out of the airport. They were on their way to the famous biker town. And Riley was feeling much better about the upcoming week. So far, she liked bikers just fine.

~oOo~

Well under an hour after they pulled away from the airport loading zone, Bart crested a rise in a white gravel road, and Riley's breath stopped. Oh, so pretty. They were at the top of ridge to a low valley, and below them, as Bart drove on, was a sight from a postcard—or, no. A painting in a museum.

The house, which Riley assumed was the hotel, or B&B or whatever, was big and bright white. Two stories, with a broad wraparound porch. The sun was low in the sky, painting pinks and purples across the white façade of the house. Across the broad, sparkling white drive and lot was a long barn, painted deep red, with exactly the white trim—including Xs on the doors—that a barn like this should have.

There was an enclosed field in front of the barn, and several horses grazed lazily on grass. As Bart pulled up near the house and parked, Riley saw a black and white dog sitting on top of a small stack of hay bales, watching the field behind the barn. Oh—he was watching goats, who were grazing back there.

On one side of all this quiet loveliness was a dense forest; on the other a wide expanse of farmland. Riley had lived in Los Angeles her whole life, so she didn't know much about farmland, but she was pretty sure she was looking at corn that was ready for the harvest—tall stalks of green and brown, with filmy strands on top.

Everything was green and white and red and yellow and brown, the colors all so vivid they were almost heavy. Then she got out of the van, and took a deep breath. The road had been hilly and winding, and she'd been feeling a little whoopsie. A few deep breaths, though, and her stomach settled. The air here was fresh and rich, with a damp cool about it that was utterly unlike the air L.A. had to offer. Finding good air in Southern California required a trip to the mountains.

She wandered away from the van as everybody else was piling out and Bart was opening the doors at the back. She could hear the goats

bleating, and she walked that direction, toward the black and white dog. He was pretty. Or she. Whichever. Pretty. He turned his head as she approached and thumped his tail once against the hay bale, then turned back to watch his goats.

There were maybe a dozen goats, all different. Some were big, with heavy horns, some small, with only stubs. Some were standing and others lying, but they were all eating. Riley saw that they weren't in an enclosure. They were loose on this back lawn, only the dog keeping them in line. Not that they looked like they were in any big hurry to make a break for it.

She heard a sharp whistle, and the dog jumped off his perch and trotted to the goats. As soon as he hit the ground, they stopped eating and watched him. And with pure, complacent docility, they turned in the direction he herded them and ambled to the barn. Standing at the wide doors into which they were being led was a lean guy with long, reddish hair pulled back in a ponytail. He saw her and nodded; she smiled and waved, and he rubbed his dog's head and followed the animals into the barn.

That was it. No gawking, no running up for an autograph. He just nodded and went on about his business.

"Riley? Are you coming in?" Pru was coming up behind her.

"Yeah. It's pretty here, huh? Quiet."

Pru nodded, but she made a little face, wrinkling her nose. "Yeah. Kinda smells like fertilizer, though. Which I guess makes sense."

Riley took another deep breath, because she hadn't noticed anything unpleasant. She still didn't. The air smelled sweet and new to her. She shrugged and let Pru lead her back toward the front. She noticed that the van was parked next to two big, black motorcycles. The guys, though, must already have gone inside the hotel. The house. Whatever. They went up onto the porch and through the glass-front door.

The room they walked into was kind of a cross between a hotel lobby and a living room. There were two big sofas facing each other, with two armchairs clustered at each end. Along one wall was the front desk. A staircase rose with a subtle sweep up to a second floor. To one side of the front desk was a glass-front door that looked like it led into a hallway. To the other side was a solid swinging door. Probably the kitchen. Off to the left, up a step and past the staircase, were closed double doors.

Everything was open and light and tasteful. It didn't feel like a hotel. Or like a house. It certainly wasn't a creepy Victorian filled with faded

floral damask. Or cats.

Their bags were stacked near the foot of the staircase. Tanner, Mark, Bart, and another guy—wearing a black leather vest nearly identical to Bart’s, so another biker—were standing near the front desk. A tall woman, statuesque and beautiful, with dark red hair that curled over her shoulders, was behind the desk entering something into a laptop.

“Come on. They’re checking in.” Pru pulled a little on the sleeve of Riley’s jacket, and she followed her to the desk.

The redhead smiled warmly and held out her hand across the desk as Riley approached.

They shook. “Hi, Riley, Pru. I’m Shannon Ryan, the manager. I’m just going over some of the details, and then Steve will show you up to your rooms.”

As advertised, she went over the details. Riley let Pru pay attention to all that, and instead she looked around some more. The other biker was young, and his patch, actually, was different, now that she could see the back. Bart’s had big patches on the back—one that curved across the top, reading “Night Horde”; another that curved across the bottom, reading “Missouri”; a large graphic in the middle of an angry horse’s head with a mane of fire; and then a small square patch near it that read, simply, “MC.” The other biker’s vest had only one patch, on the bottom, reading “Prospect.” The same word was sewn onto the left front breast of the vest.

Riley had done a little research, so she knew that a “Prospect” was, like, auditioning for a place in the club. She didn’t know what that audition entailed, but it explained why he looked so young, she guessed.

Apparently done with her spiel, Shannon handed keys—actual keys—over to Riley, Pru, Tanner, and Mark. Then another guy whom Riley had not noticed came forward and started collecting bags. Bart nodded at the other biker, the Prospect, and he, too, went to pick up some bags and follow the bellboy—did little places like this have bellboys?

“Well, then,” Tanner turned to Bart. “Where’s a bloke likely to find a pint in these ‘yer parts?” He spoke the last few words in a broad, cowboy drawl, smirking a little as he did.

Riley thought he probably meant to offend, but Bart didn’t take it. He simply smiled. “We’re having a little...get-together at the clubhouse tonight. Isaac and Lilli will be there. The rest of the club and a lot of the town, too. We’ve got a full bar, and we’ll have plenty of food. ‘Round eight

o'clock, we're usually getting a good start. Omen's gonna be driving you guys around this week, so let him know when you're ready to go." He turned back to Shannon, still standing behind the desk. "You be there tonight?"

Shannon looked not entirely pleased by what Bart had said, but she smiled. "I can probably stop in."

"Okay, then." Bart pushed away from the desk and walked through the cluster of people, heading to the front door. Riley was a little bummed.

"Hey, Bart—thanks for the ride."

He turned back to her and gave her that crooked smile. Crooked was better than crinkly. Definitely.

"Welcome. I'll see you guys later." He went out the door.

As they were heading up the stairs to their rooms, Riley heard a loud engine roar—must have been Bart starting his engine. Loud as it was, it was a good sound.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bart was pretty proud of himself for keeping his cool around Tanner and Riley. He'd been afraid he'd be a drooling moron, especially when he'd been late and had run into the airport, but then he was there, and they were there, and they were just people. And Tanner Stafford was an entitled asshole. That dulled any possible starshine right quick. Bart supposed lots of celebrities were used to other people doing for them, but watching Tanner strut around like he was in charge of the world reminded Bart that these were just people who played dress-up for a living. They were going to play people who'd actually bled for the truth their fiction was based on.

And suddenly, Bart hadn't been nervous or intimidated at all.

Where Tanner had given off the strong whiff of shithead, Riley had been quiet and sweet, most of her face hiding behind big, dark sunglasses. She was so little! He'd seen her headshot, so he'd known her stats. About five-one. Which he knew was short, but standing next to her, he'd still been surprised by how he towered over her. She was like a sprite, even in those fancy cowboy boots with the colorful flowers all over them.

Her assistant, Pru, was pretty hot, too. Taller, rounder, brunette rather than blonde, but obviously related. Cousin, he thought Riley had said. She had a funky little mark on her cheek, and a tendency to pull her hair forward on that side. She almost had an air about her of being in charge. Riley seemed to step back and let Pru take care of things, which was the opposite of how Tanner was with his friend, whose name Bart couldn't remember.

He felt conflicted about them coming to the clubhouse tonight, and he could tell that Shannon did, too. Things could get pretty crazy at a Horde party. Lots of public indecency. Fighting. Things that the Hollywood set probably only knew in make-believe. If Tanner was an asshole to a drunk Horde, he could end up not being quite so pretty.

Actually, that was an upside.

Bringing Riley and Pru into that, though—that could be dangerous.

Club girls, regulars, knew what they were getting into. New girls got told what to expect. The Horde were decent guys and treated women, overall, pretty well. Or, more or less. Depending on what “pretty well” meant. Most of them didn't have a lot of interest in what women had to say,

but they weren't violent with them, and they didn't force them. Isaac and Show had old ladies and barely even looked twice at the club girls. Badger was still shy and waited for a girl to move on him. Bart had a couple of favorites. C.J. did, too—older women he'd been banging for years. Len and Havoc could be rough, but they went for the girls they knew were up for it. Len preferred a roomful. Vic was the only one the girls worried about. But he'd been better, since all that shit with Marissa Halyard.

Bart didn't like to think about that. He did a lot better if he managed to push that to the back of his head. That was nightmare shit. Pretty much everything that had happened two years ago—almost exactly two years ago—was like something out of a fucking horror movie.

He laughed at the thought. Hollywood was here to *make* that movie. But they weren't getting the horror parts. They were making some high-toned drama about the strength of the human spirit. He supposed that was the story, too.

Anyway, the club girls knew what was what. And they knew that when the night got late and the snoots got full, the guys got rougher. Bringing women into a straight-up Horde party who weren't there as pussy got complicated, unless they were known to be with someone. Because unattached girls just didn't come to these parties unless they were looking to end up on their knees. That Isaac had suggested the Hollywood people come tonight spoke, Bart thought, to his growing frustration with the project. He said he wanted to show them what it was like, but Bart thought he was looking to scare them.

Bart should have talked to Show before he invited Hollywood. Show would have seen the folly and, as Isaac's VP, best friend, and chief advisor, would have walked Isaac back. But Bart hadn't thought about that, and now it was time to meet in the Keep. He pulled up in the clubhouse lot, dismounted, and went into the Hall.

Isaac wasn't there, but everybody else was—no, that wasn't right. C.J. wasn't around. Bart checked his phone—C.J. was late. And he heard Isaac's bike pulling up outside just then. So did everybody else; Bart could see them beginning to shift and stand, finishing their drinks, putting down their pool cues, turning off the television.

Isaac strode in, hooking his night riding glasses in his kutte pocket. Bart was still standing just a few feet in from the door, and Isaac dropped his arm over Bart's shoulders. "Hollywood all settled in? Any trouble?"

Bart didn't know whether to nod or shake his head. "They're good. Omen's there."

Isaac grinned. "You get yourself an autograph?"

"Nah. Just got them to the B&B."

"What'd you think?"

At that, he shrugged. "Just people. Pretty people." He'd let Isaac make his own judgments about any of them.

At first Isaac narrowed his eyes, as if he were trying to see past Bart's statement, but then he nodded and clapped Bart's back. "Good enough. Okay, brothers, let's get to business. Got some news." He took two steps toward the heavy double doors of the Keep and then stopped.

"Where's Ceej?"

Show answered. "Not here."

Bart caught a look between Len and Show. Isaac did, too. He asked, "Anybody call him?"

"Yeah, boss. I called." That was Len, the club's Sergeant at Arms. There was a strange tension in the room. Bart felt like he'd missed a conversation. It looked like Isaac had missed it, too.

"Somebody gonna tell me what's goin' on?"

Len cleared his throat. "He's not comin'. He was pretty far gone down a vat of Wild Turkey, Isaac. Don't think it's more than that."

Something told Bart that it was probably more than that. Blowing off the table was hardcore. That meant a big fine, at least. And Ceej had been causing all kinds of minor trouble at the table, butting heads with Isaac, disrespecting his position. Trouble had been brewing between them for the past couple of years.

C.J. was original Horde, of Isaac's father's generation—the last of them, in fact. Bart, about a decade younger than Isaac, wasn't witness to Isaac's trouble with his old man, but it was the stuff of club legend. Big Ike had been a hard father. The long, jagged scar bisecting Isaac's left cheek had come courtesy of his old man's drunken rage. But Bart knew—he'd seen, until the summer two years ago—that Isaac and C.J. had been pretty close. C.J. had respected him at the head of the table, and he'd loved him like a son. Until Isaac had met Lilli. That summer, when Lilli had inadvertently gotten tangled up in the Horde, which had resulted in her almost dying and the Horde voting to kill one of their own for it, C.J.'s attitude about Isaac had begun to change. He'd voted with everyone to send

Wyatt to his Maker, but he'd been Wyatt's sponsor, and he'd taken it hard. He blamed Isaac for it. He thought Isaac had brought his old lady too deep into the club.

Nobody else now at the table agreed, but as the months went on, Bart thought that Ceej had started to get comfortable on the other side, always the odd vote. He was losing his sense of brotherhood as he got settled more deeply in his simmering war with Isaac. Nothing good could come of it. And now he was blowing off the table.

Isaac was staring at Len, the muscle at the back of his jaw flexing under his beard. Finally, he cocked his head a little and nodded. "Let's go." He turned on his heel and stalked into the Keep.

When they were all assembled at the table, that empty seat between Vic and Havoc sucking some kind of energy out of the room, Isaac opened the meeting.

"Hav, I want you flanking Ceej on this bar thing—ready to take point. If something's up with him, we need somebody to step in." The Horde were working on opening a bar in town, something to siphon the tourist/overnighter business away from Tuck's, the town bar, which everybody wanted to stay town—and that meant rough. As Signal Bend had gained the business of visitors who wanted to see where the shootout had occurred, or who had just heard about the town as a nice place to spend a weekend—Shannon had been marketing the hell out of the B&B, and the shops on Main Street had been tooting their horns as well—there had been a general chill over the local spirit. Though the Horde had no interest in owning and running a wine bar, the intent was to give the visitors a place to have their nice wine and mixed drinks, so Tuck's could go on in its pugnacious ways. Havoc had been the biggest complainer about the loss of recreational brawling.

The project was C.J.'s. He was the club secretary, with closest sight to the money. They'd bought a property. Now, Ceej was supposed to be dealing with the permits and licenses, and preparing to hire a manager, so the Horde wouldn't have to fuck with the day to day. He hadn't reported any progress on the project in a couple of weeks now.

Havoc shook his head. "I know nothin' about this shit, boss. Wouldn't know where to start."

"We better hope Ceej is on it. Talk to him. If he's not a help, then we have another problem, but we'll deal with that if we have to. Talk to

Shannon. She's the one came up with the list of possible managers. She knows that business. See what she can do."

Havoc stared down at the table, clearly unhappy, but then he nodded. Isaac nodded, too.

"Okay. We got Hollywood in town—two of 'em today, a couple more Sunday, more next week. Everybody gets a shadow, at least for a while. Lilli and me are up first. Omen is bringing them tonight."

Show looked up at that—yep, Bart thought, Show would have stopped it. Tried, anyway.

"That a good idea, Isaac?"

Isaac met Show's look steadily. "Yeah. We give them the full tour. But keep our closets closed." He turned out to the rest of table. "That means hands off the California pussy. Look but don't touch. You too, Len." Len had had a couple of encounters with a pretty little writer who'd been in town a couple of times over the past year. "Otherwise, carry on."

Bart asked, "What about the guys?"

"You planning on making a move on Mac Studly, Bartholomew?" The table laughed, and Bart felt himself blush, which was fucking annoying.

"Haha. No—but Tanner Stafford turns out to be a dick. Sucker bet he's gonna piss somebody off."

"Man digs himself a hole, that's his grave." Bart nodded; he could live with that.

Leaning forward, his forearms on the table, Isaac got serious. "We have bigger problems. I talked to Sam this afternoon."

That got the table's full attention. Sam was Sam Carpenter, President of the mother charter of the Scorpions, the international MC with which the Horde was allied. They weren't a support club for the Scorps, but they helped them out, filling in the mid-country gap on some big runs. They'd banked a lot of markers over the years and had called them all in during the Ellis affair.

The Scorpions were hardcore outlaw, way out of the Horde's league. They were a very powerful friend to have—but they would be a fearsome enemy, so that friendship was precious, and the balance was not on the Horde's side. Sam had expressed concern about the movie and the attention it brought to the Horde, and thus to its associates.

Bart knew that, because Isaac led with everything on the table. He didn't hold shit back. It was one of the things that made him so good in that seat. Everybody knew he could be trusted. He might consult away from the table, but as soon as he had something solid, he brought it to the whole club. And then he listened. He was hotheaded, but he wasn't bullheaded. And he knew his own weaknesses. He was easy to trust, easy to follow. Even when he led them into the wilds, he cleared the best path he could.

"We're gettin' company, brothers. Show and I have tried to ease everybody's mind about this movie, but Sam needs to see for himself. They all do. We got six Scorps on their way from Jacksonville. They're stopping on the way in 'Bama, picking up Tug, maybe a couple of others. We can expect maybe a dozen Scorps in here next Friday.

Bart swallowed hard. "All of the actors will be here by then. Even the ones only staying a day or two."

"I'd say that was the point. I didn't tell him when they were coming. He already knew. Courtesy, I expect, of our great friend, Rick."

Rick Terrance was a friend of Lilli's, and now Bart's. He was a top-notch hacker, who'd worked with Lilli and had helped the Horde take Ellis down. As compensation for that, Isaac had put him with Sam, and now he was the Scorpions' Intelligence Officer. There was just about no piece of digital information he couldn't get his hands on.

"When Sam leaves here, he's got to be damn sure the Scorps are safe from what we've got going on. If he is, he'll take it on out west, and we're good all around. If he's not, we've got big trouble. He'll want to clean up."

Jesus Christ.

But that was crazy. "What are they gonna do, Isaac? Mow down half of Hollywood right here in town? How does that make them safer?" Bart felt a little adrenaline surge, as he always did when he confronted Isaac. He hoped someday he'd get over that.

Isaac answered him as an equal. "The Scorps are safe if *we* go down for their bloodbath. Any man here gonna rat them out? I got Lilli and Gia. Show has Shannon and his girls. You've got your family." He stopped listing their people the Scorpions could hurt. Only Vic and C.J. were without living family. C.J., who wasn't at the table.

"Solution is simple, brothers. We ease Sam's mind. Show our brothers a good time, make them see that the movie keeps their secrets and

ours locked up tight.”

Len sighed. “We’re never gonna get clear of this shit. We’re gonna pay for all of it forever.”

Isaac nodded. “Maybe so. I know we’re on our knees for the Scorps for the foreseeable. The kind of damage they could drop on us if we’re not on their right side—they’d crush us. Not sure how to clear us of that. I got no more markers to call in, and that puts us on our knees. Not having a favor in the bank is not much different from being in debt to these guys.”

He leaned back in his chair, his fingers rubbing the gavel. “We had almost two years of quiet. Some of you have been gettin’ damn itchy, being so well-behaved. But I like it quiet. I like a good brawl, but I like to end it with handshakes all around. Let’s see if we can’t keep the Scorps happy and send them on their way.”

Show asked, “You know who’s riding?”

“Yeah. Sam. Ghost. Rick. Shiv. P.B.” He paused. “And Howler.”

Whistling low between his teeth, Show sat back. “Howler. Fuck.” Isaac nodded.

Bart could find out himself, but instead, feeling like he was missing something, he asked. “What’s up with Howler?”

Isaac looked right at Vic instead of Bart. “He’s their loose cannon, into seriously deviant shit. He does their interrogations. I don’t know why the fuck he’s along for this ride. Sam says he likes to keep him close. That’s fine, and we’ll take that on its face. But we need to keep an eye. Because he could be trouble. And we’ve had all the trouble I can stomach.”

Vic spoke up then. “Wouldn’t we be more secure if we just went support?”

Every head whipped around to stare at him. Badger, barely patched a year but no idiot, actually pushed his seat back from Vic’s. Isaac’s eyes lazed into Vic.

But he pushed the point. “They’ve made that gesture, right? They’d patch us in as a support club. That gives us room to breathe.”

The table went silent as Isaac stared at Vic. Vic stared right back. He’d nearly lost his patch—fuck, he’d nearly lost his life—because he’d run his drunken mouth and given information to a plant. Marissa Halyard. It’s how Show’s daughter was killed. And why they’d done to Marissa what they’d done. He’d squeaked past that, because C.J. had voted against the rest of the club when they voted his patch. Instead, he’d spent a year on

probation. He'd settled down, and he'd gotten quiet at the table. This was the first time in nearly two years he was pushing Isaac.

Isaac shook his head, very slowly, his eyes never leaving Vic's. "As long as I sit in this seat, this club will never wear any colors but Horde colors. We are allies of the Scorpions. We are not their bitches. I will hand the gavel over before I ever put that to a vote."

"You're the one said we were on our knees." Vic sounded disgruntled.

"Short term, Vic," Show said. "Short term. We'll find our balance with the Scorps again. Support is signing up for a lifetime of taking it up the ass, and you know it. We'd pay dear for that breathing room."

"Enough of this shit. Anything else?" It was clear in Isaac's tone that there had better not be. The table was quiet. "Okay. Old ladies in the house tonight, and our Hollywood hotties, so let's try to maintain for an extra minute or two, okay? We're adjourned."

He struck the gavel, and everyone but Isaac stood. "Show, Len. A minute."

Holding the officers back, but not Bart, who was also an officer. That meant it was internal—Bart would put his money on C.J. Something was up with the old coot.

Not his problem, at least not right now. Right now, Omen was holding the front door open for Riley Chase.

CHAPTER FIVE

Riley walked into the Night Horde clubhouse, and the first thing that struck her was the smell. It wasn't awful, but it wasn't good. It smelled stale, maybe. Like the place didn't get much fresh air. Or any. It was a smell like booze and wet wood—maybe booze-soaked wood—and something under that, something like people, she supposed. Like a lot of people had come through this space, and a lot of them had worked up a sweat.

It wasn't a smell that would ever get bottled and sold as perfume. But she was already getting used to it.

The room they'd walked into was big and both dark and bright simultaneously. Dark paneling on the walls, dark furniture, dark linoleum, cracked and gapping. The long bar was dark wood with bright orange upholstery. But there were illuminated beer signs and Harley signs, and signs that were just words made of neon lighting, and long lights hanging from the ceiling, making the liquor bottles glitter. So maybe dark and garish was a better way to say it.

The music was loud and country. The people were loud and country, too. Lots of women in little clothes and men in leather and denim. Not every guy was wearing one of the leather vests Bart and Omen wore. In fact, there were more guys around without them.

In some ways, it resembled a Hollywood cocktail party—everybody was drinking, everybody was talking in groups, some girls in tiny clothes looked like they were in charge of keeping drinks full. There was a young guy behind the bar, wearing a vest like Omen's, drawing beer from taps and pouring hard liquor. There were peanuts and chips in big bowls around the room. As they'd come through the lot, they'd moved through a smaller group of people loitering outside. A few men were clustered around a grill, so apparently there would be real food tonight, too. Riley hoped Pru wouldn't tattle, because she had every intention of putting some of that real food in her mouth. For research, of course—understanding the local customs and whatnot. But she didn't want Pru reporting back to Trevor.

Bart came toward them, smiling. She thought again how much she liked his smile—and then sort of understood that she was pretty attracted to him. She didn't know anything about him, but he was giving off a vibe she

liked. So far, she'd met two bikers, and they both seemed like nice, normal guys.

He drew to a stop a couple of feet from her. By now, Tanner was standing alongside her. She looked back and saw Pru just inside the door, near Omen. Mark was on Tanner's other side.

"Hey, guys. All settled at the B&B?"

Tanner had already bitched endlessly about the lack of full bathrooms in the guest rooms. They each had little powder rooms, just a toilet and a sink, but each bathroom was shared between two rooms. Riley had been a little surprised at that herself, but they were staying in a tiny little country inn, not the Waldorf. Besides, the great hardship was having to share a bathroom with their assistants—Tanner and Mark shared a bath, and Riley and Pru shared another. Not such a big deal. The bitching was making him look like a princess.

Sensing that he was winding up to bitch about that to the bikers, like a total wuss, Riley jumped in first. "Yeah. It's cute."

Bart's smile grew. "Good. I'll introduce you around, but I want you to stay close to me and Omen." He looked past Riley's shoulder and nodded a little; she guessed that was some kind of communication with Omen. Then he looked back at her. She noticed he wasn't looking at Tanner almost at all. "Things get rowdy around here pretty quick. You're better off sticking with somebody you know."

She smirked. "But I don't know you, either."

"No. That's true. But you know me better than any of the other guys." He took a step closer. "And while you're hanging out with me, you could get to know me more."

He wasn't treating her at all like RILEY CHASE, TV star. There might have been a little of that at first, in the airport, but he'd shaken that off really fast, and now he was just flirting with her, like she was a pretty girl at a party. She could not remember the last time someone had treated her like just a girl. Even people in the business, more famous and powerful than she, treated her first like the presence and then—maybe, if she was lucky, eventually—like the person.

She felt playful, so she called him out. "Are you making a pass?"

He didn't blush or get awkward, he just shook his head. "No, ma'am. Just making your acquaintance."

Yep, she liked this guy.

Suddenly, Tanner strode forward. Riley watched him walk toward a huge biker. There was another biker, almost as huge, standing right behind the first, slightly to the side. Biker number one, with a full, dark beard and what looked from Riley's vantage like long, dark hair pulled back in a ponytail or braid, crossed his arms as Tanner came toward him. He made Tanner offer his hand first, then looked down at it, one eyebrow up, for a second before he unfolded his arms and shook. The noise level was too high for her to hear what was being said, but she had an idea.

"That's Isaac, isn't it? Then the guy behind him must be Showdown."

"You've done your homework. That's right."

"Is Lilli here, too? I'd like to meet her."

Bart's lovely smile faltered a little. "I think so. She's probably in the kitchen. I'll take you back, but tonight wouldn't be a good time to try to, like, interview her, or whatever you need to do. It's crazy tonight, and she's in charge of a lot of it." He hesitated, and Riley could see that he was trying to decide whether to say something else. She lifted her eyebrows, waiting.

"She's awesome. Like, totally awesome. But she's busy tonight, and...well..." He huffed. "You know you don't look anything like her."

Oh. Okay. Riley knew where Bart was trying to go. She wasn't surprised, and she'd deal with it. Wouldn't be the first time she was judged by her cover. "She already doesn't like me, right? Because she thinks I'm a dumb blonde teenager."

He was obviously uncomfortable now. "She was surprised."

Acting on a whim, she grabbed Bart's hand, feeling it twitch at the contact and then enclose hers. "Okay. Lead the way. Might as well unsurprise her right off." She turned back to Pru. "You mind hanging out with Omen?"

She knew the answer. Pru had been casting sidelong looks at Omen since they'd gotten to the inn. He was pretty cute. Early-to-mid twenties, maybe. Average height, lean, lots of colorful tattoos, a pierced nose, stretched earlobes. A lot less country, come to think of it, than the other guys she'd seen here, so far. Blue eyes and blonde hair, with a scruffy kind of three-days' beard. He'd been smiling at Pru, as well. So let the flirting begin. Pru didn't get a lot of chances, really.

Omen spoke up. "I'll take care of her. Get you a drink?" Pru nodded, and he put his hand on her back, leading her toward the bar.

Match made, Riley turned back to Bart. They were still holding hands; she hadn't realized. "Okay. Take me to the scary lady."

He laughed. "She's not scary. She is just...direct."

She nodded, and he pulled her forward, through the crowd. They passed Tanner, Isaac, and Showdown. The bikers were so big and broad, they made Tanner, who was pretty tall and broad himself, look practically effeminate. He was doing all the talking, as far as she could see. They didn't look impressed. She wondered whether he was just having an off day—it was a very full travel day, after all—because she'd thought he was a fairly good guy, and he'd been mainly a jerk, in one way or another, all day.

Bart led her into a room at the back—a kitchen. Decent size. Not quite like a home kitchen, but not like what she imagined a restaurant kitchen would be like, either. Not that she'd ever seen one in person. There were three women in the room, two of them dressed for an audience—tiny skirts, stripper heels, very tight tops that left virtually nothing to the imagination. One girl, with blonde hair so vivid it was almost literally yellow, was wearing a top so small that the black lace bra she had on underneath actually covered more of her boobs. Wow.

And then there was the other woman. Lilli. Tall and gorgeous, with a long, dark ponytail. She had a pretty good-size tattoo on the back of her neck. She was dressed more like a normal person, wearing low-rise, boot-cut jeans over low-heeled black boots, and a plain white t-shirt that fit nicely and showed some midriff when she raised her arms, as she was doing now, pulling a big metal bowl out of a cabinet over the counter.

"Candy, here. Scoop the potato salad into this, will ya? I can't stand that crap."

The girl in the teensy top took the bowl. "Sure thing, Lilli."

Lilli turned and saw Bart and Riley. A look crossed her face that Riley decided not to think too much about—it was irritation—and then Lilli smiled at Bart. "Hey, bud. Who's your friend?"

"Lilli Lunden, this is Riley Chase. I thought I'd bring her in and make introductions, but then we'll stay out of your hair.

She came to them with her hand out. "Hi. You all settled in?"

Riley shook her hand and remembered that Lilli owned the bed and breakfast. "Yes. It's lovely. The garden in back is gorgeous."

"Thank you." That smile was genuine; complimenting the garden had been a good thing. "I know you want to talk and hang out, or whatever,

but this isn't a great time. I was thinking I'd pick you up tomorrow. We can spend the day."

"Sure. That would be perfect. I don't want to be in your way any more than necessary. I know it's strange what I'm doing. I just want to be true to the character—to you, I mean."

Nodding, Lilli turned toward the big refrigerator. "I appreciate that. Okay, we'll talk more tomorrow. And hey—this crowd drinks hard and gets rowdy, and they forget their manners. Be careful." She looked at Bart. "You're watching out, yeah?"

Sliding his arm around Riley's waist, Bart said, "Yep. On the job. Isaac called everybody off, anyway. It'll be cool."

"Hmph. Still, best be out before they start with the Hank Williams, Jr." Lilli turned to Riley. "Don't mean to scare you. These are good guys. They just get a little *enthusiastic* when they're drunk. It can be a bit much."

Riley liked Bart's arm where it was, his hand resting on her hip. She could feel his side against her arm—it was solid. Very solid. "I think I'm in good hands. I'll pay attention, though."

From right behind her, a deep, rumbly voice said, "They're looking for more meat, Sport. What they've got is done." She turned around, losing Bart's arm, and found herself staring at a black leather wall. Isaac. He was enormous. She literally was about belly height to this guy. Feeling a little spike of nerves, she craned her neck and looked up to see him grinning down at her. He had a long, jagged scar across the left side of his face. It made his grin lopsided. More pronounced than Bart's.

"Well, hello, sweetheart. I'm Isaac."

"Yeah." Jesus. *Yeah?* That's what she said? She cleared her throat and tried again. "Riley. I'm Riley."

"I figured. Nice to meet ya." He looked over her head. "Is there more meat?"

Lilli answered, "Yeah. Hold on."

And then Isaac moved, sidestepping Riley and meeting Lilli at the fridge.

So strange, the way people didn't seem to care at all who she was. It wasn't just Bart. It was everybody. She'd walked through a crowded room of regular people, and not one person paid her any more attention than they would any other stranger. They simply did not care that she was famous. In fact, here in this little town, she *wasn't* famous.

That was pretty cool.

Bart's hand circled her upper arm, and then his mouth was near her ear. "We should get out of the way. They're gonna be putting food out soon, and then it's like vultures or locusts or something. We're in the flight path, either way. You want a drink?"

She nodded. A drink sounded excellent. She couldn't believe how lame she'd just been with Isaac. Afraid of him. Like he was Sasquatch or something.

There was an empty stool at the bar, and Bart led her toward it. She looked around, found Pru and Omen playing an old-fashioned arcade video game. She didn't see Tanner or Mark.

"What do you drink?"

"Wine? Like a zinfandel?"

Bart shook his head. "Sorry, no."

She racked her brain for a mixed drink. She wasn't what one could call a clubber or barhopper. She felt crushed and antsy in clubs, so she stayed away. Constantly thinking about calories and carbs and all that dreary nonsense, she drank only a little at home, and that was wine. When she was out to dinner, it was wine, or if she was at a party, she took whatever was wandering around on trays—a glass of sparkling wine, or a fancy mixed drink, usually. She'd barely drunk at all during her time with Devon. He hated alcohol, thought it ruined the brain. Funny, really, since he was fine with pot and acid on his good days—and coke and heroin on his bad days. He'd died with quite a cocktail fizzing through his veins.

Collins. There was some kind of drink called a Collins. Kind of like lemonade. Vodka? Gin? She didn't know. Bart was looking at her like he thought she was being charmingly dim. She needed to answer his question, so she asked, "What does Lilli drink?" There. Call it research.

That surprised him, she could tell. "Uh, beer. Or tequila."

Oh! That was a drink she knew. Those were good. "Like a margarita?"

"No. Like a glass of tequila. Or shots. Not for you."

She hated beer. Tasted like soggy old bread. Blech. "Why not?"

"If you can't pick your poison, I'm gonna go out on a limb and call you a lightweight. Plus, you're pocketsize. You don't want to be tossing back tequila straight up tonight. I'm saying no."

Who the hell was he to tell her no? Jerk. Even strangers thought they could run her damn life. That crooked grin was suddenly infuriating. “Fuck you. I want a shot of tequila.”

She expected him to get worried, but he didn’t. His eyes narrowed, and then he nodded his head, looking cocky. “Fine. I’m sticking close, though.” He turned to the guy behind the bar. “Dom—Patrón and a couple of shot glasses. And I’ll take a Bud.”

The kid—skinny, kind of goofy looking—did as he was told, and Bart poured the clear liquid into the glasses. “There you go, princess. Bottoms up.”

“Don’t call me that.” She picked up the glass and gave it sniff. *Whew!* Strong. Okay. Bottoms up indeed. She lifted it to Bart in what she hoped was a saucy little toast, and then she tossed it back, the same way she took Nyquil for a cold. It burned. Wow. It burned. She couldn’t help making a face, her tongue out, which was just great. Bart laughed and tossed his shot back, with nary a twitch. Fine, macho biker. Luckily she didn’t think anyone else was paying attention. It was really nice not to be paid attention to.

But how did she get to be twenty-six years old and not know what tequila really tasted like? Because people had been monitoring her food and drink her whole life, that’s how, and she’d gone along with it. Thinking about that pissed her off more, and she slammed the glass down and said, “Again!”

“You sure?”

She glared at Bart and let that be her answer. He shrugged and poured two more shots. “Okay. You’re gonna get me in trouble, princess.”

“I told you not to call me that.” Her knees felt funny, warm and tingly, the way they felt after a few glasses of wine. It meant she was buzzed. Could she be buzzed thirty seconds after doing one shot of tequila? No way. She tossed the second shot down the hatch. That went down a little easier, though there was still a half-second when she wondered if it would stay down. Yep. Smooth like glass.

“Hi, guys.” The manager from the hotel—what was her name? Sharon? No, Shannon—had stepped up, and she put two bottles of wine, one red and one white, on the bar. “Will you put this one in the fridge, Dom?” She pushed the white toward the kid behind the bar, then turned to Riley. “It occurred to me that there might not be anything you’d want to

drink here.” She took in the Patrón and the empty glasses, then looked at Bart. Riley didn’t look at him, but she could feel him shrugging broadly, his hands up, in the international sign for *What could I do?* “I see you found something after all.”

“Yep. But thanks. Nice of you.”

She smiled. She was really pretty, with gorgeous red hair and a face like Veronica Lake or Rita Hayworth. Same kind of body, too. Hollywood would want her to lose twenty or thirty pounds probably, but Hollywood liked its women skinny, as Riley well knew. Shannon was built like Jessica Rabbit. As Riley was admiring her figure, clad in a sleek, dark blue skirt and a cream silk blouse (which did not at *all* fit the scene; she must have come straight from work), the other giant biker—Showdown, who was, as Riley recalled, Shannon’s husband—stepped up behind her and put his humungous hands on the bar at either side of her. Shannon was tall, a whole lot taller than Riley, who was beginning to feel even more miniature than she normally did, and she was wearing three-inch heels, but Show was still considerably taller. He was wearing a black knit beanie. Devon had worn a beanie most of the time, too, but he’d worn it baggy. Showdown wore it snug over his head, his long, light brown hair loose under it.

Shannon leaned back into her biker’s embrace, and Riley found it seriously sexy. Like, it made her clench it was so sexy. And then Showdown tucked his head into the curve where Shannon’s shoulder met her neck, and Shannon closed her eyes. Riley gasped, feeling her panties dampen. Jeez, it was like she was peeping through their bedroom window or something. The room was suddenly really hot. She turned away from them—and came face to face with Bart, who’d been watching her, not them.

“Y’okay? Your face is flushed.”

“It’s hot in here.”

“Or maybe you’re drunk already. Lightweight.”

“I am *not* drunk. I’m hot.”

He smirked. “Well, that’s true, too.”

There was a commotion behind them and Riley swiveled on her barstool to see what was up. The swiveling made the room swim a little. Okay, maybe she was *tipsy*. But not drunk.

The food was coming out; that was the commotion. They were bringing it to the bar. Like a buffet, she guessed. Food was a good idea. Get something on her stomach. Not that she was drunk.

And oh, look! Ribs. Burgers. Wings! She could smell the spicy! Potato salad. Short chunks of corn on the cob. She wasn't sure she'd ever eaten corn on the cob, which her mother, Trevor, and pretty much everybody else in L.A. said was worthless as a food—which meant it was probably delicious. There were squares of rich, yellow bread.

They were going to have to knock her into a coma to get her back on a plane to L.A. Because this? This was heaven. She actually clapped and bounced up and down on the stool. Then grabbed the bar when the room tilted slightly. When it was steady again, she climbed down and stood, hoping to be first in line for the food.

“Hungry?” Bart was grinning at her, and she didn't find it annoying now. It was back to cute.

“Starved! For years!” She threw her arms around his waist and hugged him—oh! Very solid. With hip muscles. He wore his jeans low, and she could feel the bulge of muscle under his shirt. She loved hip muscles. What girl didn't? Those muscles said *right this way to the good stuff*. Sliding her hand under his shirt, she traced the line of that muscle from his side to the waistband of his boxers. She couldn't resist, and when she realized that she couldn't resist, she simultaneously, and possibly consequently, realized that she was rather more than tipsy. She looked up and met his eyes, which were a kaleidoscope of reaction. Surprise. Amusement. And arousal. She saw that clearly—felt it, like heat. If she let her hand fall another few inches, she'd be able to really feel it.

Everything felt hot and swimmy and strange all of a sudden. She'd only been in the clubhouse for an hour, and she was about to jump Bart's bones right in the middle of everything. He was right—she was a lightweight. Pulling Sober Riley out of the corner and placing her front and center, she stepped back and cleared her throat. “Yeah. Um. I guess it's been a while since I ate. Can I get a glass of water, maybe?”

He blinked, then nodded. “Sure. We're in the way again, anyway, so come back here with me.” He pulled her behind the bar and filled a glass from a tap. Tap water. To drink. Huh. She took an experimental sip. It was cold and almost sweet. Not anything like Southern California tap water. While she drank, he filled two heavy paper plates. Carrying them on his arm, as if he'd been a server at some point in his life, he grabbed his beer and then gestured with a nod for her to follow him. She refilled her glass with the water and did.

He took them outside, and they sat at a picnic table, side by side. Nobody was out here now but them and the guys at the grill. The fall evening was a little chilly, but not bad. She was wearing the same outfit she'd traveled in, and the suede jacket and scarf made her sufficiently warm. Come to think of it, maybe that was part of why she'd gotten so hot inside.

Bart had filled her plate with almost everything—a couple of wings, a couple of ribs, potato salad, some of the bread, and a little slice of corn. It all smelled unbelievable. She wondered if Pru would snitch on her. No. Pru was cool.

Actually, it seemed like it had been a while since she'd last thought of Pru. Or Tanner and Mark, for that matter. She should probably know if they were okay.

“I should check on Pru.”

“Sure. We can go in again. She's still with Omen, though. They were coming to the food when we came out here.”

Then Pru was fine. “What about Tanner?” She picked up a wing and took a bite. Sweet happy Jesus. She closed her eyes and focused all of her senses into her taste buds as she ate.

Bart shrugged. “Didn't notice. Sure he's fine, though.”

Riley nodded and sucked on the empty wing bones. Then she dropped that carcass and picked up the corn. She knew she was eating like a pig, but she didn't give even the tiniest fuck. It was so good! Her hands were greasy and sticky, and she didn't care. She sucked the sauce off.

“Don't they feed you in Hollywood?” Bart tipped his beer bottle back and took a swallow.

“Actually, I'm on a strict diet, so they really don't. Not anything you'd think of as food. Not like this.”

“Thin as you are? You could spare a chicken wing or two, I'd say.”

“I really can't. I'll pay for this for weeks. But I don't care. It's so good!”

He popped some of the bread into his mouth. Around it, he asked, “What's it like? Doing what you do?”

It wasn't the first time she'd been asked something like that, but it wasn't a question she knew how to answer. “I don't know. It's the only thing I've ever done. It's got good points and bad points. Like any job, I guess.”

“Nah. Your job makes you famous. Mine doesn’t.”

“It did, though. That’s why we’re here.”

“My job is a mechanic. Being Horde isn’t my job. It’s my life.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I’m never not Horde.”

“That’s like me, then. A little. I’m never not RILEY CHASE. All caps. Gets exhausting.” She stopped, looking down at the scattered remnants of the delicious food she’d devoured. She wished she’d taken more time, committed everything to memory. “Except here. It’s been pretty cool today, having people not care who I am.”

He got quiet and held her eyes. He pointed at her face, near her mouth. “You have a little...” He waved his finger but didn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t need to; obviously, she had food on her face. Charming. She poked her tongue out and tried to lick it up. She must have succeeded, because she tasted a tiny hint of spice on the tip of her tongue.

Bart’s eyes sharpened, and then he came in, his hand going to the back of her head, his mouth coming to hers. She knew she should be angry. He hadn’t asked. He wasn’t really giving her a choice. But she wasn’t angry. She was glad. Whether it was the tequila, or the relaxed way she felt here, or the lingering effects of the little love tableau that was Showdown and Shannon, or her righteously full tummy, or just him, she felt comfortable and open, and she welcomed his kiss.

It was a good kiss, too. His lips were warm and firm, and his tongue was light against her lips, as if he were coaxing her to open her mouth for him. She did, and met his tongue with hers. He groaned at that and changed position, wrapping his other arm around her and pulling her closer to him. He tasted like hot wings and cold beer. And tequila. She supposed she must taste pretty similar.

He took the kiss deeper, held her head harder, and Riley knew that she was going to sleep with him. Tonight. Thoughts of Devon floated up in her head, and she shoved them back. He’d broken his promise, started using again mere days after rehab. He’d OD’d in her house, brought all that down on her—waiting with his body, dealing with cops, dealing with press, the paparazzi doubled outside for weeks. He’d died almost nine months ago. She’d gestated her grief and her anger. Time to move on. This biker with the wonderful mouth seemed like a good place to start. She wrapped her arms around him, pushing her hands under his shirt.

He pulled away a little, breathing heavily. “We should stop. Right?”
“I don’t want to stop.”

As he stared—she could see him working something out in his head—the door to the clubhouse crashed open, and Riley spun on her perch to see Mark coming out, holding Tanner, who was holding his mouth. His hand was bloody. Pru and Omen were right behind. Looked like Tanner had pissed somebody off enough to get his face mashed in. She couldn’t say she was surprised.

“Time to go, Riley,” Mark called, dragging Tanner to the van.

Dammit. She turned back to Bart. “I should go, I guess.”

His hand had dropped from her head to her shoulder, but he didn’t let her go, his other arm still a band around her waist. He leaned in, his face only an inch or two from hers.

“I could give you a ride back later, if you want to stay.” His words lofted on a soft breath, caressing her cheek.

She nodded. She’d never done anything like this, and she knew she was putting herself at his mercy, at least a little. Yet it wasn’t like he was some nameless dude she was picking up in a bar. It was probably a one-night thing, but it wasn’t exactly a one-night stand. She’d see him a lot while she was in town.

Wait. Did that make it worse? Would that be awkward? She should think more about this.

“Riley, come on!” That was Pru. She turned and looked behind her. Mark and Omen had Tanner in the van. Pru was standing at the front passenger door, her arms crossed, looking impatient.

Riley didn’t want to go. She didn’t want to worry about whether things would be awkward tomorrow. She didn’t want to think more about this. She wanted Bart to kiss her again.

“You guys go on—I’ll catch up later.”

Pru dropped her arms and took a couple of steps toward her, then stopped. “Ri. Are you sure?”

Bart’s hand moved from her shoulder to stroke her arm, and Riley needed to close her eyes and take a beat before she could answer. “Totally. Go on, really. Looks like Tanner needs some TLC.”

Pru had taken a few more steps in her direction. She laughed. “He’ll have to get it from Mark, then. I’m not volunteering. The beefy bald guy—the hot one? Laid him *out*.”

Riley didn't know which guy she was talking about, but she was sure Tanner had said something stupid. That seemed to be his natural habitat today. Way to make an impression, Tanner. She'd want the dirt later; now, though, she just smiled. "Hope he's okay. I'll see you later."

After a considering pause, Pru nodded. "Be careful." She looked past Riley at Bart. "Be nice." Then she turned and went back to the van, climbing in to sit up front with Omen.

Riley didn't turn back to Bart until the van was out of the lot, but she felt the stroke of his fingers on her arm. Even through her jacket. When the van was gone, she turned back to him to see his eyes intent on her.

"Are you nice?"

"Very." That crooked smile. That, at least, was very nice.

CHAPTER SIX

I'm taking Riley Chase back to my room. Bart let that thought float around in his head as he stood and held his hand out to her. He waited for the internal fist pump, but it didn't happen. She'd stopped being RILEY CHASE, all caps, and had become simply Riley, a pretty girl he thought he might like. It seemed like maybe she might like him, too.

He opened the door and ushered her into the Hall, grabbing up her hand again as soon as he was over the threshold. Smoke from weed and tobacco had created a nearly solid haze along the ceiling, curling in wafts down over the party. It looked like Lilli and Isaac were getting ready to go. Shannon and Show were off in a corner, Shannon on Show's lap. From what Bart could see, the rest of the guys had mostly paired—or grouped—off. The music had gotten down and dirty—Lilli was right about the HWJr—and a couple of girls were dancing on the pool table, stripping drunkenly. They had to replace the felt on that table about once a month, seemed like. Somebody was always dancing on it or fucking on it or something.

Bart pulled Riley close, hooking an arm around her as he led her through the room. Nobody paid them much mind, and Bart relaxed as they made it to the dorm hallway. But then he felt a hard, massive hand land heavily on his shoulder.

“Bartholomew.” Isaac's voice was dark, low, and clear.

Bart stopped and turned, taking Riley's hand. With one step to the side, he move between Isaac and her. Not because he thought Isaac was a threat to her, but because he wanted to block her from whatever embarrassment he was going to experience at his President's hands. “Hey, boss.”

“What did I say?”

Hands off the California pussy is what he'd said. But this was different. This wasn't what he'd been worried about. This wasn't about tasting famous pussy. He didn't know exactly what it was about, but it wasn't that.

“Not what you think, Isaac.”

“No?” Isaac pulled himself up to his full height—like he hadn't been towering over Bart already. He did that when he was stirring up toward pissed, made himself as big and imposing as possible. “I'd say one

bullshit incident with these people is enough for one night. Turn around. I'll have Lilli take her back to the B&B."

"Excuse me? Who the fuck are you to tell me where I'll go?" Tiny Riley had stepped alongside Bart, and she was glaring up at Isaac, her head tipped so far back she looked like she was stargazing. "I am sick to *fuck* of people telling me where to go. Where I am going is back there, where I assume there is a bed. Then I'm going to bang Bart's brains out. And you can just step off. You don't scare me."

Isaac had this outrageously sardonic eyebrow. It was easy to tell when he was truly pissed, because he glowered, his brows drawing together. When that one brow went up, though, he was more amused than anything else. That eyebrow had climbed all the way through Riley's little speech. And it *was* pretty funny. She was so little, nose-to-navel with Isaac. But she was all attitude right now, like an angry Chihuahua.

Isaac smirked and raised his hands, palms out, taking one step back. "Okay, sweetheart. Sorry to offend. You go on with your night." He looked at Bart. "*Vaya con Dios*, brother." Then he turned and walked away.

"That guy's a jerk." Riley huffed and crossed her arms.

"No, he's not. He's our President. He's used to people doing what he says. Most people. Not Lilli so much." Bart reached out and took her hand again, unwinding it from the clench across her chest. "You still want to go back and bang my brains out? 'Cause I'm pretty good with that."

She blushed—a sweet, rosy pink, some of her bombast deflating. "Kiss me again. Like you did outside."

"You liked that?" When she nodded, he took her face in his free hand and bent down, covering her mouth with his, turning them as he did so and leaning her against the hallway wall.

His hand covered the side of her head, his fingers threading into the silk floss of her hair. When he'd kissed her outside, her lips had a lingering gloss of spicy barbecue sauce, which he'd found adorable; this time, they were smooth and soft and lush, and he sucked on her lower lip until she moaned. He still had her hand in his, but now she wriggled it free and wound her arms around his neck. Her tits pressed against him, and he wrapped his now-free arm across her back, bringing her even closer. She opened her mouth wider, pushing her tongue between his teeth.

Bart didn't get serious with women. He hadn't had an actual girlfriend since his sophomore year in college. No particular reason, except

that he didn't really live a life where there were a lot of women he was interested in. Signal Bend was small. Even reaching out to the closest neighboring towns, which weren't all that close, didn't deepen the pool much. Most of the fuckable girls who could handle who he was and what he did were already pussy on tap at the clubhouse.

Since the club girls were sure things, and since he wasn't actively looking for more than that, he hadn't seduced a woman in years. He'd flirted plenty; flirting was fun, and it was more or less his default approach to any conversation with a woman. Any woman. But he hadn't had to make an effort in a very long time. The Horde girls liked him, even fought over him some.

It didn't seem like he would have to make an effort with Riley, either, but he wanted to. He wanted to treat her well and make sure she got everything she wanted out of what they were doing. When she'd told Isaac she wanted to bang his brains out, Bart had felt a little thrill, and not because of who she was. He liked the thought that this girl liked him. Liked him enough to take on Isaac, even.

Or maybe he was just an easy fuck to her. That would be okay, too.

Without pulling away from their ever-more intense kiss, Riley unhooked her hands from his neck and ran them down his chest. When she got to his waist, she lifted his shirt and pushed her hands around and then up his bare back. Shit, they were warm and soft, and small. She had some nails, though, and she curled her fingers in and strafed his skin lightly. He shivered, and his cock strained for freedom. He had to get her out of this hallway.

She whimpered a protest when he pulled her hands away, but quieted when he grabbed her tight little ass and lifted her up. She weighed next to nothing. When she circled his hips with her legs and his neck with her arms, he finally pulled back, releasing her mouth and trying to meet her eyes. They were both panting. Bart felt lightheaded, and he wasn't even close to drunk.

She was, though. He didn't think she was full-on drunk, but she was definitely looser than she'd been when she'd gotten to the party.

"Open your eyes, babe." *Babe*. Huh. That wasn't something he usually said.

She opened her eyes. They were sparkling and beautiful, a light kind of dusky green, with a gold rim around the pupil. Her mouth was puffy and

red from their kiss, and he couldn't resist leaning in again to run his tongue over her lower lip. She smiled a little as he did so.

"Around the corner and down the hall, there's a bed. Mind if I head that direction?"

"Hurry," she whispered and tucked her head against his neck. He felt her mouth on him, sucking at his skin. Yeah. Hurrying was a good idea.

As Bart rounded the corner, with Riley snug in his arms, he nearly collided with LaVonne, who was making her way from one of the rooms on this side, probably Vic's. LaVonne was one of the girls who knew how to handle Vic and didn't mind the things he wanted to do. She'd been around awhile. As she backed up and sidestepped their near collision, she gave Bart a wry little grin and a wink. Riley couldn't have noticed; she was still sucking enticingly on his neck, flicking her tongue over the wet skin. He smiled back at LaVonne and continued on his way.

When he got her into his room and closed the door, he practically fell on the bed with her. He'd wanted to be smoother about it, but as he fumbled for his key, she'd started flexing her hips against him, making these tiny little moans against his throat, and by the time he finally got her into the privacy of his room, he was about ready to just fuck her against the door.

She was still wrapped tightly around him. He could feel the heels of her fancy cowboy boots—the kind no one in the country would actually wear, but pretty—digging into his ass where she'd crossed her ankles. That was kind of sexy, but they weren't going to get busy with all these clothes and fancy boots between them. He pushed up on his hands, breaking her grip on him, and looked down at her. He hadn't turned on a light. That wouldn't do, so he pushed all the way off the bed and turned on the gooseneck lamp sitting on the dresser that served as his nightstand.

She covered her face. "Don't. I like it dark."

That was disappointing. He hadn't pegged her for the bashful type. "Why? I want to see you, and see what I'm doing."

"I don't look like you think I do."

"What do you mean?"

"I just..." She dropped her hands and looked him steadily in the eye. "All those pictures? I don't look that good in real life. You'll be disappointed. It's better if it's dark."

“No.” He bent and grabbed a booted ankle, pulling her leg straight and easing the boot off her foot. She was wearing plain white socks; that charmed him, seemed normal and a little vulnerable. “I’m not here with those pictures. I’m here with you. You’re who I want to see.”

After he took off that simple cotton sock—an anklet, all the cuter—he laid her foot back on the bed and picked up her other foot. When she was barefoot, he stepped back and removed his kutte, walking over to hang it on its hook near the door. Then he reached over his shoulders and grabbed his t-shirt by the back and pulled it over his head, tossing it in the general direction of the plastic laundry basket in the corner.

Riley drew in a sharp breath. “Oh, damn. Look at you.”

He grinned. He worked hard on his body. Most of the Horde did a lot of time in their weight room. It was a point of honor for them, with Isaac and Show at the head of the table, both of them ripped to shit. Only Vic and C.J. were lax about it. C.J. was past seventy, so no one was gonna give him trouble if he got flabby. And Vic was farmer strong, his big gut belying the things he could do. Also, he was crazy and fought dirty.

“You like?” He resisted the urge to stroke his own chest.

She sat up and swung her legs off the side of the bed. “I do. You’re gorgeous.”

He walked back to the bed and unwound the scarf that was still looped around her neck and draped over her chest. “You would have missed this if I’d turned out the light.” He dropped the scarf to the floor. She shrugged out of her suede jacket, and he folded that and laid it on the dresser.

When he came back to stand before her, she snagged her finger through his belt loop and pulled him between her legs. Then she put her hands on his belly and let them wander up and over his pecs, and back down the same path. He couldn’t stop his muscles from twitching under her light, sensual touch. He brushed her hair back from her face, tucking it behind her ears, and then let his hands rest on her slim shoulders.

“You really have an amazing body.” With one finger, she traced the letters arcing over his belly: H-O-R-D-E. “I’ve heard it hurts a lot to get tattooed here. Does it?”

“Not much more than this one did.” He shrugged and turned his right arm out, showing the ink on the inside of his forearm, which was his steel horse, a flaming horse/motorcycle hybrid. Then he lifted his left arm

and turned a couple of degrees, showing his ribs on that side. “Of the ink I have, this one hurt most.”

“I don’t understand that one.”

“It’s binary. Spells a word in computer code.”

“What word?”

“Remember.”

“What does it help you remember?”

“Something it would be easier to forget.” Bart didn’t want to keep traveling down the road this conversation was on. He wasn’t sure why he’d pointed out that ink in the first place. What he wanted to do was finish undressing her—and himself—and get busy. She was wearing a nearly sheer, nearly silky kind of top, with a little black thing under it, almost like a bra. He knew there was a name for it, like a teddy or something. Whatever—it was sexy. Pinching the top shirt at her shoulders, he pulled it up, and she raised her arms and helped him, shaking her hair out as the shirt cleared her head.

What with the jacket and the scarf, he hadn’t gotten a good look at her tits until now. Not in person, anyway. There were lots of pictures online of her in not very many clothes, so, even discounting photo manipulation, he knew they were pretty and round, not overly large—but then, she was little, so big tits would have looked wrong. He had no idea if they were real, but he was very much looking forward to finding out.

Hooking his hands under her arms, he lifted her a little, turning her and laying her back down on the bed with her head on his pillows. He undid her jeans and pulled them off. She lifted her hips to help him, and then she was lying on his bed wearing only little black boyshorts and that pretty black camisole. His lingerie vocabulary had returned, and damn, she looked good. Maybe a tiny bit curvier, her legs a little fuller, but that was a good thing in his book. He didn’t know why she thought he’d be disappointed, because right here, lying in his bed, with her pale hair spread out over his pillows, she looked better than any picture he’d ever seen, no matter how aggressively photoshopped.

“You’re making me self-conscious, staring like that.”

“You’re beautiful, babe. Really beautiful.” He turned and opened the top drawer of his dresser to pull out a couple of condoms and set them on the bed, then dropped his jeans and boxers and lay down next to her.

Propped on his side, he bent down to kiss her, but she shrank back a little, putting her hand on his shoulder to hold him off.

“I know it sounds lame, and you probably won’t believe me, but I don’t usually do this—sleep with someone I just met. I’m not a slut. In fact, I haven’t...I...never mind. I just wanted to say that I’m not a slut.”

To his ears, she sounded shy, a little nervous. Not at all the spitfire who’d faced Isaac down. He wondered if the tequila buzz had backed off. Maybe she was regretting this. “Riley, I don’t think you’re a slut. I believe you. No reason not to. If you want to stop, we will. Don’t want to do something you’ll regret.”

She shook her head, her eyes steady on his. “I don’t want to stop. I just wanted to say...what I said.”

“Okay, then. Relax for me, babe. I want to make you feel good.” Her arm relaxed and slid along his side to his back, and he bent his head to hers and claimed her mouth, pushing his hand under her top, over the smooth, firm skin of her belly, her ribs, to her chest. She wasn’t wearing a bra, just this camisole, that had a band of some sort across her tits. He pushed that up and took a handful—almost a handful—of tight, round, real tit. She gasped under his mouth and pushed her chest toward him, and he felt her nipple tighten under his palm. Ah, fuck. This was hot as hell.

One thing about the sure thing that was club pussy, they’d seen and done it all before. They were willing, and they could get off (or at least do a decent impression of it), and they could damn sure get him off, but they didn’t exactly get excited. It had been a long time—Christ, since college—since he’d been with a woman who was *trembling* under his touch. It made his cock ache.

As he pushed her top higher, clearing her tits, he broke from their kiss and urged her up so he could get her topless. She took matters into her own hands and pulled the tightly bunched fabric over her head, and then she was bare and beautiful, her tits dotted with small, pearly pink nipples, so fair they were almost an illusion. Again he marveled at her self-deprecation. She was almost ethereally pretty.

Once he’d looked his fill, he took one small nipple into his mouth and suckled her. Again she gasped, and he felt her fingers sliding into his hair and knotting into fists, holding his head where it was. He was happy to stay, until he wanted to taste the other. When he moved, she didn’t let go, but moved with him, still holding him close. He put his hand over the tit

he'd just left and tweaked that damp, swollen nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

She writhed under him, her hips flexing to rub herself against him. He could feel her arousal in the hot slide of silk against his skin, and she was making the sexiest little sounds, not quite whimper, not quite moan.

"Bart, please. I'm so wet. God, it almost hurts. I need you to touch me."

Let no one say Bart Elstad couldn't take direction. He released her nipple and slid that hand over her flat little belly and into her panties, finding a silky-smooth shaved pussy that was dripping wet for him. Raising his head from her chest, he smiled down at her.

"Jesus, babe. You're so ready."

"I am. I so am. I need it. God, please."

"With my hand? That's what you want?"

"I want all of it. Please." She was staring fixedly into his eyes, all shame or self-consciousness gone. Her expression was desperate. Voracious. He flicked a finger back and forth over the firm little bud of her clit, and she came right up off the bed.

"God, yes! Please don't stop!" He didn't. He stayed on her clit, stimulating it fast and hard until she bent her head back, the muscles in her throat straining. Her fingernails embedded into his bicep, and her arched body went completely taut, thrumming with the tension of her not-yet-achieved release. She was silent—he wasn't even sure she was still breathing. He changed his motion then and rubbed a tight, hard circle instead, and she went over like a champ, dropping suddenly to the bed, her hips flailing under his hand. But he stayed on her, following her erratic motions until she was done—which wasn't easy. He was pretty proud of himself, actually.

When Riley settled, her chest heaving, her skin brightly flushed, she grinned up at him. "Holy shit! You're *great* at that. Like, you should get an agent and go pro!"

He was insanely pleased at the compliment, so much so that he felt his face warm with a blush. He covered with a chuckle. "Glad I could help out."

Still gasping, she pushed on his shoulder. "Flip." He laughed at the order but obeyed it, rolling to his back. She rose to her knees with a mischievous light in her eyes. Her attitude had shifted dramatically again,

from self-consciousness to fiery desire, and now to self-assured playfulness. Damn, she was sexy.

She scooted out of her panties and straddled him, wrapping a soft, little hand around his cock. The touch made his balls tighten.

“This is very nice, you know. Good shape, good size, good girth. You’re kinda an Adonis. Except he had a teeny winky, if the statues are to be believed.”

“Winky? Please don’t call it that.”

“Oh, yours isn’t a winky. Yours is definitely a cock.”

To emphasize her point, she slid her hand up and down his length. He closed his eyes and groaned. “You understand how hot it was to get you off just now? It was really fucking hot. So I don’t know how much playtime I can deal with.”

“You want to be inside me?” She put her other hand between her legs. The sight of her own hand where his had just been made his mouth water.

He nodded.

“Can I put the condom on?”

He nodded again. Whatever the fuck she wanted, if she’d just get on his cock.

She couldn’t reach the condoms while she straddled him, so she crawled over and got one and crawled back, resuming her position. With her eyes locked on his, she tore open the packet and pulled the latex circle out. Then she wrapped one hand around his base, and he watched as she rolled the condom on with the other. Slowly. Very slowly. So slowly that he groaned and lifted his hips toward her, trying to hurry her along. Smiling smugly, she rolled it all the way out at that same, slow pace.

“All the way to the serial number. Very nice. I’m impressed.” She lifted up off his legs then and came forward, hovering. Bart thought his cock might grow arms so it could grab her and pull her down. Failing that, he grabbed her hips in his hands.

“Come on, babe. You got me wild here.”

She took him in her hand to hold him steady and slid down, slowly again, but this time he didn’t fight it. The sensation of easing into her tight body, feeling it make way for him, surround him, clasp him, was something he didn’t want to rush. When she finally landed on his hips, she gasped. Her mouth a little pink circle, she whispered, “Oh!”

“You’re so hot. So tight.” Holding her firmly on him, he thrust up into her, making himself grunt and her cry out and drop her head backwards. And then she started to move, rocking slowly at first, then following his lead as he tried to move her with his hands on her hips, encouraging her to go faster. She kept up with the demands of his hands, putting her own hands on her tits and plucking at her nipples. Bart had to close his eyes against the sight, lest he blow his load too soon.

Because fuck, she was everywhere in his head and on his body, all of his senses engaged—the feel of her tight, lush pussy around his cock, of her legs flexing on his hips, her little ass sliding back and forth on his thighs. The sound of her moans and cries as she came closer and closer to another climax, the smell of her juices, the sight of her—her hands playing with her pretty tits, her eyes closed, her teeth biting down on her lower lip, her hair swinging against her back. All that was missing was taste—but he could still taste the sweet skin of her tits, like a memory on his tongue. He had to close his eyes or simply explode.

A heartbeat before she quickened her pace, he felt her tighten around him. She was going again, and he opened his eyes, unwilling to miss it. Damn, it was a sight. Her hips drove down on him, harder and harder, faster and faster, and her face was a mask of furrowed concentration, until her eyes flew open and locked with his. Then she fell forward, her hands on his shoulders, and moved even faster, her firm little tits bouncing a scant inch from his chest.

Fuck, he was close. Too close.

He knocked her hands clear and wrapped his arms around her, sitting up and rolling forward, bending his legs under them and putting her down on the bed. He wasn’t sure he could do that move again without plotting it out first, but it worked, and she hit her peak as she landed on the bed and he drove his cock deep.

“God! God! God!” She called out that one-word prayer every time he thrust into her, and then he went, too, burying his head in the crook of her neck, his body straining toward the end of the release.

When it was over, he muttered, “Fuck!” and relaxed on her a little, careful to keep most of his weight on his arms.

She looped her arms over his shoulders and combed her fingers through his hair. “Yep. You are really, really good at that.” Her sigh was positively feline.

His head still tucked against her neck, he smiled. Then, pressing a quick kiss to her shoulder, he lifted off her and slid out, pulling off the condom and tying it off before he tossed it toward the wastebasket. He missed. He needed to move that thing closer to his bed.

Riley sat up and looked around, her arms over her chest, and Bart could tell that she'd gone shy again.

"I guess you should take me back to the hotel now."

When he was done with the club girls, he wanted them out, and they knew they weren't invited to stay. He didn't mean anything personal by it, it was just that they weren't people he was trying to get close to.

This was different. He was a little hurt that Riley wanted to go. If, in fact, she did want to go. Reaching out and wrapping his hand around her wrist, where it lay against her shoulder, he pulled her arm free of her chest. "I'll take you back if you want to go. Is that what you want?"

"What do you want?"

Oh, yeah. Games. Nobody ever taking a risk or saying what they mean, everybody always feeling each other out, reading between lines, analyzing everything. What a pain in the ass. Another reason he'd stuck with the club girls. "No games, Riley. I'd like you to stay."

"Why?"

"Because I like you. I'd like to sleep a little and then do that again."

"I'm leaving in a week—two, max. This can't be anything."

He shrugged. He'd never thought it could be. But she was pretty, she was nice, she was an excellent fuck, and she had a little spitfire in there somewhere. "So it can be a week or two of fun. Sounds like a good time to me."

She didn't say anything, but he felt her relax, and she didn't object when he pulled her close, bringing her back up to the head of the bed and tucking her against his chest.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Riley was smiling as she woke, at peace and fulfilled, the body wrapped around hers making her warm and safe. *Devon*. She sighed and snuggled in, feeling no rush to open her eyes. Then his coarse hand moved over her hip and he hummed a sigh, the sound a low rumble in his chiseled chest, against her ear.

Coarse hand? Low rumble? Chiseled chest? Not Devon. She woke fully, a flash of fresh grief making her momentarily disoriented as her brain caught up with time. Sitting up with a gasp, she looked around, forcing her mind to put everything back in order. She grabbed the cover and tucked it around her chest.

“Riley? Y’okay?” Bart had one arm under his head. He looked like he’d been awake a while.

Wrestling with a sadness she hadn’t felt so acutely in weeks, maybe months, she pulled herself together and smiled. “Yeah. I’m good.”

He lifted his hand—the one that had been resting on her hip when she woke—and brushed his thumb over her cheekbone. A cool, damp streak marked the path. A tear.

“You sure?”

“I’m okay. Just...dreaming.”

She couldn’t decide how she felt about anything; this renewed Devon pain demanded too much attention. But Bart’s brow was creased with concern.

“Can I get you something? Coffee?”

He was sweet. And gorgeous. She was in bed with a sweet, gorgeous man who had been wonderful to her so far. She needed to get up over herself and stop boohooing over the fucking junkie who hadn’t loved her enough to even *try* to stay clean. Or alive.

The harshness of that thought stunned her, and she put her hand to her mouth. She’d never thought anything so mean about Dev before. He’d been sick; she knew that. It wasn’t about whether he loved her or whether he wanted to be healthy. He hadn’t had a choice.

Or maybe that was what the counselors called enabling, and it was her fault he hadn’t been stronger. She’d made too much room for his addictions.

God. God! Why was she fighting all these feelings right now, nine months since Devon's death, sitting naked in another man's bed?

Apparently taking her silence as a sign that she was uncomfortable or regretful or something—which was as true as it was false—Bart tossed the cover back and turned to get out of bed. Riley's first clear thought about the moment she was actually in was that she didn't want him to get up. She leaned over and grabbed his arm.

“Wait. Don't go.”

He looked over his shoulder at her. “It's okay. I can get you coffee, or take you back to the B&B, or both—whatever you want.”

“I want to stay here awhile longer. With you.”

He didn't look convinced, so she turned and settled herself on the pillows, letting the cover drop to her waist. He considered her for a couple of seconds, not moving; then he smiled and came back to her, wrapping an arm around her and pulling her under him.

“Good. Because I want another taste.”

It wasn't long before she wasn't thinking about Devon at all.

~oOo~

Later, when the sun was bright in the room, Riley was cushioned again on Bart's chest, feeling pleasantly weary and a little sore. He was running his fingers through her hair, and she was running her fingers over his chest, exploring the lines and ridges of muscle. He had a roundish, ragged scar high on his chest, near his right shoulder, and she traced its edge with her index finger.

“What happened here?”

His hand stopped moving through her hair. “Shot.”

Surprised, she raised up on her elbow and looked down at him.

“Like, *gun* shot?”

He nodded. “Yeah. That day. The shootout, or whatever people call it. Why you're here.”

“I didn't know you'd been shot.”

“It's in the script.”

She blushed. She got a lot of scripts, and she didn't have a lot of time. “I haven't really read the whole thing yet. I read the Lilli parts, and

kinda skimmed the rest. Lilli's not in the shootout. ”

He sat up and pushed her away a little, looking somber. “No. That’s when Ellis had her.”

“Right. That...that must have been terrible. I’m worried about playing that scene.” That was true. But she held back the rest of the truth, which was that she was excited to play it. It was a really meaty scene. Lilli had been taken and tortured, and she’d kicked the hell out of the men who had her. It would be the best action scene Riley had ever played. She loved playing action.

The odd look on Bart’s face gave her pause, though. Like he knew something she didn’t, or like he was waiting for her to piss him off.

“You have no idea. It was so much worse than you even know.”

It was quite apparent that talking about that day or the script was troublesome, and Riley didn’t want to tramp around in more troublesome territory with him this morning. She wanted to keep things light, have a little restorative fling with him, take this week or two and feel good. Have fun when she could. Here, nobody cared who she was. For the first time in years she could stop thinking all the time about how people perceived her, and she could just relax and *be*.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to end up talking about hard stuff.”

He smiled and tucked her hair behind her ear. “It’s okay. It’s getting late, though. We should get you back before Lilli gets there.”

Oh, shit. Lilli was supposed to pick her up. They hadn’t really set a time, just ‘morning.’ Riley looked for a way to tell the time and found a digital clock on the dresser next to Bart’s bed. Nearly nine.

“Is Lilli a morning person?”

He laughed. “Yeah. Early riser. We should hit the gas.”

~oOo~

Lilli wasn’t there when Bart got Riley back to the B&B. Shannon wasn’t there, either. There was another woman, plump, with short brown hair, behind the desk. When Riley came in, the woman smiled broadly.

“Miss Chase! I’m Vicki, the assistant manager. If there’s anything you need, let me know.” Vicki was the first person in Signal Bend to possibly be acting a little starstruck.

“Well, I’m starving. Is there still any breakfast?”

A look of real distress passed over Vicki's round face. "Well, we stop serving at nine, but I know you have a special diet. I'm sure I can ask Beth—"

"—No, no. I don't want her to go to trouble. Is there maybe a muffin or something left over?" Trevor could shove that special diet straight up his perky gay ass. Riley had made some decisions. This was a working vacation. She was going to fling—sex, food, all of it. So what if she had to work out for four hours a day instead of two for a few weeks? Fine and dandy.

Vicki's broad smile was back, with a new sprinkling of relief. "Oh, yes. There's a plate in the kitchen. I can bring it out—and a coffee, too?"

"Yes, please. Two sugars. Thank you!"

"Absolutely a delight, Miss Chase. Truly."

"It's Riley, Vicki. And you've made my morning." Vicki went through a swinging door near the front desk, and Riley took a seat on one of the sofas in the front room. She was going to have to inhale that muffin, so she could get upstairs and shower. Her clothes, in addition to being more than twenty-four hours stale, reeked of pot and cigarettes and whatever else that clubhouse smelled like. There was a little bit of Bart mixed in there, too—that smell she liked.

He'd ridden her over on his big, black bike. She'd asked him what it was—a Harley Night Rod. Very sexy. Sleeker than a lot of the other bikes on the Horde lot. It didn't have much of a seat for her, though, so she'd had to hold him tight—not that she'd minded. She'd been on a bike before, so she knew what to do. It was fun. After a few minutes, he'd sped up and started to take turns a little harder, as if he'd become satisfied that she knew how to keep her seat.

When they got to the hotel, he hadn't gotten off with her, just pulled up and waited for her to swing off and hand him his helmet, which he'd then strapped onto his own head. Disappointed, she'd started to turn toward the hotel without saying anything, but he'd caught her hand before she could.

"See you again?" He'd asked. Her first impulse was to be flip and say it was a tiny town, of course he'd see her, but then she decided to answer the question he was really asking.

“Tonight? Take me to dinner?”

“You bet.” Then she’d stepped back, and he’d left.

Vicki came out with a small plate of baked goods and a cup on a saucer. Riley stood and met her at the front desk. Feeling like a rebel, she took the coffee and selected what looked to be a blueberry muffin.

“Can I take this up to my room?”

“Of course! Oh, and you have several messages.” She handed her a small stack of pink paper. Riley saw her mother’s name and then folded them up. “Is there anything else I can do for you this morning?”

“No, thanks. Well—Lilli is supposed to be picking me up. Just call me when she gets here?”

“Oh, yes. She was here a couple of hours ago. She said she’d check back in around ten.”

That gave Riley about twenty minutes to get showered and dressed. If she could manage that, it would be a personal best.

“Okay, thanks!” She took her muffin and coffee and hoofed it up the stairs.

Pru barged through the door of their shared bathroom about ten seconds after Riley had gotten into her room and closed the door.

“Riley! Where the hell have you been? I’ve been calling! Eleanor has been calling for ages. I think you broke her.”

Riley had never turned her phone on after they’d landed. She hadn’t quite forgotten, she just found something else to think about every time her phone tried to worm its way into her thoughts. Setting the coffee and muffin down, she said, “I guess I forgot to turn my phone on. I’ll call her later. I’m in a hurry now.”

“We have to talk, Ri. There’s something happening. I think you should sit down.”

Riley had a protest queued up—she didn’t want to keep Lilli waiting—but Pru’s serious expression as much as her words shut her up and sat her down.

“What happened? Is somebody hurt?”

Pru took a breath, held it for a second, as if she were having second thoughts, and then let it out. “Let me get my laptop. It’ll go faster if you see it.” She went through the bathroom into her room and came back in a few seconds with her Mac, already open. “Before I show you this, I want you to

be calm, okay? There's nothing you can do now to fix anything, but you could make things a lot worse.

"God, Pru, you're freaking me out. What? Show me!"

Pru sat her Mac on Riley's lap. On the screen was the image of the cover of one of the biggest, nastiest gossip rags. They'd been disgusting after Devon's overdose, hounding her for months, waiting for her to do something they could turn into a scandal. She'd done nothing. She'd been alone since. Not even a dinner date. Until last night.

Dominating the cover was a photo of a ghostly thin young woman with heavy eyeliner and straight, deep black hair, sitting in a hospital bed, holding a little bundle of baby. Inset with that cover was a paparazzi shot of Devon, after a gig, looking badly strung out. Immediately under that inset was another paparazzi shot of Riley and Devon on a red carpet—from the dress she was wearing, Riley knew it was the last Emmy awards before he died, when *Hades High* had won a writing award.

The headline read: *LAUGHING WARRIOR LOVE CHILD—Former Addict Chrysta Ewing Says LW Frontman Devon Gaines Fathered Her Child Before His Tragic Death!* In small font at the bottom of the photo of her and Devon: *Riley Chase Devastated, In Seclusion!*

Riley's head went suddenly, utterly, entirely silent, as if it were packed with cotton. She let go of the Mac, and Pru dove to catch it as it slid off her lap.

"Ri? Riley! You have to keep it together. It's probably some nobody whore looking for a payday. Devon wouldn't—"

Riley cleared her head angrily and cut Pru off. "—He totally would, and you know it. I don't even have to read the tripe on the inside to know the truth. Not that there'd be truth in there. She was at rehab with him. Probably in group or something. He probably thought he'd found some kindred spirit or something. Hell, maybe he had. It's true. You know it's true. Or true enough. God, I'm such a fool."

"Riley, no..."

But Riley had moved on from that. Thinking about Devon screwing some pathetic little addict was too big and horrifying to deal with, so she set it aside and let a more immediate horror take hold. "They're going to come here, aren't they? They're all going to come here and hound me and wait for me to be broken. Oh, God!"

Pru sat next to her on the edge of the bed. “No. No. I talked to Stan, and I talked to Denise, and I talked to your mom. They are all on it. Nobody knows you’re here, and nobody’s telling.” Stan was the producer of this film. Denise was Riley’s agent. Her mom was her manager. With Pru and Trevor, they made up the team currently running the RILEY CHASE Machine.

“Every airline agent and flight attendant we came into contact with yesterday knows where we were headed.”

“Don’t borrow trouble, Ri. That’s my job. And Denise’s. We are on it.”

“God. God. I can’t—God. How can he keep hurting me? He’s *dead*.”

“He loved you, Ri. He loved you so much.”

Riley thought about the nearly two years she’d spent with Dev. They’d met at a party for a mutual friend’s birthday. She knew who he was; she was a fan. He knew who she was; he was not. Toward the end of the evening, when Riley had escaped to a balcony on the second floor, she’d found him sitting in the corner, on the floor, smoking a joint. He’d said not a word, just lifted the joint in her direction. Always aware of her public persona, she didn’t smoke, and she certainly didn’t take something that was just handed to her. So she’d shaken her head and turned to go back into the party. He’d said, “Don’t go, lovely Desdemona. I’ll put out the light and then put out the light.” Then he’d stubbed out the joint.

He’d called her by her character’s name, and he’d earlier made clear that he didn’t have a lot of respect for the show. But she’d been charmed by the Shakespeare. She’d stayed and sat next to him. He’d been serious and sweet and beautifully awkward. They’d talked until the sky was grey with dawn, then had gone out to a Denny’s way out in the Valley for breakfast. They’d slept together a couple of nights later, and from that point they were serious.

They’d been together a bit longer than six months before she’d truly understood the depths of his drug use. Right around when he went into rehab for the first time.

She wondered if he’d found a fuck buddy then, too. And the second time. His last time in rehab, when he’d apparently met the inestimable Chrysta Ewing, had been his third time in just more than a year.

“He didn’t. Not like I loved him. He loved his high better. He was sad and weak. And I was a fool.”

“Ri...”

The room phone rang next to her bed. Pru walked over, pausing at Riley’s side to squeeze her shoulder, and answered it. “Hello?...okay, thanks.” She hung up. “Lilli is here. I’ll go down and tell her today isn’t a good day. You should stay in, get some sleep.”

Spending the day in bed thinking about the sham her life had been was nearly the very last thing Riley wanted. “No. Call down and say I’ll be down in fifteen minutes. I’m going to take a shower.”

~oOo~

The lobby was empty when Riley came downstairs twenty-five minutes later. She’d done her best—her hair was still mostly wet and just bound into a lank ponytail at the back of her head.. She was wearing jeans, a pink cotton sweater, and her flowered Doc Martens, one of her few pairs of low-heeled footwear. She wasn’t wearing any makeup but mascara, and she couldn’t remember the last time she’d gone out into the world when that was the case. She hadn’t even taken the time to put on any jewelry. She had, however, taken the time to take *off* the white gold Celtic knot bracelet Dev had given her the night he’d first told her he loved her, and which she’d worn since.

It hadn’t occurred to her to doubt that the baby was Devon’s. Even knowing what a dreadful piece of crap that tabloid was, Riley felt certain they’d accidentally landed on truth. Except for the part about her being in seclusion, anyway. Though that was a little bit true, too. And was she devastated? Maybe so, but she couldn’t say for sure. Everything was too big. She hadn’t cried about all this yet. So far, her worst panic was that the hounds would find her in Signal Bend.

She could feel pain looming, though, the weight of it heavy at the back of her mind. It seemed like all Devon had ever given her was pain. That couldn’t be true, but it felt true. Certainly it had been his legacy.

Seeing that she was alone, she felt her heart flatten. She had a desperate need to spend the day with Lilli, following her around, getting to know her. Proving herself. Keeping her mind occupied. And it looked like Lilli, coming around for the second time that morning, looking for her but

not finding her, had given up. Riley stood for a few seconds, feeling lonely. Then she turned and started back toward the staircase.

She'd taken the three steps to reach the landing when the swinging door pushed in, and Lilli came through from the kitchen.

"Hey! Good! I was about to give up." She stopped, looking Riley over. "You okay? Rough night last night? If you need a hangover remedy, Beth does this thing—"

Riley shook her head, happy to realize that Lilli had no idea about the news. Maybe everybody around here would be as clueless. She could hope. "No. I'm fine. Just not much sleep."

At that, Lilli smirked. "I imagine. You set, then?"

"Yep. Ready when you are."

Lilli nodded and headed for the door. Riley followed, her stomach in knots. If she saw even one camera today, she thought she might lose her mind—which would finally give those rapacious assholes what they wanted.

~oOo~

"Look, I'm not trying to be a dick. I just don't know what you want to get out of this. My life isn't what it was, so you're not going to see me fly a helicopter or shoot at somebody, or even hit anybody. If you want that version of me, she's gone. Now, I run this library. And I take care of my family. That's all you're going to see. And anyway, all these questions you're asking—there's no answer that could make you really understand. You haven't lived a life that would let you understand."

That was about the sixth time that Lilli had said, essentially, that Riley was too soft and sheltered to possibly understand what had happened. She felt abashed and aggravated in almost equal measure. She'd felt that way most of this day with Lilli, and it had given her a headache. This would be her first time playing a real person, and so far, it sucked. Fictional characters didn't judge.

They were sitting in the Signal Bend library, which Lilli apparently ran. It was quiet on this late Saturday afternoon. Lilli had taken her all around town—driving out into the country, then to her house to check on Gia, her little girl, who was being minded by what Riley assumed was a neighbor. Then they'd gone into town, and Lilli had introduced Riley

around at the little antique shops. The odd phenomenon of people not showing excessive interest in her continued. It didn't look like the newest news had reached the residents of Signal Bend.

They'd had a late lunch at a cute little diner and then Lilli had brought her here to the library, where she had some work to do. She had been friendly and they'd been chatting pleasantly most of the day, but she hadn't talked much about the things Riley felt she needed to know to really get the character she was playing. Although Lilli was built like an Amazon, tall and obviously strong, the definition of her arms and torso clearly apparent under the clingy fabric of her top, Riley was having trouble forming an image of her as the ex-soldier hardcore badass. She had the kind of self-possession and steady forthrightness that Riley imagined came from a habit of being in charge—Isaac had it, too, though Riley could already tell that he was cockier than Lilli—but otherwise the only overt sign of something tough about her was the deep, V-shaped scar through her left eyebrow, marring her otherwise classic, quite feminine beauty. To Riley, Lilli seemed to be a mass of contradictions, and she couldn't yet find the footing she'd need to create her as a character. She needed Lilli to let her in.

"I know that I can't have the experience. I don't *want* to have the experience. But I'm an actor—and I'm good at it. What I need to be able to portray the experience convincingly is some kind of a hook. When I play a fictional character, I can make that up myself, develop a backstory, find the thing that drives the character. But I want to be respectful of you. Who you really are. I'd like to try to understand what helped you succeed. What drives you? What drove you that day?" She paused, thinking about the question she'd just asked. That was it. That's what she needed. It was the same as playing a fictional character, except that somebody else had the answer.

It had caught Lilli off guard, too, and she just stared at her. Riley stared back. That was what she wanted to know. Getting to know the people and the town was fine, but if Lilli could answer that one question, then Riley could become her—at least to the extent required to do her justice on film.

"I don't have an answer for you. I don't talk about that day. I just don't." Lilli stood, and Riley knew the conversation was at an end. "Look. I appreciate that you want to be true to me and to the story. I really do. But

the story shouldn't be me. It should be the town. That's the story the script tells. Get to know the town."

She wasn't playing the town. She was playing Lilli. That's who she needed to get to know. But Riley sighed and decided to live to fight another day. They'd been together for hours, and she was exhausted from the effort of trying to find a way in. She'd be here for several more days—longer if she could; she was in no hurry to get back to L.A., especially not now. There'd be time. She hoped.

"Okay. I'm sorry I was prying. I'd like to spend some time with you and Isaac, so I can try to understand your relationship a little. Would that be okay? Not to grill you, just to spend some time?"

Her arms folded across her chest, Lilli was quiet. Then she nodded. "Yeah. I think Tanner wants something similar. Why don't you both come over to our house tomorrow for supper? We can talk and eat and try to be normal."

It was a start. "That'd be great. Thank you."

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Need coffee. Tell me there’s coffee.”

Bart turned around as Havoc reeled into the Hall from the dorm hallway.

“Dude. It’s three in the afternoon. There’s toxic waste at the bottom of the pot, if you want that.”

Havoc made it to the barstool next to Bart. “A bullet, then. Right here.” He rubbed the space at the top of his nose. “Jesus Christ, what was that shit Denny brought?” Denny was one of the older hangarounds, from Worden. He’d been a true regular for a lot of years, but he’d never applied to Prospect. He just liked hanging around.

Debbie, one of the club girls, looking like she’d recovered much better than Havoc from last night’s debauchery, came up behind Havoc and put her hand on his back. “I’ll make a fresh pot, Hav.”

“Thanks, sugarpants. You’re the shit. Aspirin, too.” He gave her ass a sharp swat, and she flinched pretty dramatically. Looked to Bart like last night Havoc had made it hard for Debbie to sit today.

Bart had stopped imbibing early last night, in favor of taking Riley to bed, so he was feeling fine. “I didn’t see what Denny brought, unless it’s those empties of ouzo I saw in the bottle bin.”

“What the fuck is ouzo?” He dropped his head onto his arms.

“Greek booze. Tastes like licorice on steroids.”

“I think that was it. Fuck me. I should rip Den open for bringing that shit.”

That reminded Bart. When Pru had described the guy who’d hit Tanner Stafford as “the hot, beefy bald guy,” Bart had known she meant Havoc—just over six feet, broad and burly, shaved head and full beard, trimmed close. Not that Bart noticed other guys’ hotness. But the other Horde who could be described as bald were Vic and Len. Len was covered in ink all the way to his jaw, so that was usually the way people described him. And Vic was most definitely not hot. By any metric.

“What happened with you and Tanner last night?”

“Who? Oh, the actor stiff?” His head still pillowed on his crossed arms, Havoc grinned. “Got mouthy, so I shut him up. Guy’s a dickbag. What happened with *you*? Got yourself a bite of Cali fruit, looked to me.”

Normally, Bart would have no trouble giving Havoc the highlight reel—that’s what they did whenever either of them had bagged a new fuck. But those girls were new to the club, so sharing information about them was the brotherly thing to do.

Bart didn’t want to talk about Riley. She wasn’t new club pussy. And he was feeling weird feelings he needed to sort out—he thought it was something like protectiveness. If she knew what he knew—and why would she not?—then she was having a rough day. The entertainment sites were on fire with news about her dead boyfriend’s baby. She didn’t need her privacy invaded more than it already was. So he just shrugged.

But that made Havoc suspicious. He sat up and narrowed his eyes. “You got it for this chick?”

“What? No. I just met her yesterday.”

“Brother, don’t do it. Pussy like that is a bottomless pit. You think it’s something special, all fresh and tight and packed with money, but it’s all a trap. Swallow you whole.”

“What the fuck would you know about it, asshole? When was the last time you had your dick in something that wasn’t on the roster or looking to be?”

Havoc laughed, then put his hand to his head with a groan. “You’re fucked, B-man. You are fucked.” He got serious then. “Be careful, though. Can’t trust new pussy. Even famous new pussy. Remember what happened with Vic.”

Yeah, Bart never forgot that. Or what they’d done. Never would. He’d gotten ink, just to be sure.

The coffee was brewed, and Debbie came out and poured Havoc a cup, spooning in the three sugars he liked and handing him the cup and some aspirin. He took it from her and swallowed the aspirin back, grimacing at the hot coffee. No longer needed, Debbie faded out, probably headed back to the kitchen, or into the dorm to clean up.

Bart slapped Havoc on the back, making his friend groan again and mutter, “Fuck, man!”

“You need to get your mind off your head. Wanna kill zombies?”

Havoc nodded, and they went over and turned on the Xbox.

First thing Bart did when he got to the B&B later that evening was stop in at the desk. He'd talked to Shannon earlier in the day, and he was sure that she'd talked to Vicki and Wallace, the night manager, but it didn't hurt to get an update.

Vicki was still on the clock, sitting at the desk with a soda and a novel. Didn't surprise Bart that things were quiet today, even though weekends were usually busy. Riley and Tanner and their friends were the only guests. The movie studio had booked the whole B&B for two weeks, even before the actors would fill it up. They'd booked the little roadside motel in Millview, too, for the second-tier actors who were only spending a night or two. It gave all the actors some breathing space, and there wasn't another room to be had for fifty miles. But if reporters were on Riley's scent, they'd be trying to get in.

"Hey, Vicki. How's it going?"

She'd looked up from her book when he opened the door. "Good, Bart. Quiet. Miss Chase and Mr. Stafford been out all day. No sign of their friends since lunch."

"Phones been quiet?" He knew the website had been; he'd been checking that throughout the day.

"Yep. Couple of people calling for reservations, but nothing out of the ordinary. Shannon wants us to let her know special if anybody tries to book a room this week or next. Is there something going on?"

"We're just trying to make sure we don't get a lot of people around, trying to take pictures of the actors. We got two more coming in, then more next week."

"Well, that's good, then. Miss Chase is a sweetie. Didn't see much of Mr. Stafford before he went out, though. Oh, here she is back!"

Bart turned around as Riley came through the front door. He could see Lilli's car pulling away; she must have just dropped Riley off. He was curious how that day had gone. Lilli was all kinds of uncomfortable and aggravated with the movie. She could be pretty intimidating, and not just because she probably knew about fifty ways to kill somebody with just her hands.

Okay, that was a big reason she could be intimidating, actually. You could see it in her eyes when she got pissed, like she was considering which way would work best on you. Better not to get her pissed. Because

otherwise, she was awesome. Bart would never admit it, but it was possible that he had a little bit of a crush.

Riley smiled when she saw him. She looked tired, and a lot less Hollywood than she had the day before. She was wearing just jeans and a sweater, her hair was pulled back, and she didn't seem like she was wearing makeup. She looked like a normal, pretty girl. As he walked toward her, Bart was surprised to see that she had a light sprinkle of freckles over her nose.

“Hey. How'd it go with Lilli?”

“Okay. Good enough. Saw a lot of the town. It's cute. Are you here for me?”

“Yeah—I'm taking you to dinner, right?”

“But it's not even six o'clock.”

“Well, almost.”

“That's dinner?”

He laughed. Even though Bart hadn't been raised in Signal Bend, he'd lived in town long enough to forget that other people, especially city people, had dinner later. “It is around here. The restaurant stops serving at nine-thirty, and if you want a decent meal, you eat earlier than that.”

Her expression was still a little bewildered. “*The* restaurant? There's only one?”

“Pretty much, except for the diner and a couple of little cafes—and the A&W. Changing your mind?”

“No...more like changing my paradigm. Can I go upstairs and change my clothes, too, at least? Check in with Pru?”

“Sure. I'll just hang out with Vicki and wait.” The mention of Pru, her assistant, made him think about the news story. “Hey—you doing okay today?”

“Yeah, I'm—” She stopped, her budding smile freezing and dying. She stared for a beat, and then her brows knitted tightly together. “Oh, fuck. You know. Dammit. *Dammit!* You know. You know what? Fuck it. I'm staying in.” She turned and stalked toward the staircase.

Bart went after her and grabbed her arm, pulling her back to face him. “Wait! Riley, what? How'd I piss you off?”

At first, she glared stonily at him, long enough that he started to wonder if she was just going to stand there like a statue until he gave up and left. But then something sharpened in her eyes, and she swatted at him with

the arm he wasn't holding. "Do you have any fucking idea what it's like not to ever have control over anything about yourself? To have no secrets from anyone, ever? To find out about really personal shit on the cover of a *magazine*, because the whole world knows about it before you do?" She shook her arm until he released her. "I can't even meet somebody without knowing that the person I'm talking to probably knows everything there is to know about me, even the stuff that should only be mine. *Epecially* that stuff. It sucks. It just fucking SUCKS. So fuck you!"

Yeah. Too much work. "I don't know how the fuck you worked it out in that little head that *I'm* the bad guy, but I'm sorry you had a tough day. If it's true, then I'm sorry your guy was a cheating asshole." He took out his phone and sent a text. "There. Now you have my number. Call or text me if you want to see me—for *fun*. Not to pitch a fit. I'm sure you pay people to deal with that bullshit. Otherwise, I'll just see you around."

He spun on his heel and went directly for the door, feeling angry and a little guilty. He'd probably been too harsh. She'd taken a hard blow. But he hated getting backlash for somebody else's fuckup.

"Hey!" She called from behind him. He stopped and turned around about a step before he reached the door. She had her phone in her hand; her look was accusatory. "How'd you get my number?"

"It's what I do." He turned again and went out the door.

~oOo~

He went back to the clubhouse in a funk. Vic, Havoc, Len, and Badger were drinking and playing pool. Dom was behind the bar. Omen wasn't around; Bart figured him for running errands for the B&B. Isaac and Show usually spent Saturdays with their old ladies these days. But C.J. wasn't around. He realized he hadn't seen the old guy in a couple of days.

"Anybody heard from C.J.?"

Len turned from the pool table, where he'd been waiting his turn, his hands resting on his cue. "I went over earlier. He's working on a world record bender, but he's okay."

Ceej had been stubborn and cantankerous as long as Bart had known him, but he'd been more and more out of line over the past couple of years. Bart was waiting for the day when Isaac would come to him and want some kind of dirt on the old man. Because he could see—everybody could see—

that Isaac and Ceej were going to face off eventually. And Isaac would crush Ceej under his big boot.

“Something set him off?”

Len shrugged, and the conversation died there. Nobody wanted to forecast what was going on with C.J. They should be, though. They couldn't get caught flat-footed. Especially not with the Scorpions making an appearance next week. But he wasn't going to push it in the Hall on a Saturday evening. He'd bring it up with Isaac.

“B-man! Thought you were taking the little princess for another spin tonight! She kick you already?” Havoc, now that he was worried Bart was getting invested, was going to ride him hard. Bart had decided to take it in stride. At least as far as anyone knew.

Len spun back around. “That's right. You got some of that sweet California sunshine last night. It's great, right? Like there's something in the water or air out there that just makes it better. And the guys out there must be limp as shit, because the chicks are so *grateful*. Am I right?”

Take it in stride. “I'll meet you guys at Tuck's.” He went back to his room.

~oOo~

Bart came in about half an hour or so after the rest of the guys. As it was every Saturday, Tuck's was loud and rowdy, packed with locals from Signal Bend and from Millview and Worden, the nearest towns. Even though things had gotten better, people were doing better, they still worked damn hard and didn't have much. Saturday night and Sunday was the only time most of them took off or even backed off. Sunday was for remembering God and family. Saturday night was for forgetting. And they all partied hard in the few hours they had.

Tuck's—or, more officially, No Place, the town bar owned by Tuck and Rose Olsen—had live bands and dancing on Saturday nights, and that tended to stir people up extra hard. The place was regionally notorious for the regular brawling that broke out a few times a week, and always on Saturdays.

The Horde maintained some profile at Tuck's during after-dark hours. Even when there was a Friday party at the clubhouse, the guys rotated through in pairs, doing a couple hours' time keeping the peace. But

keeping the peace at Tuck's meant only that they'd kept any lasting damage to a minimum. The Horde were always in the thick of the fighting. They looked forward to it.

As did everybody else in town. The fights, for the most part, were friendly and recreational, a way to blow off some steam. When they started, usually over some petty, lighthearted disagreement but sometimes over a real beef, everybody would get up and move the breakables out of the way, then get down to business. Rarely did a brawl get out of hand. When they were over, men shook hands or clapped each other on the back.

But over the past couple of years, as the town gained popularity as a weekend getaway spot, the bar's clientele had started to include a trickle of unsuspecting strangers, and the Horde had tightened down on the fighting. Now, they dragged the brawlers out back and stayed out of it unless they were principally involved. The restraint chafed at most of them—they were all fighters and needed the same kind of release all these other guys did. But they were in charge. Like everybody else in town, Tuck paid the Horde to protect his business, to protect the town. Part of protecting the town was not chasing off the people who were spending money in it.

Havoc probably had the most trouble with the new rules. He was constantly bitching about it, and it had been his carping that had started the club down the road of opening another bar in town, one that catered to the wine and cheese crowd. The kind of people who went antiquing and stayed in bed and breakfasts. Not the same kind of people, generally speaking, who enjoyed a good bar fight.

As usual this early in the night, the Horde were lined up at the bar, and Bart stepped in between Havoc and Badger. Badge wasn't much of a fighter, but he was still putting on muscle, not to mention experience. He was young—really young to have already earned his patch. But the Horde had empty seats around the table, and Badge had proven himself in the shit with Ellis. He might not look as imposing as his brothers yet, and he might get scared, but he stood firm. In some ways, Bart thought that made him tougher than the rest of them.

Rose, Tuck's wife and the bartender, came up and leaned on the bar in front of Bart, resting her ample cleavage on her arms. The rose tattoo over one breast was starting to get a little misshapen, but that didn't deter her from putting her assets right out front.

“Hiya, honey. Bud and a shot, like regular?”

“Yeah, Rose. Thanks, beautiful.”

She winked and gave his hand a pat before she turned to the booze at the back of the bar and grabbed the Jack Daniels.

The band was still in their first set. This was a regular gig for them, so they knew the right pacing to keep the crowd into it. Nobody ever danced the first set. People sat around drinking and talking. Things amped up the second set, and the dancing happened then. All the Horde danced. Most guys around these parts did. No shame in knowing how to two-step.

Actually, it had taken Bart some time to come to terms with that. He'd been a geek in school—hell, he was still a geek—and he'd tried to cultivate some nominal cool by staying off the dance floor. But that was the city. Here, dancing was cool. And this kind of dancing, with actual steps, was something he could learn. So he had, even though he wasn't really a fan of the country music that was a mainstay here.

The third set, when everybody was drunk and riled up, was when things got interesting. But now it was early, and Bart tossed back his shot and then grabbed his beer and turned around, leaning back against the bar. Havoc was stuffing his face with a Reuben sandwich. That boy could eat, but it seemed to convert straight to muscle.

Around a mouthful he said, “Guess you wised up about the little blonde.”

Bart answered without turning. Riley hadn't called or texted in the couple of hours since he'd walked away. “I guess. Don't need the trouble.”

“Fuck's a fuck, brother.”

“You know that's bullshit, Hav. If it was true, we'd just jack off and not bother with women at all. A good fuck is worth something.”

Havoc shrugged, making a face like he wasn't sure he agreed but wasn't going to argue the point. “Well, that little bitch musta really been something, way you've been all day.”

Feeling pissed again, and knowing that acting pissed would only give Havoc more ammo, Bart put the bottle to his mouth and finished his beer. “I gotta drain the pipe.” He left the empty on the bar and went back to the john.

He wasn't in a big rush, but he didn't linger long enough for it to be weird. Just long enough to get his head even again. When he came back out, the band was finishing its set, and Havoc was leaning against the wall at the

end of the little narrow hallway, grinning like he was waiting for him. What the fuck?

“What’s your damage, asshole?”

“Just thought I’d get a good seat for the show, loverboy.”

Whatever. Bart rolled his eyes and walked past, already looking to get Rose’s attention so he could get another beer. As he came around the end of the bar, not quite focused on where he was going, he almost knocked Riley on her ass.

He grabbed her arms to catch her as she stumbled backwards.

“Jesus! What the fuck!”

Okay, he was still pissed off, apparently. Maybe he should have lingered another couple of seconds in the john, because yelling at her for almost running her over wasn’t exactly an effective pickup strategy.

Then again, it kind of made them even.

Not that she saw it that way. She knocked his hands away with a snarl and turned away. He grabbed her arm again. “Hey, sorry. You surprised me is all. What are you doing here?”

She was still irritated, he could tell, but she answered him straight.

“Omen brought us. I tried to text you but it wouldn’t go through.”

“Us? Who us?”

“Me and Pru. Tanner already went to bed, and Mark wanted to stay in and watch TV.”

Bart looked around—there was an empty four-top in the corner near the kitchen. Fairly quiet spot, relatively. Omen and Pru were by the juke. He slid his hand down Riley’s arm and took her hand, leading her over to the table. He pulled out a chair, and Riley sat. “Wait here a sec. I’ll be right back.”

He stalked through the bar and grabbed Omen by the back of his Prospect kutte. “Scuse me, hon. I need Omen for a minute.” Then he dragged Omen to the wall and threw him against it.

“What the *fuck* are you thinking, Prospect, bringing those girls here on Saturday night?”

Omen looked shocked and scared. “What? Bart, Riley was looking for you. She wanted me to take her to the clubhouse, but I knew you’d be here. What was I supposed to do?”

“Say *no*! She’s a chick! You tell her no!”

“But Isaac said I’m supposed to keep her happy!”

Jesus Christ. “Jesus Christ! You’re not gonna keep her happy if you put her in the middle of a fucking bar fight, asshole. What do you think the boss will do to you then?”

The kid went so white Bart thought he was really going to keel over. “Oh, shit.”

“Oh shit is right.” He thought for a minute. “You tapping the assistant? Pru?”

Overlaid on that ghostly white sheen of fear came a bright red blush. He didn’t need to answer any other way.

“Isaac know?” And the blood drained away. The kid was going to have an aneurysm at this rate.

“I’ll talk to him tomorrow. And I’ll take Riley over tonight. You get Pru out of here. Keep her happy.” He let go of Omen’s kutte. “And next time, call somebody and fucking ask.”

“I tried. Calls aren’t getting through tonight.”

Fuck. It happened sometimes. Cell service around most of the area could get finicky. A few places, Horde places—the clubhouse, the B&B, Isaac’s house—were stable, but otherwise they’d hit a dead patch for a few hours a couple times a week. Worse in bad weather.

“Okay. You tried. That’s something. Be nice to the girl.”

“Yeah, man. Of course. I like her.”

“Careful with that, kid. She’s just visiting.” Advice he should probably take himself. He sent Omen back to Pru and began to wend his way back to Riley.

Havoc was sitting at the table with her, leaning in close. Riley was smiling at him. That cheeky son of a bitch. He strode up behind him and dropped his hand hard on his shoulder. He was bigger than Bart, and Bart had yet to take him down in the ring, but he thought he might be ready to give it another try.

“Thanks for saving my seat, brother. Now fuck off.”

Havoc turned in the seat and looked up at him, grinning the biggest bullshit grin. “Sorry, brother. Didn’t mean to cut in.” He got up and gave Bart an affectionate slap on the back of the head as he went back to the bar.

Bart sat down. “Sorry about all that.”

Riley nodded toward the door. “What’s going on? Where are Omen and Pru going?”

“They wanted some time alone. I told him I’d take you where you want to go. If that’s alright with you.”

She stared at the door for a couple of seconds, then met his eyes and stared at him for a couple more. “I’m sorry I yelled at you before. You’re right. Tough day, but not your fault.”

“Understood. You said you texted me? Looking for some fun?”

She smiled. He finally really saw her, and he realized at last that she must have showered and changed, dolled herself up a little for him. Her hair was loose and full, and she had more makeup on than earlier, her eyes rimmed with black. She looked sexy as hell, in dark, body-hugging jeans and a snug black top with long sleeves and a deep neckline. She was wearing tall boots with a fairly low heel—good, because he had an idea.

“This place isn’t that much fun. Wanna go for a ride?”

CHAPTER NINE

“Ride where?” It wasn’t that late, but it was dark, they were out in the boonies, and Riley was totally out of her element. All the smart money said that going for a nighttime ride with an outlaw biker was a classically awful idea. A Roger Corman, John Carpenter, Wes Craven kind of classic. No matter how nice he’d been to her so far.

“Just out in the country a little ways. I know a pretty place. Quiet.”

A quiet place out in the country. Where no one could hear her scream. Maybe a George Romero kind of classic. Or Sam Raimi.

“Um...”

He grinned crookedly at her. “You chicken, princess?”

“Don’t call me that. And no, I’m not chicken. I’m smart.”

He leaned on the table, crossing his arms as if he was ready to really debate that point. “Okay, smartypants. Let’s think about this. Your ride just left—but I’m sure Havoc will give you a ride. He thinks you’re hot. There’s no bitch seat on his bike, though. I *have* seen him ride with a girl on his lap before, and I’m sure if you asked nice, he’d do that for you. ‘Bout ten miles to the B&B. Oh—and he’s a spanker. Just so you know—for reference. Len doesn’t have a bitch, either. Vic does, but he’s...ooh.” Bart whistled. “More than you can handle. He likes it really rough.”

“Jesus! Stop!”

“Just telling you your options. Those guys’ll want payment for the service. Only fair.”

He’d never stopped with that snarky grin. Like he knew she didn’t have a choice. “And *you* don’t want payment?”

“All I’m looking for is your time. Anything more than that, it’ll be what you want.” He leaned in close. She could smell the leather of his vest—he’d called it something else, but she couldn’t remember—and the liquor on his breath. “What would you rather do tonight? Sit here in this dank old saloon, watch the natives get restless? Or take a ride out on this great night and watch the sky? Country sky on a clear night is something to see. I promise.”

His grey eyes glinted at her. He was cocky as hell, thinking he had her. But he did, and they both knew it. Because he’d sent her ride away. She

should be mad, but she wasn't. The cocky was coming off as playful, and he was just so damn cute.

“Okay. I just hope the next tabloid headline isn't ‘Riley Chase found headless in ditch in obvious suicide.’” Wow. She just made a joke about all that. Not a good joke, but still.

A weird look went through his eyes first, but then it was gone and he laughed, indulging her weak attempt at humor, and stood. “Good girl. Come on.”

She took his hand, and he pulled her close, hooking his arm around her. She fit under his arm, close to his body. She felt safe. Ironic, but true.

~oOo~

They rode for nearly half an hour, and they'd passed nothing but trees for the last ten minutes or more. He hadn't been joking about going out a ways. He'd had a thick fleece hoodie in his saddlebag, and he'd given it and his helmet to her. His helmet was a lot too big for her, but he helped her adjust the strap, just as he'd done when he'd brought her back to the hotel that morning—wow. It had only been that morning. She'd only been in Signal Bend a few hours more than a day. A lot had happened.

Most of it had happened in L.A. and still felt unreal. She'd talked to her mother, and Stan, and Denise—who'd put her on the line with Heidi, the publicist who worked with Denise's clients. They were all more or less in agreement that the idea that she was in ‘seclusion’ was more helpful than harmful, and she should stay where she was and go on as planned, while they kept a full lid on Riley news until the situation changed, or it was time to return home.

Eleanor had also used the opportunity to indulge in a harangue about how she'd always loathed Devon, had known he was no good and said as much, but would Riley listen to her? Of course not. In truth, her mother *had* hated Devon. But not from the beginning. At first, she'd thought it was a great match. A high profile match. It wasn't until that profile tarnished that Eleanor began to protest. By then, Riley was deeply in love. Her first real rebellion from her mother had been to ignore her ranting about Dev.

That had become a habit, one she had not broken. She'd ended the call while Eleanor was fully engaged. Then she'd turned her phone off. She'd sat on the bed and stared at the thing, thinking about the night before

—how Bart had made her forget completely about Devon, at least for awhile. How his body had been so different, bigger and broader and firmer. How he'd focused so much on her pleasure. How he'd filled her. How he'd smiled and laughed.

Sex with Devon had been serious business, all about two souls melding, finding transcendence. She'd found that poignant and sexy, but it did tend to mean his mind was a bit elsewhere. Sex with Bart had been *fun*. Also mind-blowing. Talk about transcendence.

She'd realized she'd been a bitch earlier, lashing out at him simply for having access to the internet, basically. At first, she worried that maybe she'd fucked up something that could have been a nice distraction, but then she remembered that he'd sent her a text. She'd checked. He'd sent: *4 a good time call*.

She'd texted him back: *This is me calling*. But the send had failed. Three times. She'd thrown her phone on the bed in a snit and then gone to take a shower. By the time she was out, she'd decided that she would not be thwarted, and she'd gone hunting for Omen.

Now she was on the back of Bart's bike, leaning her head against his back to shield herself from the chill of the fall night, and he was slowing up and pulling off a paved road onto an overgrown lane that wasn't much more than a path.

The roar of the bike eased as the engine slowed. The lane was canopied by trees, cutting them off from the sky. God, it was so dark. No lights but the headlamp. Riley laughed a little as she imagined her mother's paroxysm of horror if she could see her now.

Then they cleared the natural tunnel and were in a wide, even field sloping gently to one side, and around and above them an infinite blue-black dome of night. No longer pitch black, the world glittered with stars and a glowing white half moon.

Bart stopped the bike and helped her off, then dismounted himself. He took the helmet off her head. When she shivered as a breeze blew past them, he zipped his hoodie up all the way to her neck.

She tipped her head up and took in the sky. "Whoa."

"Told ya. Something to see. In the city, you forget stars even exist except in stories."

Bringing her head down, she turned to look at him. He was starring up at the sky. "How do you know?"

He answered with his face pointed straight up. “Not from here. I grew up around. Mainly cities on coasts.”

“I thought all the Horde were local. I thought that was a thing.”

“Nope. I’m the only one who’s not, but there’s not a rule or anything. And my dad was brought up here. My grandparents lived here till they died. So I’m almost local. Just been around more than my brothers. Most of them.” Now he turned to her. “You ever live anywhere but L.A.?”

“No. I’ve traveled, though. I’ve been to Europe a couple of times. And I did a movie in the Czech Republic.”

“*Shattered Reflection*. Right. I saw that.”

“Yeah? You and like three other people. It sucked.”

He chuckled and took the two steps that had separated them. “It did.” Picking up her hand and lacing his fingers with hers, he added, “But you didn’t.”

“Thanks. You know if a movie is going to be any good while you’re making it. You can’t always tell when you’re reading a script, sadly, but when you’re on set, you really know. If it’s gonna suck, then it’s demoralizing to go to the set every day and try not to suck. The first shooting day on that one, I knew I was fucked. That’s the last time I tried a heavy drama.” She paused, realizing that that statement was no longer true. “Until now, anyway.”

Bart started to walk away from his bike, leading her into the field, toward the top of the low slope. “Do you think this one is going to suck?”

“From what I can tell now, no. The script is really good. *Really* good. The director has two Oscars, and this real-life drama stuff is what he does best. The cast is good. Doug and Peter are both playing to type, and they are great in roles like these. Tanner—I know he’s being an asshole, but he’s very talented. He’s old-school Method, and I think he must be trying to find the rhythm of the biker. Because he’s never been such a douche before. I don’t know him that well, but I’ve always thought he was pretty decent.”

“And you?” Bart stopped them at the top of the slope and sat down, pulling her gently to the ground with him. Then he lay back.

“Did you honestly bring me up here to lie in the grass and look at the sky?”

There was that damn grin. “Did you think I was lying? Where’s the trust?”

She had to laugh. She'd say it was like high school, but her high school experience had been nothing like this. She lay down next to him and looked at the stars. He was right. She'd never experienced anything like it. The sky felt close enough to touch and yet endlessly far. The light breeze danced over her cheeks. The grass smelled sweet and...*pure* was the only word that came to mind. She felt present. As the stars winked and blinked overhead, she answered the question he'd asked before he sat.

"I'm good, too. I know this isn't the kind of role I'm known for, and I'm not an idiot. I know I got it because *Hades High* is hot with the right demo. But I also have the cred. I know Lilli doesn't like how I look—I'm too small, too young, too blonde. Well, no guy is as big as Isaac, certainly no actor with the right look and the chops, and they want to maintain that sense of size. Tanner's very tall for movies, but he's five inches shorter than Isaac. So they wanted a small Lilli. You'll find that the actors playing the other Horde are all shorter than you guys. As for my age, I'm, what, nine or ten years younger than Lilli? Maybe seven years younger than she was when it happened? Not that big a difference. And to the last point, that's why God made Clairol. I'll dye my hair."

He rolled his head toward hers. "You've thought about that answer."

"Sure I have. There's already chatter that I'm miscast. I'll get the question every stop on the junket. And Lilli just beams her frustration about it right at me."

"You should tell her what you just told me."

"I will. I'm trying not to be too adversarial with her. I've never done this before, played a living person, but I get that it's got to be weird. It's weird for me."

"It is weird. The whole thing is weird. Most people around here aren't thrilled that it's happening."

"I got a sense. What about you? Do you wish we weren't here?"

He rolled to his side, his body right up against hers, and looked down at her. "No. I'm glad you're here."

Riley thought he was going to kiss her. And she would definitely have let him. But just he put his hand on her face, brushing her hair back.

"How're you doing with the tabloid shit?"

Way to kill a mood. "Don't bring that up. I don't want to think about it. I want to not deal."

"I can help you. We can keep them off your back."

She really, really didn't want to talk about this. She wanted him to kiss her and make her forget what he'd just made her remember. She'd been thinking they might get naked under the stars, even though it *was* kinda chilly out here. But the thought of having a second line of defense against the vultures had no small appeal, so rather than shut him down, she asked.

“Why? How?”

He shrugged and shifted, leaning on her a little more and putting his hand on her waist, like he wanted to get something going. This wasn't exactly pillow talk, though. Or field talk.

“The how is I can keep track of any unusual digital traffic, and I've got the B&B and the motel in Millview both hooking me in if they get reservation requests. There's a lot we can do to discourage them from camping out in Signal Bend. The why is because it helps us, too. We don't want those types nosing in our business. And anyway, I'm a good guy. I like to help a damsel when I can.”

“I'm not a damsel.”

“No?” He picked up a lock of her hair. “You sure look like one.” He bent down, his face right above hers. “So, anything you want to do now?”

His smile faded, and his hand slid under his hoodie and her shirt to caress the bare skin of her side. She kept thinking he was going to kiss her, but he never moved closer. He just stared at her, his hand on her side, his thumb drawing a slow circle on her skin, making her belly twitch. Finally, sick of waiting, she threaded her hands into his hair and pulled him down.

He was laughing as his mouth covered hers, but as soon as their tongues touched, the tone changed. It wasn't Devon's mystical solemnity, but neither was it lighthearted like the night before. She didn't know what was different, but she felt it in him—the way he moved over her, his leg pushing between hers, his thigh heavy against her, his hands holding her head as he kissed her hard, crushing her lips against her teeth.

She shouldn't like that, how hard his mouth was on hers. She'd always liked things to start more slowly, more gently. But she felt a difference in herself, too, and instead of pushing him away, she clung to him, moaning, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He was the one who tore away first, gasping as he did so. “Fuck, babe. I want you naked.”

She didn't answer. She didn't want to take the time to talk. Instead, she lifted her head and kissed him again, making him grunt. When he

pushed a hand between them and pulled the zipper on the hoodie down, she eased her hold on him. She wanted his hands on her.

The hoodie was open, and he pushed her shirt, then her bra, up over her breasts, exposing her to him—and to the cool air of the autumn night. Her flesh prickled, and she shivered.

He'd released her mouth and was moving down to her breast when it happened.

He stopped. "You're cold."

"It's okay. You can warm me up." She pushed her hands under his shirt to bring him closer. He jumped and laughed.

"Whoa! No, you're very cold. We should go back."

When he started to pull her bra and shirt back down, she grabbed his hand to stop him. "No! I want—I want—"

He laughed at her, and she was suddenly warmer as she blushed. "Easy, babe. I do, too. We're not done. We're just gonna get warm. I'll take you back to the clubhouse."

She wanted to stay where they were, but he was right—she was cold, and getting naked enough to do what she wanted to do would only make her colder. Also, the ground wasn't exactly soft. The grass was a little scratchy, now that her clothes were bunched up funny. And was that a rock?

But she didn't want to go through the clubhouse again, not like this, on their way back to his room. She knew all the guys knew what was going on, but she didn't want the possibility of walking through a leering gauntlet between now and when they were finally naked.

"No. The hotel. Stay with me."

"Yeah?" Crooked damn grin. He pushed up to his knees and then to his feet, holding his hand out to her.

She took it and let him pull her up. "Yeah."

~oOo~

Bart went faster on the ride back, even on the weedy lane, through the heavy overhang of autumn leaves. While they were dashing through that enclosing space, and until he turned out onto the paved road, Riley clung tightly to him, her arms squeezed around his waist and her eyes squeezed shut.

The ride evened out on the macadam, though, and she relaxed a little. The vibrations of the engine through the seat did nothing to settle her stirred body, and she dropped one hand from his waist to his crotch. He was stirred, too, long and hard in his jeans. He twitched at her touch but didn't move her hand. She spent the rest of the ride with her hand cupping his cock through his jeans.

When he finally pulled up at the hotel and parked the bike, Riley felt restive with desire. Bart grabbed the hand she'd had around his cock and guided her off, then dismounted himself. As soon as both feet were on the ground, he grabbed her, yanking her hard against his chest and slamming his mouth over hers. She grabbed his vest in her fists and held on for the ride.

Nothing she was doing was what she would usually do. She was always so aware of how she could be perceived, always so careful not to do anything stupid and land on the cover of the tabloids. But she'd landed there anyway, as the sad little sap of a girlfriend who was just clueless and stupid, thinking she was loved and putting up with all kinds of bullshit, while her guy partied and played around. Nice.

If there were cameras hiding in the bushes on this night, they'd get quite a different show. She felt wild, kissing Bart back every bit as hard as he was kissing her, hooking her leg around his and rubbing herself against him as he shoved his hands into the back of her jeans and cupped her ass. She felt more than wild—she felt savage. If he turned her over the seat of his bike, she didn't think she'd stop him. In fact, the thought of it made her gasp.

He pulled back, panting, and took the helmet off her head and set it on his bike. When his hands came around her again, he lifted her up, trying to get her legs around his waist—the same way he'd carried her into his room at the clubhouse. But she wriggled away. She wanted to walk to her room under her own power. He grabbed for her again, but she stepped back and took his hand.

“Come on.” Those were the first words either of them had spoken since the field. He nodded in response, his smile crooking up, and let her lead him inside.

There was a guy sitting on one of the couches in the front room. He jumped up as they came in.

“Miss Chase! Hi, I’m Wallace, the night manager...Oh, uh...hi, Bart.”

Riley was in a hurry, and in no mood to make small talk with the help. She smiled and dragged Bart toward the staircase. Usually she was more polite, but if she didn’t get naked soon and feel his skin on hers, she was going to combust.

Bart laughed behind her and said, “Hey, Wallace. See you later. Have a good night!”

When they were upstairs and down the hall, she got the door open as quickly as she could and pulled him in. She barely had time to switch on a light before he’d taken over and had her against the door, pulling her shirt and his hoodie over her head.

“Fuck, I’m so hard for you right now.” He muttered the words in a rush before he claimed her mouth again, his tongue pushing until she let him in. The metal hardware on his vest dug into her skin. Then he backed off, and she thought he was going to start taking his clothes off. Instead, he grabbed her arm and spun her around, pushing her face-first on the door and shocking her to her toes.

She wasn’t sure what to think, so she didn’t bother. She simply felt, and her body was nearly exploding with sensation. His hands were working the hooks of her bra and then pushing the straps off her shoulders. He pulled her away from the door, and she shook the bra off. Then he leaned his body into hers, his weight again pressing her hard against the beveled wood. He nosed her hair out of his way; she felt his mouth on her shoulder, her neck, her back. His hands circled her waist, coming forward, between her and the door, working the fly of her jeans.

Everything was quiet—but loud, too, his breath heavy and rough in her ear, and her own gasps of surprise and need magnified as they bounced off the door. Riley could both hear and feel his hands moving on her jeans, opening them, sliding inside, under her panties, his palms flat against her belly, moving to her hips.

In one sharp movement, Bart shoved her jeans and underwear to her knees, and she was all but naked, bound at mid-leg by the bunched denim and lace. He stood again and leaned into her, still fully dressed. His hands came around her, between her body and the door, one hand taking a breast and the other pushing between her legs, hard and rough on her most sensitive skin. When his fingers pushed fiercely into her and pinched firmly

around her nipple, all at once, she cried out and threw her head back so hard she collided with his shoulder and knocked herself a little loopy for a second.

He chuckled, his mouth against her ear. “You okay, babe?”

She nodded, gasping as his hands excited her—but she was confused, and her mind tried to make herself think after all. This was different. It was rough. It was too rough. Wasn’t it too rough? Why wasn’t it too rough? He was still dressed, for fuck’s sake, and she was practically naked and practically tied up. This wasn’t what she was into. It wasn’t. But God, she needed more. She put her hands flat on the door and pushed until he took a step back. She took a step, too, and bent at the waist.

What the hell was she doing? Presenting herself to him, that’s what, like a bitch in heat. She didn’t know what was going on, why she was behaving like this, but if she didn’t have his cock inside her pretty soon, she was going to lose her mind.

“Ah, babe. Ah, hell yeah.” The hand that had been inside her came around and caressed her ass, then slid between her cheeks and pushed back into her core again, deeper this time, his fingers finding that special spot she’d never quite understood. Her knees began to shake.

“God! More! I need more! Please!”

Both his hands left her. “Okay, tiger. Gimme a sec.” She could hear his amusement and felt like she should be embarrassed, but her need was too great to bother with shame.

Her hips wouldn’t stop moving, even after his hands had left her. She’d never felt like this before—it was like an actual need, more than want. She heard his zipper and then the tear and fumble of the condom packet, and she whimpered her impatience.

He spread his legs wide, and then he was there, cool and hard, thick against her core. One hand on her hip, he held himself against her but didn’t push in. When she tried to do it herself, to push back, he held her and leaned over her back.

He whispered into her ear, his lips hot. “I am going to make you come so fucking hard.” And then he shoved into her, hard and fast, so deep she felt bruised. His hands clutching her hips, he pulled out and slammed into her again, and again, and it was...God, it was so good! So deep, so hard, so fast. Her nails noisily scraped the wood of the door as her hands curled into fists.

Every time he sank deep, he grunted roughly, and the sound was hardly human. She answered each one with a bestial cry of her own—a strangled whine that, to anyone passing the door at that moment, would probably have sounded like she was dying. Painfully.

He changed his hold on her, putting a hand on the door next to her fist and leaning over her. “Fuck, Riley. Come on, babe.”

She bent over a little more, and he muttered, “Shit!” Then his free hand left her hip and pushed between her legs. When his calloused fingers rasped over her clit, she was done. Just done. Pleasure spiraled out from that small point to every extremity, and coupled with the deep slide and pressure of his cock—he was right. He made her come so fucking hard. She pounded on the door with her fist, rocking her hips as hard as she could.

“Yeah, you like that. Come on, come on.” His breath tickled the side of her face.

“Yes! Yes! Oh, God! Oh please *now!*” And then she shut up, the capacity for speech completely beyond her; her climax had her by the throat. Just as she was finally over the peak and coming down, Bart leaned back, hooked his hands around her hips and sped up, grunting in time with his thrusts until he froze and she could feel him pulsing inside her.

When he was done, he kissed her shoulder and pulled out slowly. As he dealt with the condom, Riley, her need sated, found the shame she hadn’t had time for earlier. What the hell was with her all of a sudden? She’d just gotten fucked against the door of her hotel room, her jeans and underwear were bunched around her knees, and her body was damp, sore, and throbbing.

And Bart, whom she’d known for not quite two days, was still fully clothed, up to and including his damn leather vest. What a slut. She started to pull her underwear back up, but he stopped her and lifted her off her feet.

“You were going the wrong direction there, princess. Those are coming off.” He carried her to the bed and laid her down on it. “I’m not done with you.” He brushed a finger over her nipple, and she gasped at the intensity of that light touch. “Unless you want me to be. Do you want me to go?”

She very much did not want him to go. It felt like the sluttiness would be in the letting him leave. “If you stop calling me princess, I want you to stay. Why do you keep calling me that?”

He grinned and grabbed one of her feet, pulling off her boot and tossing it behind him with a flourish. “You’re like a princess—little and pretty and pampered. All fancy. Like Sleeping Beauty. But I’ll try not to call you that anymore.”

“Sleeping Beauty is a weak little twit. *She’s* a damsel. And don’t try to stop—do or do not. There is no try.”

He froze just as he was about to send her other boot over his shoulder. “Holy shit. Did you just quote fucking *Yoda* to me?” He tossed the boot.

He looked both excited and impressed. She just smiled.

“If you’re a Star Wars fan, I might have to marry you.” He yanked her jeans and underwear off her legs.

“I am. I was Leia for every Halloween from seven to fourteen.”

His smile went wide at that. “You mean *Princess* Leia?” He pulled her socks off, both at the same time.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Call me princess—as long as you’re thinking of Leia when you do it. But I’m not going to marry you.”

Finally, now that she was completely naked and he’d already fucked her silly, he started on his own clothes, reaching down to unlace his boots—they were basic black Docs, and she liked that they weren’t cowboy or engineer boots—and then toe them and his socks off. “Why not? I’m a catch.”

She shrugged and made a show of examining him with a critical eye. “You’re not exactly Prince Charming.” She liked this banter a lot. It had made her forget all about being embarrassed.

He hung his vest over the arm of one of the wing-back chairs in the room. “Yeah, but you don’t want Prince Charming. Sleeping Beauty wanted Prince Charming. You want Han Solo.” He pulled his shirt over his head.

“Are you seriously making your case for your potential as my husband? Because if we’re talking seriously, then let’s talk seriously.” She couldn’t get it out with a straight face, but he didn’t see her smirk—he’d halted in the act of taking his shirt off. He was standing there, his arms over his head, wrapped up in his shirt, like he’d been freeze-framed. It was a pretty great picture, actually—his cut chest and abs, those hip muscles, his flat, almost-outie belly button, that great ink, just locked in place for her to look her fill.

After a few seconds, he shook off the fugue and got his shirt off. His grin was gone—she'd really thrown him. "I'm just playing, prin—Riley."

"I know, dork. So was I. And you can call me princess." She lay back on the pillows and coiled a lock of hair around her fingers, working her best come hither. "Now, will you hurry up and get naked? I want more."

He dropped his jeans, and then his boxers, and lay next to her. The feel of his muscular body all along hers made her stomach flutter and her heart race.

He leaned over her, his hand on her waist. "You are fucking hot, *princess*. Hey—were you Slave Leia for Halloween?"

"I was a kid. I was Cinnamon Bun Leia."

"Bummer."

"Wait. You're perving on an image of tween me in a gold bikini right now, aren't you?"

"Am not. I'm perving on *this* you in a gold bikini. It's a really good image."

She laughed and traced his crooked grin with her finger. "How do you know so much about Sleeping Beauty, anyway? You guys having Disney marathons at the clubhouse?"

"Nah. Got a little sister. She liked all the princesses when she was little."

"Sounds like you're a good brother."

He shrugged. "I tried. Now shut up." He kissed her.

CHAPTER TEN

The Keep was crowded, and the Horde were on edge. Every actor was in town now, or had been. Tanner and Riley had been in Signal Bend nearly a week. Doug and Peter, playing Show and Bart, had been in since Sunday afternoon. Lindy, the girl playing Daisy, had come and gone, and Show was in a quiet bad temper, the wound of his grief rubbed raw again. And earlier in the day, the actors playing the rest of the Horde had arrived in a pack. They were leaving in a pack Saturday afternoon.

Peter Gruen had turned out to be a decent guy, and Bart hadn't minded having him hanging around with him for a few days. He was kind of a hound with the girls, but he was basically harmless. Not that bright, though. Bart's earlier excitement about meeting famous people had been completely exploded by this week, when they were everywhere. They were just regular people, good and bad, just prettier and richer.

But now, the Keep, the inner sanctum of the Night Horde MC, was packed with Horde and the men playing them in a movie. This room, as a rule, was off limits to all but patched members. The few times anyone else had been behind these closed doors had been controversial.

This meeting was less so, but it was still deeply weird for the Keep to be so full. It wasn't much of a real meeting, not while the actors were in the room. The actors wanted to see what a meeting was like, and the club had voted to let them watch.

Most of the club had voted. C.J. was still absent—nearly a week, now. Len and Vic had both checked on him a couple of times. Strangely, nobody was talking about it. Bart found that more unsettling than C.J.'s absence. Something was brewing—Bart could feel it, like the way the air pressure changed, got heavy, right before a big storm. He knew everybody else could feel it, too. But everybody was backing away from the topic of C.J., other than Vic and Len delivering a quick update that the old man was still kicking. These were not men who backed away from anything. These men were forthright. So it made Bart nervous.

It was the actors, he was pretty sure. There were too many outsiders around the clubhouse and had been all week. Nobody wanted to air internal strife while external people, especially people whose very intent was to

make the Horde's business public, might be near enough to hear. But it still made him nervous.

As did what was going on with Riley. They'd spent every night together. Every. Night. Six in a row. She was spending more time with him than she was with Lilli—substantially more. And he wasn't done. He didn't think she was, either. It was starting to freak him out. The past couple of days, he'd told himself that he was done, that he'd stay away. But he couldn't. He'd start thinking about how she'd be leaving soon, going back to California, and he'd be texting her before the thought had fully formed in his head.

He really liked this girl. A whole fucking lot—and it wasn't just the great sex. He liked *her*. She was funny and sassy, and there was a tiny little geek inside that cheerleader exterior. A couple of days before, they'd played *Dead Space 3* in the Hall, and she'd been halfway decent. She knew her way around a gaming controller. He thought maybe that was when he'd become a lost cause.

He knew that she was still all tangled up in her feelings about her weak puke of a dead boyfriend, and he knew that the tabloid shit going down right now was only making her feelings knottier. She was the very definition of rebounding. He knew that—hell, before he'd met her, he'd been banking on it. It was a good thing that she would have to leave and he would have a chance to shake this off. Because he was getting invested. Havoc had seen it before he had, and he had not passed up any opportunity to remind Bart of that fact.

He knew her leaving was a good thing, but it didn't feel like a good thing. She was staying in town through the weekend, hoping for the Devon bullshit to blow over, but probably not much beyond that. She'd done in Signal Bend what she'd come here to do.

The Devon bullshit was still a problem, though, and the media vultures were still on the hunt for Riley. With the mass influx of Hollywood types into town over the past few days, Bart had been working overtime to mask all the travel activity. Some of the things he was doing were as complex—though certainly not as desperate—as the things he'd done to help Lilli. He was working at the top of his game again, and it made him nervous. He was afraid he'd miss something.

So was Riley's 'team.' He'd been in contact with her agent and publicist. Isaac had spoken with Stan. Bart had even had a surreal

conversation with Riley's mother. They were all working toward the same goal—keeping the media out of town—though Isaac's concern wasn't as focused on Riley as everybody else's was. He was protecting the town and the club. Having news crews in town right after the shootout had been bad enough. But having the *tabloids* sniffing around, looking for scandal? That could be disastrous.

And the Scorpions were due into Signal Bend the next day. The Horde could be up to their eyeballs in trouble again.

With the actors in the room, they'd gone through the motions, mimicking a Horde meeting without conducting any business, but there was one actual item on the agenda. The potential for a media incursion affected them, and the Horde needed their cooperation. So Isaac laid out the issues and concerns succinctly. Then he leaned forward, his expression darkly serious.

"Stan wants it quiet. I—we—want it quiet. I expect you all want it quiet, too." He turned an eye to Tanner, leaning against the wall, behind Vic. Isaac didn't address Tanner directly, but Bart knew enough to know that was a warning.

Isaac and Tanner weren't going to be best buds. Ever. The actor had been snarky and ill-tempered most of the week. From what Bart could tell, and what Isaac had said, he'd been better around Isaac—which was smart. Isaac's patience was short and his temper hot, and Tanner was wise to be intimidated. Bart thought that most of his bad mood came from feeling slighted by Riley. Because he kept up on entertainment news, Bart was fully aware that Tanner fucked his co-stars habitually. He'd likely been expecting to have this week to start in with Riley. But as far as Bart knew, Riley and Tanner had barely seen each other all week. They'd had dinner with Lilli and Isaac one night and had been at the clubhouse at the same time once or twice. Bart had caught a couple of looks—aimed at him and at Riley—that indicated Tanner felt cockblocked.

On the one hand, Bart was kind of hoping that resentment would boil over in such a way that he could feed Tanner his fist. On the other hand, though, Tanner was a publicity hound anyway, and he might not see anything but upside to feeding Riley to the wolves. So Bart was keeping a careful watch.

"So," Isaac continued, "I know most of you are only here for a day or so. But I need you to pay attention. You're here to shadow one of us, so

you stick with us. You wander off, and we have a problem. Nobody in town is gonna take your picture, so you see a camera, you let us know—and I mean right away. We clear?”

The actors were mostly standing in a cluster at the far side of the Keep. There was some rumbling that sounded like a protest might be forthcoming, but then Doug Warness took a step forward. “We’re clear, Isaac. Nobody here is going to make trouble, for you or Riley. That’s not what we’re about.”

Bart liked Warness. He carried himself like somebody who got it. He’d seen him talking with Show a couple of times, and even without hearing, he could tell that Show felt okay about Doug playing him. And that was good, because talking, even for a couple of hours, with the girl who would play his dead daughter had driven him deep into his whiskey.

As a reply to Doug’s assurance, Isaac nodded. “Good. I got one other thing. We’re gonna have some other guests this weekend, starting tomorrow. Members of another MC. They’re rougher around the edges than we are, and I’m gonna ask that you keep out of their way, much as you can. Their President might want to meet a couple of you, but otherwise, low key is better for everybody. Catch me?” Everybody nodded. Isaac relaxed a little and cleared his throat.

“Now, the Horde need to get some actual business done. The ladies have put out a spread, so help yourself.” He leaned back in his chair, and the actors, with Doug in the lead, and Tanner pulling up the rear, filed out of the room.

When the Horde left the room about half an hour later, they were a grim group. The Scorpions arriving tomorrow was a problem. Sam wanted to see some of this movie business for himself. He wouldn’t take Isaac’s assurance on its face, and that had Isaac bent way out of shape. Sam and Isaac had always had a strong, brotherly relationship. Isaac had never balked at helping out the Scorpions. Even now, when they’d gone otherwise legit, they’d still ride a leg of a run for Sam when he asked, no matter what it was. There was no reason for him not to trust Isaac now. But it was abundantly clear that he didn’t. Not enough.

There was another factor somewhere, something that neither Isaac nor Bart, nor any other Horde, had seen. Something was making Sam nervous. And that was very bad news.

Bart, Isaac, Show, and Len had talked repeatedly during the week, trying to solve the problem. Bart had nosed around the Scorps a little online, but he had to be careful. Rick was a substantially better hacker than he was, and he'd see Bart coming a mile away. Even though they were friends, if Rick saw Bart snooping on the Scorpions' digital turf, he'd serve him and all the Horde right up to Sam. It was his job.

Bart was turning the problem over in his head as he came out of the Keep and into the Hall, so it took him a second to notice that people were clustered oddly, at one side of the room. When that dawned on him, he saw that they were all staring through the window into the weight room. Scanning the crowd for Riley, whom he'd left out here with Lilli, he walked up alongside Havoc.

"What's going on?"

Havoc shrugged and smirked, but Dom, standing in a bit, turned at Bart's question. He looked a little worried and a lot jazzed. "Lilli and Riley are in there. *Sparring.*"

"What? In there?" Holy hell. Isaac and Show had hung back in the Keep when the other guys left. Bart turned to see if they'd come out yet. They hadn't. So he pushed through the little crowd. As he passed Dom, he hissed, "You let that happen?"

"What was I supposed to do about it? It's Lilli! And you should see your little Riley. I'm not getting in the middle of that."

Setting aside the general wrongness of Lilli the Amazon sparring with Riley the Elf, the weight room was a fucking horrible place to spar—all that metal, all those sharp edges. The floor was covered in dense rubber matting, and there were two tumbling mats laid out in one corner, but still. There was a reason they had a boxing ring.

The big, wide window into that room was right next to the door. As Bart put his hand on the knob, he stopped and let himself take a good look.

Well, look at that. He couldn't tell from this view if Lilli was taking it easy on her. Bart had sparred with her, so if he watched long enough, he'd probably know. She was tough, faster and quicker than she was strong, but she was no weakling, either. In fact, after Gia was born, she'd gone a little Sarah Connor, and had built up even more muscle than she'd had when she got to town. She might be a chick, and a hot one at that, but she was not somebody to fuck with.

But it looked like Riley was doing okay. At least she was on her feet, and Lilli was as sweaty as she was. Bart's hand dropped from the knob as he watched Riley block a barrage of hits and then jump when Lilli dropped and swept her leg.

Yeah. Lilli was moving more slowly than she normally did. She was being careful. But Bart was still proud. Not that he had any business being proud. Riley's television show had stuntwork in it, but Bart had never considered that she might actually do any of her own stunts. The PR stuff said so, but that could have been so much bullshit. He'd have said she was too little. But there she was, clearly having studied some martial arts.

He thought it said something, too, that Lilli was taking it easy. If she had a point to make, if they were sparring so that Lilli could put Riley in her place, she could have flattened her without leaving a mark, and then moved on. But she was engaged. Bart thought maybe Riley was showing Lilli that she wasn't just a tiny blonde bimbo.

Just as he thought that, Lilli put Riley on the floor. He didn't even see how. Shit. He opened the door and went in.

Lilli was helping Riley back to her feet. As soon as she was up, Riley bent over and put her hands on her knees. Bart finally noticed that they were both wearing workout clothes—Lilli in her customary tiny black shorts and bright sports bra, Riley in very low-slung, light blue pants and a little pink belly shirt. No wonder everybody was staring. That was not what she was wearing when he went into the Keep.

He dropped the blinds and turned them shut. "What is going on?"

Lilli spun around and glared at him, and he second-guessed, too late, his tone. "Excuse me?"

"No, Lilli—I just...Riley, are you okay?"

She stood up straight. Her face was flushed and damp, but she was grinning. "Yeah. I'm good. Just working out." Lilli grinned at that and put her fist up, and Riley bumped.

Whoa.

"Don't worry, Bart. Your girl can handle herself."

He didn't know whether to correct Lilli and say that Riley wasn't his girl, but he saw Riley's flushed face darken a little when she said it, so he kept his mouth shut. He didn't know whether her pink cheeks meant she was embarrassed or pleased or what. Hell, he didn't know what he thought,

either. Except that he liked being around her more than being away from her.

He sensed Isaac come into the room behind him. “You picking on the little girl, Sport?”

Riley’s brow wrinkled at that, and she got her spitfire look in her eyes, but when Bart turned to Isaac, he saw that the boss was just teasing. Riley figured that out, too, and was pulling her tongue in when Bart turned back to her. Had she just stuck her tongue out at Isaac?

There was a whole relationship building up with Riley and Lilli and Isaac, and he’d missed it completely. She’d talked to him about her time with Lilli. Some. Mostly, they talked about other stuff. When they were talking at all. They talked about their families. Riley had talked about her life in L.A, and Bart had talked about moving around all the time when he was a kid. The night before, they’d talked a long time about Devon, and he’d held Riley while she cried.

That had been weird. Oddly painful. The sex afterward had been their most quiet so far. That whole night had made him feel a little disoriented.

But he guessed they never had talked that much about Lilli. Huh. Clearly, though, it was going better in Signal Bend for Riley than it had been for Tanner.

Isaac put his hand on Bart’s shoulder. “I need you, Bartholomew. Office.”

Before he turned from Riley, he asked, “I’ll see you out there?”

She nodded, and he followed Isaac to the office.

As soon as the office door was closed, Isaac turned and said. “It’s C.J. It’s gotta be.” He sat at his desk. Bart sat in the chair next to the desk.

“What?”

“He’s got Sam worked up somehow.”

“Ceej doesn’t have any special relationship with Sam, boss. Even if he was trying to fuck us, why would Sam listen to him?”

Isaac raked his hands through his hair, pulling his braid loose. “I have known Sam Carpenter for a decade. We’ve been friends. Allies. He’s always taken my word as truth, and I’ve done the same for him. Now he’s got to see with his own two eyes that what I say is true? No. Ceej is the only variable we haven’t considered. He’s now missed the Keep three fucking

times. He doesn't give a shit about that patch on his back. He's muddying the waters with Sam."

Bart hated to push Isaac back in the best of times. This was not the best of times. Swallowing hard to force his heart back where it belonged, he pushed the point. "Boss. What you're saying makes sense, except there's no reason Sam would trust Ceej over you." Isaac gave him the look that said he wanted to do bodily harm. Next would be the very vivid and colorful threat against his person.

But Bart took a breath and carried on. "What does Show say?" This must have been why Isaac held Show back after the meeting. Generally speaking, Isaac, knowing his own weaknesses, bounced everything off his VP and got some feedback before he proceeded.

"He pointed out the same shit. But we're in agreement that what's going on with Ceej is more than just a world-class drunk. Figure out what it is. Trace his calls or whatever you do. I need it before Sam is in this clubhouse, with his fucking freaks." He slammed his fist down on his desk. "Goddamn Howler. Bringing that psycho here means he expects to do damage."

"Yeah. Okay." So much for spending the night with Riley. He was on the job.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Riley came out of the bathroom with her gym bag over her shoulder. She was still a little sweaty, her hair was damp with it, but she'd washed up as well as she could, changed into street clothes, and had redone her ponytail, and she figured, for the clubhouse, she looked fine. She didn't want to look too good, anyway. Apparently, that was dangerous. Though the clubhouse tonight had almost as many of her people as club people. She was surprised by how surreal it felt to be surrounded again by Hollywood types. She hadn't even been away for a week.

When she got to the Hall, Bart was still nowhere to be seen. Lilli was standing near the television, though, talking to Show and Shannon. She was wearing workout pants and a zippered hoodie, probably over the clothes she'd worked out in. Her brow was furrowed, like something was going on. None of Riley's business.

She'd had a good week, with Lilli, finally. The dinner at their house with Tanner had gone okay. Tanner had behaved himself, though he was still acting strangely. But Riley had enjoyed it. The food had been delicious (she knew she was gaining weight this week and couldn't be bothered to care), and their little girl was adorable. Strong willed, and bossy for a toddler, but really cute. Both Isaac and Lilli had been warm and friendly, though neither had talked much about the movie or the events depicted in it.

Riley's favorite part of that night was watching Lilli and Isaac interact. It wasn't only her favorite part; it was also the most significant part. By the time Isaac dropped her and Tanner off at the hotel, Riley didn't need to know more about Lilli or about what had happened two years ago. She felt like she had everything she needed simply in the way Lilli and Isaac loved each other. Everything about Lilli made sense after that.

And nothing about herself.

She'd gone up to her room and cried. Tanner had wanted to come into her room and "debrief," but she'd put him off, claiming a headache. What she'd needed was to release the tight hold she'd had on her emotions and just have a good cry. What Lilli and Isaac had? She'd never had that. Devon was her great love, but they hadn't had anything like that—that ease, that sense of completeness that came off Isaac and Lilli in waves. Every time they touched each other was like a little love note.

She'd sensed something similar when she'd seen Shannon and Showdown together at the clubhouse that first night. It was like she was surrounded in this podunk town by true love, and she'd never even *seen* it before. It kinda sucked.

When she'd finished sobbing, she'd gone into the bathroom to wash up, and then started to knock on Pru's door. But she could hear that Pru wasn't alone, and she was definitely not going to want to answer the door. So Riley had slunk back to her room and texted Bart. He'd come right over and made her feel miles better. Then he'd tucked her close, and she'd slept feeling warm and safe and content.

She really liked him. Really, really. She was trying to keep her head straight and realize that what she was feeling for Bart was complicated by what was going on with her feelings about Devon, her lingering sense of grief and loss, and the way it had been corrupted by his betrayal—*betrayals*. Plural. Because the overdose was as much of a betrayal as the cheating. Or maybe that wasn't true. Maybe she wasn't being fair. Probably she wasn't. But it felt true.

See? She couldn't think of how much she liked Bart without thinking about how much Devon had hurt her. And God, last night she'd told him all about Devon, and she'd cried on his shoulder. About another guy. She was mortified about that, although he'd been sweet and patient, and then had been gentle with her when they'd had sex. Everything was all knotted up in her head, and that was dangerous. Her heart was going places her head didn't have a map for.

Not to mention that they lived two thousand miles apart and he was an outlaw biker in a tiny country town. Talk about star-crossed. She kept thinking that she should stop texting him and get some distance, especially since she really had no reason to stay in Signal Bend much longer. But she missed him when he wasn't around, and left to her own devices, her willpower sucked.

Pru was no help. She was working, doing everything she needed to do and staying on top of the tabloid thing, but otherwise, she was involved with Omen. Riley wasn't even sure Pru had noticed how much time she was spending with Bart. She was taking a vacation from paying attention to Riley.

She was still standing in the middle of the Hall, trying to decide whether to just drop her gym bag somewhere or go interrupt Lilli to ask

where she should put it, when she felt a towering presence behind her. She turned around with a smile.

“You must suck at stealth, Isaac.”

He shrugged, grinning. “I have people for that. Sorry to say, sweetheart, I’m gonna have your guy busy all night. How ‘bout I have Lilli take you back to the B&B?”

Surprised, at first she just gaped at him, as she sorted out the information. No Bart tonight. That disappointed her a lot. Too much. But okay. Isaac wanted her to leave, but she liked it here. It was pretty mellow tonight, as many actors as bikers, and mostly people talking, drinking and eating. It was practically a cocktail party. She didn’t want to go back to the hotel and be alone.

“Can I stay? Is that a problem?”

He considered her for a moment before he answered. “He really is gonna be busy. But sure, tonight’s a quiet one. Stay s’long as you want.”

She thought about making a snarky comment that her life didn’t revolve around Bart, but she found that she liked it a little, the way everybody thought of them as a couple. That was dangerous, too.

“Is there someplace I can put this?” She lifted the gym bag’s strap off her shoulder.

Isaac’s eyebrow went up. “My office. Which happens to be where Bart is. Behave yourself.”

She nodded, batting her eyes innocently, and walked around him, headed down the side hallway to Isaac’s office.

The door was closed, so she knocked, and Bart opened it. His scowl eased into a smile when he saw her. Whatever he was working on, she guessed it was serious. She decided he needed some fortification.

“Hey, princess. I’m sorry. I’m slammed with work now. You need me to ask somebody to take you home?”

He was leaning on the door jamb with his right hand. She put her hand over his forearm and stepped in, basically walking into his arms. He took a step back and let go of the door frame, bringing that arm around her waist.

“I really do have to work.”

“I thought being Horde wasn’t your job.”

“It’s not. But it is my life. Life is work, babe.”

“Ah. Well, I’m just here to put my gym bag down. I’m not ready to leave yet.” She took another step into the room, and he stepped back again, this time letting go of the door. She kicked it closed with her foot. Then she let the bag fall from her shoulder and drop to the floor. Another step; now her body was right up against his.

“Riley...”

She rose up on her tiptoes, put her arms around his neck, her hands in his hair, and pulled him down for a kiss. He didn’t resist at all. In fact, he wrapped her up tight and squeezed her close, his tongue pushing deep into her mouth. Kissing him was just amazing. Made her tingle everywhere, every time.

After several seconds, he groaned and let her go. She wasn’t done, however. They had a streak going. Every night. Just because Isaac had co-opted him didn’t mean they had to break their streak. She grabbed for his belt buckle and pulled it loose.

He wrapped a hand around hers. “I’m not gonna fuck you in the boss’s office, babe.”

With her other hand, she went for his belt again, and he grabbed that one, too. She could see how hard he was. She pouted. “Why not? I thought you were a rebel. A renegade. An outlaw.”

“Reformed. More or less.” He yanked her close and kissed her. With his lips still on hers, he whispered, “Don’t you like my pretty face? All the parts right where they are?”

“Are you saying Isaac would rearrange your face?”

“I believe that’s the way it’s put, yeah.”

“You chicken?”

God, his smile was so sexy. “I’m not chicken. I’m smart. I believe that’s the way *that’s* put.”

She huffed. He really was putting her off. She considered letting her feelings be hurt, but decided against it. There was cause to be disappointed, but not hurt. “Well, that sucks.”

“Sorry, princess.” He took her hand and put it on his swollen crotch. “Trust me, I’m very sorry. If you hang around, I’ll come out in a little while and get something to eat with you. I need to get some things started first.”

“Fine.” She sighed, putting lots of Sarah Bernhardt into it. “Your loss.”

“Oh, I know.” He turned her around and ushered her to the door. When he opened it, he gave her ass a swat. “Now git.”

When he closed the door behind her, she had to admit she was a little bit hurt. But she tried to shake that off, and she went back to the Hall to find something to do until Bart came out for food.

She asked Dom for a glass of wine, and he poured her a red. Omen and Mark were playing pool. Pru was watching, so Riley walked over and leaned against a support post near the pool table. Pru smiled and walked over.

“Hi. You having an okay night?”

Riley shrugged. “I guess. You?”

“Yeah. I like it here.”

“I noticed. You’re getting attached, aren’t you?”

Pru gave her a sharp look at that. “And you’re not?”

Riley was surprised. She didn’t think she’d said anything that would piss Pru off. “I don’t know.”

Omen came over then and took the beer from Pru’s hands, and they didn’t pursue it further. As Riley was relaxing on the post again, thinking over the exchange she’d just had with her cousin, a low voice whispered in her ear.

“Hey, Sport.”

Tanner had decided that his Isaac would call her Lilli ‘Sport.’ It wasn’t in the script, and Lilli thought it was a huge intrusion into something that was private between the real Isaac and Lilli. But he’d gotten it into his head that it would ‘capture’ their love. She turned around. “Tanner, *don’t*. That’s way creepy.”

He smiled, his eyes crinkling. “It’s not, love.” He’d called her Sport in a rural Midwestern drawl, but now he’d reverted to his natural accent. “It’s Lilli and Isaac, and we need to capture that chemistry. You know it as well as I. The film rises or falls on our love.” He put his hand on her hip.

“This is Method bullshit. That’s not how I work. You and I don’t have a romance. When the cameras are rolling, we’ll pretend that we do. That’s it. And you understand that all the big bikers in this room think that I belong to Bart, right?” She looked over his shoulder and saw that Havoc and Len, at least, were watching them. Havoc had already laid him out once.

But Tanner didn't seem to care. Was he drunk? He must be drunk. "Ah. Perhaps. But the greater question is: do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Belong to the biker?" Now his other hand was on her face.

Trying not to make a scene, afraid that might get something bigger started, she didn't react except to hiss, "More than I belong to you. Now back off."

"I don't think the lady likes you, asshole." That was Havoc. Oh, shit. He slammed his hand around Tanner's neck—even though Tanner was a couple of inches taller than he was—and yanked him away from her. "You don't listen, dude. We already had a talk like this, you and me."

"Hav." Isaac hadn't yelled, in fact he hadn't raised his voice at all, but Havoc stopped, his fist cocked back. "No, brother."

Isaac turned to Tanner. "Time for you to go back to the B&B, my friend. What you're doin' is nothin' but trouble. It's time for you to get on home to L.A., too. This is you overstayin' your welcome."

Tanner shrugged Havoc off and straightened his shirt. "I thought tomorrow's terrifying new guests would like to speak with me."

Riley had no idea what he was talking about, but Isaac's expression got positively stormy. *That* was terrifying enough. Cripes. He got up close to Tanner, chest to chest. He was a lot taller, though, and Tanner had to crane his neck.

"Man, you got no clue what kind of minefield you are stompin' on. So let me do you a solid and clue you in. You find some respect in that bloated, self-important head of yours, and now. For me. For my people. And for my guests. If you can't find some respect, then find some self-preservation and fuckin' fake it. Because when I say that there's no guarantee you'll *make* it back home, I am not fuckin' playin' make-believe. You catch me?"

Tanner blinked and paled. He wasn't so self-involved that he didn't understand that Isaac was deadly serious and had just, in all deadly seriousness, threatened his life. Riley's breath stopped. This was not their world, and they'd only been visiting for a few days, but already Riley knew enough to know that the very worst thing Tanner could do right now is make a fuss about being threatened. It occurred to her that she actually believed Isaac might kill him if he did.

That realization made her stomach roll. She liked Isaac. She liked all these guys. Or, those she'd gotten to know a little. She'd had a great week for the most part, and had been lamenting having to leave—and not just because of Bart. But were these guys capable of murder? No. No way.

Yeah, they'd killed a lot of people in the Ellis drama, but that was all self-defense. Isaac looked terrifying right now, but he wouldn't kill Tanner. Beat him, maybe. But he'd called Havoc off from doing just that. Riley was very confused. She felt like there were pieces missing from the picture.

She spoke up. "Tanner, just go back to the hotel. Don't make it worse."

It was like her voice broke the tension somehow. Isaac stepped back, Tanner took a breath, and the moment was over.

"Yes, I believe I shall. Omen, would you help a bloke out? Mark, it's time to go, mate."

Lilli stepped forward. "I'll take you. Omen needs the night off."

"No." Isaac pulled Lilli back. "No. I'll go."

Tanner looked deeply unhappy at that but didn't protest. Riley breathed a sigh of relief. He'd found some self-preservation.

Isaac kissed Lilli on the forehead. The gesture gave Riley a little pang. She wanted someone to love her like that. And Isaac was a mass of contradictions, sweet and brutal, friendly and fierce, loving and terrifying. "I got this, Sport. Won't be long."

Lilli looked pissed, or at least aggravated, but she nodded. Isaac went to the door and waited with his arms crossed over his broad chest as Tanner collected his jacket and his assistant. When they were gone, Lilli came up to Riley.

"Isaac didn't want you riding with Tanner just then. I can take you, but I need to be moving in about half an hour, so I can get back to Gia. That good with you?"

Bart hadn't come out yet. Not that he could spare the time to take her back tonight. She wasn't going to ask Isaac to make another trip when he got back. Her only other real option for a ride was Omen, and he and Pru were pretty involved. They were standing together, watching all this, and she knew they'd take her back, but she felt bad about getting in the middle of their night. Not too many nights left in Signal Bend.

Yeah. And she was going to spend this one alone.

“Okay. Half an hour.” Lilli nodded, and Riley went back to the office. She was going to spend the time she could with Bart. It was time for him to take his break.

~oOo~

It was still fairly early when Lilli pulled up at the hotel—not even ten o’clock. But it was dark and quiet. Lilli put her old car in park, and Riley put her hand on the door handle.

“Thanks, Lilli. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Lilli was looking through the windshield, squinting a little toward the side of the hotel. “Hold up.”

She leaned over and opened the glove box. There was a handgun in there, and she pulled it out and checked the clip.

Oh, God! Riley looked around, her head swiveling frantically, but she didn’t see anything. The only other vehicles in the lot were Omen’s bike and the Civic that the night manager—what was his name? Wallace—drove. Everything was dark and quiet.

“Stay put. Lock the doors.”

Adrenaline pumping through her blood now, Riley nodded and locked her door. Lilli turned a knob low on the dash and then quietly opened hers. The dome light didn’t go on. She got out and closed the door almost silently. Then she walked away from the car, toward the side of the building. The lot was gravel, but she still managed, as far as Riley could tell from inside the car, to be quiet.

Riley was petrified. She leaned over and locked Lilli’s door, worried that would cause a problem if she needed to get back in a hurry. God! Was this what it was really like here?

She sat there, nearly paralyzed with fear and confusion, for countless, infinite minutes. And then a figure was walking backwards around the building. A man. And then Lilli was coming around the building, too, her gun trained on the guy.

He had a fucking camera.

Riley wanted to go out there and kick that asshole in the shins, but she stayed put. She did not give bottom-feeders like that any scrap to live on if she could help it. But she was curious, and she tried to fill in the blanks based on what she could see.

Lilli gestured with the gun, and the guy handed her his camera and his phone, then sat on the ground, his back against the building. He said something, and Lilli steadied her aim. He shut up.

Lilli got her own phone out and made a call. Then she backed up to the car on Riley's side and, never taking her eyes or her gun off the photographer, gestured for her to crank the window down. She did.

"Hey, Riley. You can go in if you want. It's clear. You got yourself a fan, but some of the guys are on their way over to take care of the situation.

She didn't want to go in. She wanted to see what would happen. In L.A., she was powerless against guys like this. Something told her that she had more recourse here in Signal Bend.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Isaac opened the office door. “Bart. Got a problem.”

Jesus. Another one? “Yeah, boss?”

“Guy with a camera at the B&B. Lilli flushed him out and has him at the end of her gun.”

“Shit! Riley okay? Lilli?”

“They’re fine. Lilli is in control of the situation. You miss something? Again?”

“No, Isaac. No weird traffic at the B&B, or at the Millview Motor Inn. No suspicious bookings for air travel. It’s been clear, and I’ve got dummy info out. We’re as secure as we can be.” He’d ascertained that the tabloids and straight news orgs used certain travel services to book trips, and he’d been on them like Velcro. Nobody suspicious was coming into Springfield, St. Louis, or Kansas City. But there was only so wide a net he could cast.

Isaac crossed his arms. “Guy with a camera. Something got missed.”

Bart was tired and stressed out, and he was sick to shit of getting leaned on for fuckups he hadn’t made. Since the shit with Marissa Halyard, he was expected to read the fucking mind of everybody within fifty miles of the town border. “You really do think I’m some kind of wizard or some shit. I’m good. Very good. But there’s a limit to what I can know, boss. I have my hands on everything I can.”

Isaac stared for a few seconds, and Bart stared back. Then Isaac nodded. “Okay. Come on. Let’s deal with this, and then you can get back to Ceej. I’m still gonna need somethin’ on that early tomorrow.”

Bart sighed. Right. Because he was a machine.

~oOo~

When Bart came out of the office, Isaac was orchestrating a clean-out of the Hall, sending the actors who were staying in Millview back with Vic and Badger in the club van, and having Omen take Pru, Doug Warness, Peter Gruen, and Pete’s assistant back in the B&B van. Doug was traveling without an assistant. Isaac, Bart, and Havoc followed on their bikes. Len and Show were going to wait at the clubhouse.

They were bringing the photographer in.

When they pulled up at the B&B, Lilli and Riley were sitting on the hood of Lilli's classic 'Cuda. Her headlights were still on, illuminating the figure of an average guy: brown hair, a little balding, wearing khakis, running shoes, and a windbreaker. He was sitting on the ground, against the building. Lilli had her gun on him; as far as Bart could tell, her attention had not wavered as they'd all pulled up.

He dismounted and came immediately around the 'Cuda to Riley. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Omen leading Pru straight into the building. Good.

"You okay?" He put his hand on her neck and kissed her head, then she slid off the car and put her arms around his waist.

"Yeah. Lilli saw him before he could get even one picture. I had no idea what was even going on until she already had him."

Isaac was talking to Lilli, and Havoc was dragging the guy up to his feet.

"You should go on to your room, babe. We got this from here."

He leaned down to kiss her, but she held him off. "Wait. What are you gonna do with him?"

"Don't worry about it. We got it. Come on, I'll walk you to the door." Havoc had bound the guy's hands behind his back and now he and Isaac were forcing him into the van. He had to get moving. He went to take her hand, but she pulled it away.

"No. Wait a minute. Where are you taking him? *Why* are you taking him? What's going on?"

He shook his head. This was not her concern. Her concern ended when the guy hadn't gotten a picture. And she was nowhere near close enough to him or anybody else in the club to be brought into their plans.

"No, Riley. Just go on inside."

"No! Tell me what the fuck is going on! What—are you gonna *kill* him?"

Isaac was talking to Lilli between the 'Cuda and the van. They both turned at Riley's raised voice, and Bart took her by the arm and pulled her to the porch.

He stopped at the bottom of the steps and grabbed her other arm, too, staring down at her. "You need to shut up, and you need to chill. When I say we got it from here, that means it's not your business anymore. All

you need to know is that he won't be bothering you. Now go upstairs and get in bed and stay put tonight. I will see you tomorrow if I can."

Her eyes were shimmery with tears, and he felt terrible. But he couldn't talk to her about the club. She tried to pull away, but he held on. He wanted her to understand.

"Bart, please. You're scaring me. Don't—don't hurt him."

"I thought you hated guys like this."

"I do. I thought I wanted—but no. He doesn't deserve to die."

He had to think of something he could tell her. The odds of them killing that asshole were very slim. Not zero, but close. Still, he knew better than to count it out entirely. They needed to talk to him, find out how he'd slipped past and whether there was more they were vulnerable to. But a guy like that would fold fast, and folding fast would likely keep him breathing. "Babe, relax. That's not who we are. I can't talk about the club with you. But I'll tell you that we need to talk to him, and you're not the only one who's vulnerable. Okay? So we need to talk to him."

"You won't hurt him?"

Trying not to lie, Bart answered, "We only want to talk."

He could see her recognize the evasion in his answer. She narrowed her eyes and considered him. "Okay. Okay. Just—okay."

"Good girl." He let go of her arms and circled her waist, bending down to kiss her. Her body was tense in his arms, but she kissed him back. "It's gonna be okay, princess. I'm not gonna let anybody hurt you."

"What about you? Are *you* going to hurt me?"

Surprised by the way her question hurt *him*, he took a beat and then smiled down at her. "Not me. I'm your Han Solo, remember?"

~oOo~

They didn't have to hurt him much. A few judicious applications of Len's pliers, and he was chock full of information. What he had to say was both a relief and a problem. A relief, to Bart at least, because he was local. Not working for any of the media orgs Bart had been tracking, and so nothing he'd missed. His name was Grady Morris, and he was a 'freelance,' from Sullivan. The quotes around the word were needed, because he hadn't actually earned anything as a photographer, even in a 'freelance' capacity. This would have been his break.

The problem came when he told them that he was Wallace's cousin. Wallace, the night manager at the B&B. Who was there with Riley and the other actors as they worked on Grady. He'd been there the whole time. For all they knew, he had illicit photos already.

Bart didn't think so, though. None of the actors was alone much, certainly not when Wallace was on duty, and Bart didn't think he was stupid enough to try to get a shot himself while one of the Horde might catch him. So unless he was sneaking into their rooms while they slept, he probably hadn't had a chance to do damage on his own. Which was probably why he'd leaked to his cousin. Grady had said about as much—they'd intended to split the proceeds after he'd sold the photo to the highest bidder. Wallace had suggested Grady wait at night to get a shot of Bart and Riley making out after they got off his bike.

Isaac was on the phone, calling Omen, before Grady had spilled his whole story.

"O, get out of your girl, get your piece, get downstairs, and put hands on Wallace. Show and Hav are on their way." Now, Isaac nodded at Show, and he and Havoc turned and left the Room.

"I'll call Shannon again." Show had his cell in his hands as he went through the double doors. Isaac nodded.

When he ended his call, Isaac came back and stood in front of Grady.

The guy was flushed and sweaty, his thin, dark hair plastered to his head. His shirt and his pants were open. One ear was turning emphatically purple, the ridges from the pliers still etched into his lobe. Len had started there. Grady hadn't caved immediately, so Len had had to get a little... personal before they got his tongue loose.

Now, his eyes jumping with fear, he watched Isaac move to stand in front of him. "What you gonna do to me? I told you everything. I did. I swear."

Isaac nodded. "I believe you. You know, Grady. You're not a smart guy. Getting in people's personal business is some stupid, slimy shit. I'm not sure you've paid what's owed."

"I didn't even get one goddamn picture!" His voice hit a high note and cracked.

Isaac punched him, and his nose exploded in blood.

“Don’t whine, man. Find your balls, or Len really will take ‘em.” He turned to Bart. “We need something over his head. Wallace, too.”

Bart nodded. “On it.” He turned and headed to the office.

~oOo~

Finding dirt on Grady took no time at all. There was so much edgeplay fetish porn on his home PC, Bart wanted to boil his eyeballs after taking the most cursory look. Asshole’s password was ‘12345678.’ Average people were such easy fucking marks. Bart figured they were so stupid they deserved to get their shit hacked. Grady was a deacon at the Baptist church in Sullivan. His actual job was an insurance agent. And he was married, with five kids. A hardcore BDSM jones should serve nicely to keep his trap shut. Bart printed out several of the grosser pictures—*Jesus! Who gets off on pictures of caning wounds?*—and prepped a little stack of evidence to share with Isaac.

Wallace was a tougher nut. Bart had hacked him before he’d been hired on at the B&B, and he’d come up clean. He was the kind of guy who’d work a night shift job. He had an associate’s degree, and several years’ experience working at motels, as desk clerk or maintenance manager, but the economy hadn’t made much way for him. He had no wife or significant other, no kids. He was from Worden and had family, a mom and two sisters, but everybody was on the up and up, no secrets of value.

This thing, conspiring with Grady to take and sell a compromising photo of Riley, was his only snag. There was nothing, no secret or scandal or embarrassment, that Bart could find to hang over him and keep him quiet. But he’d demonstrated that he couldn’t be trusted, so Isaac would demand leverage.

What he had was a mother and two sisters, one of whom had a kid.

Bart printed off some family photos Wallace had on his PC, and then sat for a while and got his head around the intel he had, and what it could mean. Then he left the office, a small sheaf of paper in his hand, and went back down to the Room.

Wallace was bound to a chair right next to Grady, and neither of them looked like they were having a very good night. They were both gagged now, too. Wallace looked worse than Grady, in fact—his face was

swelling into a lump. Havoc was standing closest to the door; Bart came up next to him and waited to catch Isaac's eye.

Havoc turned his head when Bart came up. "Moron tried to run. We had to chase him down on the goddamn road. After we got him pulled over, he came up with a gun. Little pearl-handled pussy gun. Show about fed it to him."

Well, that explained his face.

Isaac walked over and put his hand on Bart's shoulder. "Tell me somethin' good, Bartholomew." Show walked up and stood just behind him.

"Grady's locked down." He handed Isaac the images he'd printed from Grady's computer.

"Jesus. This is sick shit."

"Yeah. He's got a suit job, a family, and church. These'd ruin him."

"Good work, brother. Real good. What about Wallace?"

"There's nothing, Isaac. He's whistle clean. There's just this."

"Not good enough."

Bart sighed. "He's got family. Women—a mom and two sisters. One of the sisters has a kid, three years old. A boy. They're all in Worden. They all still live at home."

"Fuck." Isaac was quiet for several seconds.

Show still hadn't said anything. Now he asked, "You sure there's nothing else?"

"I looked as deep as I could in the time we have. I could look harder with more time, but there's not even a bread crumb, so I won't find anything. This is his first mistake. All we have as leverage is women and a kid."

"Goddammit. I just want a quiet fucking life." Isaac closed his eyes. When he opened them, he took a breath and blew it out. "Okay. Let's hope he's smart, and knows when to take a threat seriously. Come on, Bart. Let's show these boys some pictures."

Before they'd taken more than a couple of steps, Dom burst through the double doors. "Boss!"

Isaac turned.

"The Scorps are pulling in. Right now."

It was almost three o'clock in the morning. Isaac roared and punched Dom in the side of the head.

Shooting the messenger. Show pulled him back, and Bart helped Dom to his feet. The kid was knocked silly, but conscious.

Show had walked Isaac back and was talking him down. By the time Bart had Dom focusing well, Isaac was back. Dom eyed him warily but said nothing. What could he say? He was a Prospect.

“Sorry, kid. Not your fault. Go on and head back to your room. You’re off the clock. Omen, get out there. Now.” Looking anxious, Omen nodded and trotted out. Dom walked himself unsteadily in his wake.

Isaac turned to the rest of the Horde. “Badge, you get to the B&B. You’re on guard. Len, Hav, Vic, get these guys locked down, then Len and Hav, I want you out in the Hall with us. Vic—you keep it down back here. Show, let’s go. Bart, you too. We got company.”

Sam was already in the Hall when Isaac, Show, and Bart came down the hallway. The rest of the Scorpions were filing in.

Sam was older than Isaac, maybe mid-fifties. Entirely grey, with close-cropped hair and beard. In any other clubhouse, he’d be considered big—at or near six feet, with a broad, barrel chest. For a Scorpion, and the mother charter President at that, he didn’t have much visible ink, and he probably could clean up into something pretty straight-laced, but he was very obviously someone to be reckoned with. Even standing next to Isaac and Show, who were so much bigger, Sam didn’t seem to be at a disadvantage. He carried himself like a man who had very little to fear.

Bart had seen a few of the Scorpions, when they’d come through on important runs, or at charity events and rallies. But ten men came through the doors, and Bart only recognized four of them: Sam; Shiv, his SAA; Rick, Bart’s hacker friend; and Tug, the SAA of the Alabama charter. He knew Shiv and Tug were hard men, but they looked like teddy bears compared to some of the others. The Scorpions were hardcore, cold-blooded outlaws. These men wore menace like they wore their kutties. Bart’s pulse picked up as adrenaline moved through his blood. He wondered which of these guys was Howler.

He tried to think of their unexpected arrival at this hour as harmless, but he couldn’t. It had to be an attempt to catch the Horde—Isaac—off guard.

And they had. Besides just being unprepared for guests, the Horde had two men detained for the very reason the Scorpions were concerned—publicity. Vulnerability. Exposure.

Bart hung back a little and watched Isaac meet Sam in the middle of the Hall.

“Sam.” Bart could hear the fierce anger in the rumble of Isaac’s voice.

“Isaac. Brother.” Sam held out his arms, and he and Isaac hugged briskly. “Sorry to barge in on you like this. We were having a pit stop in Illinois, and we just decided to push on through. Figured you wouldn’t mind.” He and Show embraced, too. Nobody else moved forward in greeting. That in itself was disturbingly strange and a clear sign that this was not a social call. Trouble made the air virtually crackle.

“Course not. You’re always welcome in our house.” Bart heard the way Isaac hit the word ‘our’. He could tell that Sam heard it, too. “Caught us flat-footed, though. Expectin’ you tomorrow afternoon, and we’d have had the rooms ready and the feed on.”

“No problem, brother. You know we’ve slept harder than this. Long as there’s bitches and booze, we’re good.” He looked around. “Place seems awful quiet.”

With a tilt of his head, and a lift of his eyebrow, Isaac made it very clear how he was actually feeling. It was clear to the Horde, anyway—at least, it was to Bart, and he figured the others saw what he was seeing. But Isaac’s voice was calm when he answered, “Well, we’re a quiet place these days, for the most part. And it’s late. The girls went home. Like I said, didn’t know to expect you. But we got booze. Omen’ll hook you up.” Omen waved; Bart could see the tremor of anxiety in his hand.

“In our clubhouse, we’re sure there’s women if there’s men around to have ‘em.”

Bart saw Isaac go rigid. “In our clubhouse, the women come and go as they please.” Again, he hit the word ‘our’.

Sam’s stance changed slightly, and all the Scorpions reacted, also changing their stances—moving their hands closer to their weapons. The Horde responded in kind.

Jesus fuck. These were friends?

Then Isaac smiled. “Well, there’ll be women around tomorrow, no doubt. For now, help yourselves to our drink and our bunks.” He looked past Sam to the rest of the Scorpions. “Make yourselves comfortable, brothers. The Night Horde welcome you to our home.”

The tension didn't exactly break, but it eased, and, finally, men who had been brothers to each other greeted each other as if that were still true. Rick came up to Bart, and they embraced sincerely. They'd only been face to face twice before, but they'd worked closely together many times, and Bart considered Rick a true friend, in a bond that transcended the alliance of their clubs. In fact, Rick had first been friends with Lilli, and had come to the Scorpions through his connection to her and the Horde.

While they were still arm in arm, Rick muttered, "Man, we gotta talk."

Bart nodded. Yeah, they sure as shit did. But then Rick nodded back toward the middle of the Hall, and Bart turned. Isaac and Sam were talking, both looking serious, neither particularly animated. Then Isaac stared hard at Sam before turning away. "Officers. Keep. Now."

Sam said, "That's you, too, brothers."

Rick muttered, "Showtime." And the Horde and Scorpion officers headed for the Keep.

~oOo~

Sam sat at the end of the table opposite Isaac—C.J.'s seat. Len, Show, and Bart took their usual seats. Shiv, Rick, Tug, and Ghost, who turned out to be Sam's VP—an old guy with a shiny bald head and a long grey beard down to the middle of his chest—sat near Sam. The effect was to divide the table about in half, Horde vs. Scorpions. Bart's heart was pounding so hard he had to concentrate so that he didn't shake.

It was Isaac's table, and Sam didn't try to step on that. Isaac led. "It's late, and I know you rode hard, so let's get to it. You got concerns."

Sam nodded. "We do. Lotta light on Signal Bend right now. Lotta people around who don't know how things work. Lotta news all over the place. Be remiss if I didn't see for myself that our interests are protected."

"They are. We're on it. We've been on it. I told you as much." Isaac stopped and took a breath. "But you need to see with your own eyes. What is it you need to see?"

"I know you think I'm stepping over, Isaac. And I'm sorry 'bout that. But the word is things ain't so settled around this table. That makes me cautious. I want the actors here. Have a couple of my guys talk to them. Make sure everybody's clear what it is they're doing."

Bart thought of Riley in the clubhouse, surrounded by these guys, and his stomach clenched. Before he even knew he would speak, before Isaac even had a chance to respond to the claim that the Horde were in trouble, Bart looked straight at Sam and said, his tone pointed, “No way.”

He didn’t lose eye contact with Sam, but he felt every head in the room swivel to him. He was shocked himself, and scared more than a little, but he held. He had lots of practice standing his ground with Isaac, so he held. “It’s a bad fucking idea, Sam. Sorry.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed, and Bart pushed back the nervous urge to swallow. “You got a reason—more than where you’re sticking your dick these days?”

That pulled Bart up short for a couple of seconds. How the fuck did Sam know? Rick was good, but what intel was there to even be had? They’d kept a lid on the paparazzi—at that thought Bart remembered the guys they had in the Room—and there was nothing else.

No. There was one thing. There was C.J. He hadn’t been around the clubhouse since the actors started arriving, but Horde were checking in with him, and the guys all gossiped worse than the women. Easy bet somebody told Ceej that Bart had bagged the actress.

Sam knew about Riley. He knew that there was trouble at the table. Isaac was right. C.J. was working an angle. Ironic, since *he* was the trouble at the table.

Then he thought about Vic, and the way he’d brought up the patch-over idea last week. Bart’s head began to swim as bits of information gained new context. Holy fuck. The shit was deep and the fan was big.

But he pushed that aside and answered Sam’s challenge. “We’re talking about famous people. A bunch of ‘em. Our usual ways of persuasion won’t work here. Scaring them—won’t work. Bringing them into a clubhouse double full of guys like us—won’t work. PR is what they understand. We—the Horde—have been hanging with them for days. A couple of ‘em for longer than that. We’ve built relationships. They understand. And they don’t know shit, anyway. You saw the script. The writers were way deeper than these actors have been or will be. And we kept the lid on when the writers were here. Our mutual interests are secure. More secure than if they’d made this movie without us. We signed on to *protect* our secrets, not expose them.”

He turned to Isaac then, who was focused on him. When Isaac nodded once, he knew he'd answered right.

"Bart's a smart man, Sam. And he's been on this since the beginning. He's right. We can't scare all these people. And we can't hurt 'em. That's where there's too much light. That's what would expose us all. But we don't need to. We're cool."

Again, Bart thought about Wallace and Grady, bound and gagged in the Room as they spoke.

Rick spoke up then, turning to Sam. "Bart's being straight, boss. You know I've had no red flags, either. The Hollywood folks are respecting the boundary. And our friends here have been on top of it."

Sam looked around the table. Isaac stared at Sam. When Sam met Isaac's eyes, they held. "I know this pisses you off, brother. And I understand. But you know that we got to hold the line. You know what's at stake. We can't have your fifteen minutes get in the way of our business."

Isaac's fists were clenched, but he said nothing. It was Show who leaned forward. "We have a lot of years in this alliance, Sam. Trust on both sides. You know we respect your business. We help your business. We're not in the way."

Sam leaned back. "Trust is a tricky thing, especially when it's more than just your own self on the line. There's a straight-up solve for all this. You come into the fold. You're one of us, then trust is not a problem. I'm not talking support, Isaac. I'm talking charter."

That was a new wrinkle. Full charter brought more privilege and status. But full charter for a club like the Scorpions was heavy duty outlaw shit. The table went quiet, every man looking around. Except Isaac and Sam, who were engaged in a staredown. Without breaking that deadly eye contact, Isaac slammed the gavel into the table. "This meeting is fucking adjourned."

Nobody moved. Finally, Sam pushed away from the table. "Yeah. Let's get some rest, boys. We'll talk tomorrow." He stood and walked out of the room. The rest of the Scorpion officers followed.

The Horde stayed back. His voice low and uncharacteristically hesitant, Len asked, "How fucked are we?"

Isaac stared at the table he'd made, his fingers rubbing the braid he'd carved into it. He shook his head. "They push this point, we're either gone or patched over. Ellis was hardcore, but until the end, we could have

given up and walked away, if we had wanted to. The civilized businessman in him would have let us walk.

“We fight Sam, and he will salt the earth. Bring a club like the Scorps on our head and there’s no backing out. There’s being dead or being patched over. I gotta back him down some other way. Because I will burn this fucking kutte before I put any Scorpions patch on it. But I do not intend to die.”

He looked straight at Bart. “You on board now?” Knowing what he was asking, Bart nodded. Isaac looked at Show. “You?” Show nodded. Isaac turned to Len. “This is Ceej. Ceej is feedin’ Sam intel. He’s sittin’ on his fucking couch drinking his fucking Wild Turkey, and tearing this club down.” He turned again to Bart. “You find something, and you find it now. I need evidence. I want that fucker’s patch. I want that fucker’s ink. And I want that fucker’s heart. In my hands.”

~oOo~

When they came out of the Keep, Vic was talking to Sam and Shiv.

Vic, who was supposed to be back in the Room with Wallace and Grady. Sam turned to Isaac, and Bart understood everything. Ceej and Vic. Both of them. Holy fucking shit.

Staring at Isaac, Sam called, “Howler!” And then he turned and walked down the hallway toward the Room. A short, compact Scorpion, bald (it occurred to Bart that most of the Scorps were shaved or close-cropped), with a thick ring through his septum and several small ivory skulls braided into his beard, followed after Sam and Shiv.

Isaac took two quick steps, as if to try to head them off, then pulled up. He looked at Show. Show nodded. Then Isaac checked the piece in his shoulder holster. They were all still carrying, from the night’s earlier—and continuing—excitement. “Hav!” he called, and Havoc, who was standing at the bar, walked over.

“I saw it, boss. Vic came couple of minutes ago, went right up to Sam. What’s goin’ on?”

“I’d say the Scorpions are not our allies—or if they are, we have ourselves a fucking uneasy alliance right now. Looks like Vic and Ceej’ve flipped. You get a shot on Vic—any one of you—you take it. I want him on the ground, but I want him breathing. Anybody got a problem with that?”

No one did. Bart was usually queasy about the violence, especially against their own, but he saw the scene unfolding, and, yet again, Vic was bringing heavy shit down on the club. Bart would have voted for him to meet his Maker, if that had been the question before them.

Isaac turned to Bart. “They gotta go. And they gotta go now. I’m calling Lilli. You call your girl.” He turned. “Show, call Shannon. Len, call Badger. Make it quick. Let’s get ‘em moving.”

Bart nodded and, while the Horde were clustered together in a huddle, he dialed Riley.

She answered on the first ring, wide awake. “Hi. Everything okay?”

“No, babe. We’re getting you all to the airport, right now. Pack and move. Everybody. Shannon, Lilli, and Badger are on it. Do what they say, and get moving.”

“Bart—what’s going on? I don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry, princess. You gotta go. Remember how I said I wouldn’t hurt you? This is me keeping my promise. You gotta go.”

There was a pause. Then, “No—I need to see you first.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.” The thought of not seeing her, maybe ever again, made his heart feel flat and his chest ache.

“But—Bart. No. I—we need to talk. I don’t want to go without seeing you. I can’t.”

There was something happening between them, something more than a fling. He’d been setting it aside, not wanting to deal with it, but he could hear it in her voice now. It hurt him to hear it and know he couldn’t give her any ease about it. “Babe, you have to go. It’s not safe. You have to go. We’ll work it out, but right now, you gotta move, and so do I.”

This pause was much longer, and Bart pulled the phone from his ear to see if the signal had been lost. It hadn’t. As he was about to say more, he heard, “Okay.” Then the line went clearly dead. Bart put his phone away and looked at Isaac. He couldn’t think about anything about that call right now.

The other calls were done, too. Bart wondered if the Scorpions in the Hall had made note of their huddle and phone calls; he guessed they’d find out. “Okay. Let’s go.” Isaac headed down the hallway, walking calmly. Show, Len, Havoc, and Bart fell in line. As they walked down the hall, Bart sensed the rest of the Scorpions fall in behind them, and he understood that there could very well be a bloodbath in the next few minutes.

When they went through the double doors, Sam was standing in front of the still bound and gagged Grady and Wallace. “You got somethin’ to tell me, Isaac?”

“No, Sam. I do not. This is Horde business. You are a guest in my house, and you are way out of line.”

“Vic tells me these guys came through a hole in that tight lid you said you had on the situation.”

At least Vic had the sense to look worried. Suddenly, there was an explosion very near Bart’s ear, and then Vic was on the ground holding his shoulder. Bart’s head started to ring ferociously.

That fast, every man in the room had a gun in his hands. Every man but the one writhing on the ground and the two bound to chairs—and Sam. He had his empty hands up in front of his chest. Most of the Scorpion guns were pointed at Havoc, who’d shot Vic. But Isaac was on Sam, and as soon as Shiv saw it, he turned his fifty caliber onto Isaac. And then lots of guns swiveled. Len was on Shiv. Ghost was on Len. Bart was on Ghost.

Howler was on Bart. But Howler spun around and fired twice in quick succession, and both Wallace and Grady drooped, blood oozing from small holes in their foreheads.

Before the echo of the reports had left the air in the concrete room, Havoc had his arm around Ghost’s neck and his gun in the old man’s ear. At that, Sam shouted, “Hold! Hold!”

Bart had no idea how Hav had gotten the drop, but he was damn glad he had.

Isaac put out his free hand, gesturing for the Horde to stand down as well. Havoc lifted the barrel of his gun to the ceiling but did not release his hold on Ghost.

“This is not the way of friends.” Sam’s voice was low.

“Agreed. Or guests.”

“Put ‘em away, brothers. I think Isaac and I need to talk on our own. Howler, clean up your mess. Will any of yours help him out with that?”

Len holstered his weapon. “I will. Hav—you got Vic?”

“Yeah. What do you want with him, boss?”

“Clean him up and lock him down. When we get a breath, we’ll vote it. Show—can you handle Ceej?”

Show nodded, his face grim. “Bring him in, lock him down?”

“Yeah.”

Sam walked up to Isaac, who eyed him suspiciously. “I want to talk about C.J.”

“He talk to you? Feed you bullshit? That’s Horde business to take care of, not for you to have a say.”

Sam put his hand on the younger, bigger man’s shoulder. “Isaac, let’s talk. I don’t want a rift. But we got trouble to work through.”

Isaac stared for a long time at the hand on his shoulder. “Yeah. Office.”

After the two Presidents left, Bart stood in the Room, while Howler and Len cleaned up the bodies of two men—one of whom had a wife and five children—and Havoc dealt with Vic, who’d lost consciousness. The Scorpions who hadn’t been given a task went back out to the Hall to drink Horde booze.

Rick came up to Bart. “Dude, let’s talk. Maybe you and I can smooth this shit over.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Riley stared at the phone for long, painful seconds after she ended the call. She didn't understand. She was scared—if Bart was trying to scare her, then kudos, because her heart was doing the flamenco, and she felt dizzy and ill with the stress—but his call had been terrifying and cryptic, and confusion was making her sluggish. He'd said to pack and go. But they hadn't booked a return flight yet. So, what? Go to the airport and hope for the best? Was that a thing that could happen? She'd never booked travel for herself, so she just didn't know. Pru did all the booking.

Okay, Pru. She needed to talk to Pru. She went through to Pru's door and knocked. It was late—or early, one or the other—but Pru opened her door right away. She stepped back, and Riley went in.

“Oh, good. You're awake. Things are weird.”

“Yeah. Omen up and left a while ago—right in the middle of... He barely said anything. Do you know what's going on?”

“No. Just that we're supposed to pack and go to the airport right now.”

“But that's nuts!”

“I know. I don't understand, but it must be bad. I think we should go. I just don't how we're supposed to make that happen.”

“Okay. I got it. You pack. I'll make the arrangements. I guess I'll try to get a shuttle?”

“Bart said Lilli and Shannon were helping. I don't know what that means.”

There was a knock on what sounded like Riley's door. Riley opened Pru's door and saw Shannon, Lilli, and Mark standing in the hall. Shannon stepped forward. “Hi, Riley. Here's what we're doing. Lilli is going to take you all to the airport in the van. Badger has everybody who's staying in Millview. We need to get moving as fast as possible, so if everybody will meet in the lobby in about, say, twenty minutes, I'll go down and get tickets booked for everyone.”

Doug's door opened. Doug was older than the others and had an unflappable demeanor, like somebody who'd seen and done a lot. He was perfectly cast as Show—probably the best, most obviously perfect casting in the movie. He'd been in the military before becoming an actor and had seen combat. So he had seen and done more than the rest of the actors, definitely.

He walked into the hallway, wearing only a pair of light grey pajama bottoms, almost like scrubs. His hair was tousled and his eyes still swollen with sleep. He looked past Shannon to Lilli and directed his question to her. “What’s the situation?”

Lilli took a step forward, and Riley noticed for the first time how precise her posture was. She carried herself very straight, with her shoulders perfectly perpendicular. Doug carried himself the same way. Without fully thinking about it, Riley squared her own shoulders.

“The Horde is dealing with some trouble, and we want you all out of harm’s way. We’re sending you back to California. Sorry for the rush.”

Doug was quiet for a couple of seconds, then he nodded. “Okay. I’ll rouse Pete and Alex. Let’s get moving.”

Funny—Doug was the least famous of the actors staying at the B&B, but nobody questioned him at all. Lilli and Shannon went back downstairs. Mark nodded and headed straight for Tanner’s room. Pru and Riley went back to their rooms.

Riley washed up and dressed, then packed as quickly as she could. She was still frightened, but now at least she felt like there was a plan and somebody knew what to do. Not her, but somebody.

~oOo~

Not even Tanner kicked up a fuss, and they were piled into the van, Lilli driving and Doug riding shotgun, within half an hour of the confab in the upstairs hallway.

Riley was sitting sandwiched between Tanner and Pru, which was unfortunate. She and Tanner hadn’t seen each other all that much during the week, but when they had, he had never really let up on the idea that they should be a couple. And then he’d pulled that shit in the clubhouse tonight. And now they were sitting thigh to thigh, and Riley felt guarded, waiting for him to try something else.

But he didn’t. Until they were clear of town and had been on the highway for awhile, no one spoke. The quiet was thick and a little creepy. Then Tanner said, “It must have to do with the other bikers that are coming in.” He’d leaned a little toward Riley, and his voice had been low, but the van had been so quiet that everyone heard him. Riley saw Lilli’s eyes jerk to the rearview mirror, but she didn’t answer.

Doug turned around. “Don’t think it matters, Tan.”

“Don’t you? It doesn’t matter to you that we’re attached to a project that might be dangerous? You’re a tougher man than I, then, mate.”

Doug laughed, but he didn’t say more.

Tanner turned to Riley again. “I do hope you’ve wised up now about your affair with the big, bad biker.”

She glared at him, but kept her mouth shut.

But he wasn’t done. “It’s better this way, love. We’ll be back where we belong, and things will be as they should be.”

Pru leaned over with a scowl. “Tanner, just shut up.” He smirked and then nodded and eased back into his seat.

Riley looked forward and caught Lilli’s eye in the rearview. She smiled a little, and Lilli smiled back.

For the rest of the ride, Riley let her mind loose to try to understand everything that had happened and was happening.

She wasn’t afraid anymore. They were safe, on the way to the Springfield airport. She was still confused, and she still didn’t understand what Tanner and Doug had been talking about, the ‘other bikers.’ But she didn’t suppose it mattered. They were going away from whatever it was.

What mattered more, and first, was the turmoil she felt about Bart. She’d been feeling it since she met him, really, but especially acutely since he’d taken the photographer away. And now this. Leaving without seeing him, without even a goodbye. It made her heart feel bruised.

She didn’t want to go at all. She’d felt a kind of ease in Signal Bend she hadn’t felt in years. *Years*. She’d forgotten that she was RILEY CHASE, all caps, and she’d just gone about her days. She’d only spoken to her mother twice all week. It had been wonderful. And she’d been a normal girl with Bart. They’d talked and laughed and screwed and talked some more. He called her princess, but he treated her simply like a girl he liked. Nothing more or less. She loved it.

She thought she might love him, too. Actually, she was pretty sure she did—it felt like she did—but she kept telling herself it wasn’t possible.

Twice in the past day, she’d come close to saying that she loved him: in Isaac’s office, before she left, and on the phone when he was telling her to go. It felt true. It was crazy, but it felt true. She’d stopped herself out of fear that he would only see the crazy. Just because she was a sap who

always fell fast didn't mean he was. In fact, considering who he was, the odds were strongly against it.

And maybe she was wrong. Maybe she was just giddy from the break from her life. She'd only known him a week. Tanner was right; it was a fling. Worse, it was a rebound fling. Bart was there when she was feeling lonely and vulnerable. He'd made her feel good, safe. That was ironic, since he was supposed to be an outlaw biker. No—he *was* an outlaw biker.

Earlier, her eyes had been opened a little, when she'd realized that Isaac was threatening Tanner. She hadn't thought about the Horde as outlaws. She liked most of them, and they treated her pretty well. Mostly what they seemed to do is handle town problems and party a lot. She'd seen Isaac talking to the town mayor, and several town business people. She'd seen the way all the Horde were warmly greeted wherever they went. She hadn't seen anyone who'd seemed intimidated or scared. They were respected, and Isaac was very clearly in charge, but until he'd loomed over Tanner, he'd never seemed truly scary to her, even as big as he was.

And Bart? He was *sweet*—really sweet. He was a geek with a sarcastic sense of humor. And he was amazing in bed. He paid attention to her. She could feel him really noticing her body and her responses. He could be gentle, and he could be a little rough. He could take her over, and he could let her have her way. She'd never been with anyone who was so confident and involved in bed.

When he touched her, it felt like love. Even from the first night—which meant it couldn't be love. She was very confused. And she hated to be leaving without seeing him, talking to him. There was no guarantee they'd ever see each other again. He'd said they'd 'work it out,' but Riley had no idea what that meant. The plan now was to film exterior scenes on location, but plans like that changed all the time. Signal Bend looked like lots of little towns, probably, and it wasn't really convenient for a whole film crew. Vancouver was far better prepared and was always standing in for just about every conceivable location. And after this, when all the actors and their people were fleeing Signal Bend and some kind of threat that was so imminent Bart couldn't even say goodbye, maybe there wouldn't even be a movie at all. Tanner certainly seemed to be having his doubts about continuing.

There was something real happening. Something dangerous. And that meant Bart was in the middle of it.

Riley's chest felt too tight to breathe.

~oOo~

When they arrived at the airport, a grey dawn had broken. Lilli didn't pull up at the passenger drop-off; instead, she parked and went into the airport with them. Badger had caught up on the road and caravanned in with them. He parked nearby, and the whole Hollywood troupe went in together. Riley felt a little calmer; getting to the airport had at least given her something else to focus on.

Shannon had done well, and had managed to get them all on two planes departing within twenty minutes of each other. The early flights, Riley assumed, were what made that possible. Lilli and Badger didn't leave them until they'd checked their bags and made it to the security checkpoint. Then they'd all said goodbye.

Riley felt an urge to hug Lilli, whom she'd begun to feel like she knew pretty well. But she knew Lilli was not much of a hugger. So they'd shaken hands. By way of farewell, Riley said, "Tell him...tell him I had a good week."

"Sure. I'm sorry for it ending this way. I'm glad I got to know you. I think you'll be great."

Riley smiled. Lilli was taller, stronger, older, and far more interesting than Riley ever would be. She was just a better person all around, Riley thought. So she felt the compliment in Lilli's words, whether they were intended or not. "Thank you."

By the time she had retrieved her boots and bag off the scanner belt, Lilli and Badger were gone.

~oOo~

Tanner, Peter, Mark, and Alex went to find a drink, early as it was, intending to avoid the common areas as much as possible. The other actors didn't have first class tickets, or assistants. Doug went to the gate area with them. Riley started to follow him, passing up the lounge entrance, and Pru snagged her sleeve.

"What are you doing?"

Riley pulled her arm gently free of Pru's hold. "I don't want to go in there with Tanner and those guys. Nobody's bothered me. I'm just going to the gate. You don't have to go with me. I'll be okay."

"No. I'm with you. We need to talk about what you'll face when we land at LAX."

Oh, right. The tabloid crap. Devon, finding ways from the grave to make her suffer. They sat down at a long bank of vinyl seats, near the others but with some distance for privacy. The airport was still quite empty so early in the morning. There was something eerie, a little desolate, about such a huge space, intended for bustling activity, to be so cavernously quiet.

Pru started right in. "The plans were so last minute that we might be okay. On the flip side, though, the flurry of activity could have alerted someone if they were paying attention at the right time. Plus, you know... it's LAX. They have hounds just stationed there. I'll do what I can to move you through fast, and when I talked to your mom—you are in for *such* a maternal meltdown when you get back, by the way. She's been on a tear about the way you've been ignoring her. Anyway, she was going to make sure it was Joe who'd pick us up. Nobody gets past Joe."

Riley felt something give way inside her head as Pru prattled on about how they were going to protect her from the paparazzi. She thought about the guy Lilli had held at gunpoint until Bart and his brothers could come and take him away. What had they done with him—or to him—she wondered. Was he okay? Was Bart okay? Why had he sent her away so fast? What was going on?

"Are you even upset to leave Omen without saying goodbye?" She didn't know why that was the question that came out of her head.

Pru was shocked, too. "What?"

"You like him, right? Aren't you going to miss him?"

"I—I don't know. Yeah, I like him. It was nice to have a break from thinking about you every waking minute."

"Ouch."

Pru put her hand on Riley's arm. "No, that's not what I meant. But you know, keeping track of all your stuff takes a lot. This past week, you did your thing and I did mine, for the most part. It was nice. It was really nice to be with a guy who didn't see me as a way to get to you, too. So yeah. I'll miss him." She looked hard at Riley. "But Ri, they're bikers. They live in the middle of nowhere. They're not for bringing home to Eleanor. In

an alternate universe, sure. But we live in this universe. More specifically, we live in L.A. So Tanner, as much of a dick as he is, is right. Time to get back to the real world.”

Staring out the wide window to the tarmac, Riley thought about what Pru had said. She thought about the way she felt about Devon, and the tabloid crap, and Pru, and her mother, and the movie, and Tanner. She thought about Bart. She thought about the week she’d just spent feeling normal. Her head felt packed solid.

Somehow, she knew that all this had started because they were trying to protect her from somebody with a camera. A camera. Not a knife, or a gun, or a bomb, or anything else that could really hurt her. A *camera*. All of what happened last night—or some of it, anyway—was her fault, because she couldn’t deal with the thought of people making her private life public. And she was going back to that anyway now.

She hadn’t wanted to leave. She hated leaving without saying goodbye. She’d been whisked away before she had a chance to fully understand what was going on. She still didn’t fully understand what was going on. In Signal Bend, or between her and Bart.

Whisked away. She was always being whisked away, and she hardly ever knew where or why—at least not when the decisions were being made. Pru understood Riley’s life better than she herself did. She didn’t even know how to book an airplane ticket. She was twenty-six years old, she’d been working since she was four, and people had been giving her direction for her whole damn life. She laughed. That was something she was known for—how well she took a note. She was considered a consummate professional, because she always had her lines down, she never balked, and she took direction.

She wasn’t an actor. She was a marionette.

She stood up. “I need the bathroom.”

Pru grabbed her bag off the floor. “Hold on. I’ll go with you.”

“No! Geez, Pru, I can use the toilet on my own. I won’t get lost.”

Dropping her bag back on the floor, Pru crossed her arms. “Fine.”

Riley put her own bag on her shoulder and headed down the concourse.

She walked straight past the women’s room, past the security checkpoint, and nearly out the doors of the airport. Only when she went under a bank of signs advertising rental cars did it occur to her that she had

no way of getting where she wanted to go. So she followed the signs and stopped at the first rental car kiosk. She'd never rented a car before, but it turned out not to be very difficult. They even gave her a GPS unit.

On her way to pick up the car she'd rented all on her own, she texted Pru: *I'm going back. Don't freak, don't try to stop me & don't follow. I'm fine. I'll see you soon.*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bart stared at Rick. He'd been leaning against his dresser; now he stood straight and took a couple of steps toward the window, looking through the wire-reinforced glass. "Fuck, Rick. No—that's...no." He could not believe what he'd just heard. He could not even consider it.

Rick was sitting on the end of Bart's bed. He had a heavy, dark beard and, as far as Bart knew, was ink from his neck down—he even had ink on the palms of his hands—but otherwise he was the least biker-looking biker Bart knew. He was a hipster, short and rail thin, with thick-gauge plugs in his lobes. The few times Bart had been in the same room with him, he was dressed the same: beanie, esoteric geek t-shirt, narrow jeans, and Docs. And black horn-rimmed glasses. Take off his Scorpions kutte, and there was nothing biker about him. He could be a barista.

But it was the twenty-first century, and MCs needed guys like Bart and Rick. Hackers. Their prowess in a fistfight wasn't nearly as important as their ability to get their hands on information stored digitally—that is, almost all the information available in the world.

When Bart turned back to face his friend, Rick was sitting forward, regarding him steadily. "I know, man. It's extreme. But you see what's going on now. Extreme is warranted, I think. And you're the only one Sam would consider worth it. Soldiers are a dime a dozen. What we do? We're fucking priceless."

Bart rubbed his belly, where the word HORDE was inked into his skin. He shook his head. "I can't. Shit, I can't even make it straight in my head. Turn my back? No way."

"That's not what it is. It fixes things. I mean, yeah. I got selfish motives. I like where I am. I got a little condo, nice view of the water. And I need to keep a low profile. L.A. is too hot for me. "

"And not for me?"

"Not like it is for me. Plus, you got that cute little piece of ass." He sighed and pointed to the door. "Listen. What's going on out there? That's the end of the Horde, man. Sam isn't leaving unless the Horde is patched over or history. It's not even what C.J.'s been saying. He's just been bitching more than anything else. Most damning thing he's told Sam, far as I know, is that Lilli is calling the shots. And I know that's not true. So does

Sam. What's got him wound up is that C.J. is in touch at all. He's a fucking officer. He's got clear line of sight to everything. That's a big break in the ranks, and this is a shit time for it to be happening. The Scorpions have powerful business partners. Those partners were glad to see an end of Ellis, but they are not happy with what's been going on here since. Too much attention. A weak link in the Horde is a very bad thing. And now it looks like there are two weak links."

"But the attention's not on the Scorpions or anything they're doing."

"You are not that naïve, Bart. We're one degree of separation. One good intel specialist, working for law, and we're up to our asses in wiretaps and plants. Fuck, man, *I* was a good intel specialist working for law."

"You understand that C.J. and Vic are both dead, right? Probably before the day is over. I don't see them surviving that vote. That leaves six Horde. I can't make it five."

"*You* understand that unless we give Sam another solution, he's ending the Horde, one way or another. You're already outnumbered in your own clubhouse." Rick sighed again. "Bart, man—think. We could call it a loan. Just until the attention from the movie is done."

Okay. Bart turned away again. He put his head to Rick's idea, deciding to consider it fully. His stomach lurched.

Could he leave the Horde? His brothers? Could he go to the Scorpions?

"I'm not that hardcore, Rick."

Rick laughed. "Shit, man. You think *I* am? You're way more hardcore than I am. I'm not a fighter. And anyway, I barely get my hands dirty. The benefit of a bigger club—people stay in their roles. They have people to get dirty. I stay clean and in the clubhouse, for the most part."

Bart let his brain do its thing, sorting through the information, seeing the pattern, playing out probabilities. Rick was quiet and let him, but after a few minutes of silence in the room, he asked, "Bart—do you see any other choice?"

No. He did not. It was the only way to save the Horde. If it worked at all.

"Okay. I gotta talk to Isaac. Alone."

Rick nodded and stood. "Yeah, man. Of course. I won't say shit until you know your play." They shook hands and pulled into a quick, back-slapping embrace, then left the room.

~oOo~

Isaac was still in his office with Sam when Bart and Rick came back into the Hall. The atmosphere was thick with distrust, and the room was overrun with Scorpions. There were no women yet—it was still early in the morning, only an hour or two past dawn, and the women had been called off, at least for now. The clubhouse was too unstable to bring innocents into it.

The Scorpions were relaxing, more or less—sitting on the chairs and couches, playing pool, drinking. Len and Havoc were at the bar with Badger, drinking and keeping their distance. Omen was behind the bar with Dom, who'd apparently decided that the shit was piled too high to stay back in his room.

It didn't look like anyone had taken a bunk. This was a bad time for sleeping.

Rick sat at the end of the bar and asked for a beer.

Bart went up to Badger. "Any trouble getting to the airport?"

"No, brother. Went smooth. They're probably boarding now—or soon."

Bart nodded and patted Badger's back. "Good."

Omen went down the side hallway, probably to pull another keg. Dom came over. "Get you somethin', Bart?"

"Nah." He didn't want to drink—he had a lot to think through, and he wanted a clear head. But the coffeepot was empty. He came around the bar and took the carafe out. There wasn't any coffee under the bar. "We out of coffee?"

"Think there's some in the kitchen. Gimme a sec, and I'll get it." He was pouring a beer at the tap.

"I got it. Just fill this when you're done." He put the empty carafe back in the coffeemaker and went back to the kitchen.

Other than rooting through the fridge, he'd never spent much time in the kitchen. Usually, there were chicks around to get him what he wanted. So he had no idea where anything was, and he went through almost all the cupboards before he found two giant cans of coffee. He pulled one down and closed the cabinet door. Then there was an uproar in the Hall, and Bart

heard what he would have sworn was Riley. Screaming. He dropped the can onto the counter and ran out, reaching for his gun.

Which he didn't have, because, after the madness in the Room, Sam and Isaac had made everybody put their weapons away before they sequestered themselves in Isaac's office.

When he got to the Hall, what he saw was Shiv holding Riley in front of him, facing out. He had one hand over her mouth and the other hand between her legs, holding her off the ground. She was struggling, and he was laughing. All the men in the room were on their feet. Bart felt sick with rage.

No one was armed, but Dom caught Bart's eye and then sent a slanted look under the bar—twelve gauge. Bart nodded once, but put his hand up subtly, indicating that Dom should wait. Dom nodded.

Shiv called across the room to Bart. "Found this pretty little bitch outside. Len is sayin' she's yours. Show me her ink."

Bart walked across the room, stopping when he was only about three feet away. Riley looked terrified, but she relaxed a little when their eyes met.

Shiv got his name for his fondness for blades and his inventive use thereof. He'd dumped four in a locker when Sam and Isaac did their sweep. He was Bart's size, but about twenty years older and worlds meaner. Still, Bart stood his ground, hoping like hell he hadn't held a blade back. "She is mine. You need to put her down, Shiv. Now."

"Been no bitches here all fuckin' night. This is the only one. You show me your ink on her, or she will have to do." His hand flexed between her legs, and her eyes went wide and teary.

The sound of a shotgun being cocked split the silence. Bart didn't turn around, hoping it was Dom and the twelve-gauge. From Shiv's reaction, it was. And then he heard Dom's reedy voice. "Put her down. She's protected."

Shiv did, and Riley ran the couple steps to Bart and buried her face in his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and held on.

Looking furious, Shiv took a long stride toward the bar, but Havoc and Len both stood in his way. "You let a fucking *Prospect* draw on me? I will end you." He turned sharply toward the locker room—where the weapons were—and Havoc and Len jumped him.

Hell broke free. Bart grabbed Riley's hand and pulled her back, heading immediately to his room. But the Horde were far outnumbered, even in hand-to-hand. Isaac was in the office with Sam. Vic was out of commission. Show was out, after C.J. And he had to get Riley safe. That left Len, and Havoc, and Badger—and Omen and Dom. Against nine Scorpions. Well, eight. He saw Rick, hanging back near the bar. He yelled, "Get Sam and Isaac out here!" and pulled Riley down the hall to his room.

He slammed the door behind them and pulled her close. "Fuck! Are you okay, babe?"

Her head shook frantically against his chest. "No! No, my God!"

Setting her back, he made her look up at him. "I have to get back out there. You stay right here and lock the door when I go."

Riley clutched at his kutte. "Don't—don't leave me. *Please.*"

"Babe, I have to. They need me out there."

"I need you in here!"

"You're not supposed to *be* here! I sent you away from this shit!"

Without another word, blinking up at him, she released his kutte and stepped back.

"I'll be back. Stay put and lock the door." He went out to his brothers.

~oOo~

Isaac, Sam, and Show—who was back, apparently—were pulling Scorpions and Horde apart. Shiv, Len, Havoc, and a Scorpion Bart didn't know were on the floor, bleeding copiously, but it looked superficial. Sam pulled Shiv to his feet, and Bart charged across the room.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Show charged at him and stopped him dead before he could get to Shiv.

"Back off, Show!"

"No, brother. Stand down. What the *fuck* is going on?"

"He had his fucking hands all over Riley!"

"Riley? What?"

Then Isaac came up behind Show. "Yes. What the fuck was this about?"

Bart took a breath and pushed clear of Show. "Riley's back. I don't know why or how. Shiv came in holding her—hurting her. Making threats.

Boss, is this our house or is it not?"

Show caught Isaac's fist before it could connect with Bart, but Bart had been ready. He needed to punch somebody, even Isaac. Apparently sensing his need, Show put a preventive hand on Bart's shoulder. "Easy, brothers. Got enough going on."

Isaac nodded and visibly calmed. "Go on back to her, Bart. We need to know if it's trouble that brought her back. We gotta get this shit straight."

"I can't walk away from what he did, boss."

"Yeah, you can. You've known her a week. The disrespect of our house will be dealt with. But she's not your old lady, so you step back. You catch me?"

He hated it, but he knew Isaac was right. She was under club protection, but she wasn't his. He had no particular claim against Shiv. He knew all that, but he couldn't make himself back off. He stared at Isaac, his fists clenched. Isaac stared back.

Finally, Show stepped between them, facing Bart. "She's back there alone, right?"

Bart blinked. Yeah. She was. He nodded, and then turned around.

As he was walking to the dorm hallway, he heard Show say, "Isaac, I couldn't track Ceej down. That's trouble."

Bart paused mid-step, thinking to turn around. But he didn't. If they needed him, they knew where he'd be. He went back to Riley.

~oOo~

When he unlocked the door and went in, she was wedged in a far corner of the room, her arms wrapped tightly around her body. Her face was wet with tears.

"It's okay, babe. Just me."

She began to sob, and he went to her and pulled her close. "Did he hurt you?"

When she shook her head, he asked, "What are you doing back here, Riley? Is there something wrong?"

She sobbed harder and knotted her hands into his t-shirt, which was becoming sodden with her tears. He held her for a long time and let her cry. When she didn't seem to be settling down, he cradled her face in his hands,

pulling her away and looking down into her eyes. “I need to know if there’s trouble, Riley. I need to know why you came back.”

Watching her fight for control of her emotions, he was beset by protectiveness and worry. As it washed over him, he realized he’d been feeling it for awhile, churning in the background. He bent down and kissed her forehead, letting his lips linger on her flushed skin. She gasped at his touch, and when he looked into her eyes again, she was calmer, her eyes intent.

“I wanted to say goodbye. I just wanted to say goodbye.”

She was looking at him so seriously, her pale eyes sad and wet. But the thought of the chaos she’d wrought by coming here now, unannounced and unprotected, just to say goodbye, struck him as hilarious, and he laughed. Even when he saw that he’d obviously hurt her feelings, despite the guilt he felt at that, he couldn’t stop laughing. Angry, she pushed him away, and he fought for and won control over himself.

“Aw, babe. I’m sorry. It’s just—we almost had a war out there over you. You could have called. I would have called.” He pulled her to the bed and sat down with her.

“I’m so tired of people telling me where to go, what to do, how to do it. I didn’t want to leave without seeing you. So I decided to come back. I didn’t think about...I didn’t think. I should have. I was stupid. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry about what happened.” A thought occurred to him. “How’d you get here, anyway? Where’s everybody else?”

“I rented a car. Everybody else is on their way to LAX, I suppose. I texted Pru when I left. She’s pissed that she has to deal with my mother on her own, but she’ll live.”

He tucked her hair behind her ear. “You should go back, Riley. You need to go home.” It felt strange to be sending her away again. He knew she wasn’t safe here, but it still felt good to be touching her again, and he didn’t like the thought that he soon wouldn’t be able to.

“No. I mean—I will. I don’t plan to move to Signal Bend or anything. But we need to talk. Or I do. I need to understand some things. And then I’ll go. I didn’t mean to make things worse for you.”

“Okay. Then let’s talk. And then you have to go. The guys out there are not good guys. They’re a different kind of MC.”

She shivered. “The Scorpions, right? They’re, like, famous. Or infamous, I guess. Are they supposed to be friends of yours? Is that why

they're here?"

He shook his head. "It's complicated, and I'm not gonna talk about that with you. That's not what you want to talk about, right?"

She took a long, deep breath and let it out on a sigh. "Right. Okay. I practiced this on the drive, so hush, okay?"

He didn't want to talk. He didn't want to listen. Her eyes were red and puffy from her weeping, and she was still mussed from the way Shiv had pawed at her. But she was composed now and smiling up at him. She was fragile and strong all at once. She was beautiful. He'd said it earlier, when Shiv had her, and Isaac had told him it wasn't true. But now he felt it as truth: she *was* his. He wasn't sure what it meant, or what it could mean. But he thought of Rick's idea—oh shit, Rick's idea; he needed to talk to Isaac—he thought of Rick's idea, and wondered if he might have a reason of his own that made it right. He needed to think; he would when he got her safely on a damn plane. For now, he bent down and kissed her. She relaxed completely against him and opened her mouth.

Whether it was the fucking nonstop intensity of the past several hours or the simple thrill of having Riley in his arms again, Bart was rock hard and suddenly overcome with the need to have her. There was far too much going on right now for them to be fucking, but he didn't care. He pushed her down onto the bed and lay over her, his tongue searching her mouth. She moaned and hooked her arms around his neck.

He pushed his hand under her top, and she arched against him. But then she brought a hand down and put it over his. He lifted away from her and looked down, confused.

"I know it seems dumb, but I'm still kind of rattled from that guy. Can you just hold me? Maybe we can just make out? Is that stupid?"

Make out. He hadn't made out since high school. Not for its own sake. Making out was foreplay. As hot as he was for her, it might well cause him to herniate something if he didn't get a release out of it. But he thought of Shiv's hand between her legs, and his desire turned to anger.

She was lying under him, looking nervous and small. Pushing the anger away, he smiled down at her lovely face and said, "Sure, babe."

He kissed her gently, caressing her with his lips and tongue. Every time she moaned, his anger ebbed, leaving only desire. He kissed her, held her, caressed her. Long minutes passed when what was going on outside the door seemed inconsequential. When he finally pulled away, he was in a

torment of need; he had to stop. She looked dazed, too, and he grinned. “We were gonna talk, remember? So, what did you practice?”

She pushed a little on his shoulders, and he rolled more to his side. Sitting up, she cleared her throat. “I’ve had a great time here. Well, until today. But anyway, the best of it was being with you. I don’t like the way I feel when I think that I might not see you again. I know maybe we’ll come back to shoot some scenes, but then I’ll just leave again, and I don’t like it. I know we’ve only known each other for a few days, but I don’t want to not know you anymore. You make me feel like just a person. I like that feeling. I’ve been thinking about what that means, for me at least, and—”

She was cut off by a fierce din as someone pounded on the door. “BART! WE GOT TROUBLE!” Havoc. Bart stood, crossed the room, and opened the door.

Havoc looked freaked out and furious. “It’s Isaac. Jesus holy fucking Christ, brother. It’s Isaac.”

~oOo~

The silence in the hospital waiting room was oppressive. Sitting in a cheap vinyl chair in a row of cheap vinyl chairs, Bart held Riley’s hand. She shouldn’t be here. She had no business sitting here with the Horde family. Nobody had challenged him for bringing her; they all understood. There was nobody else to keep her safe. He could have sent her back to the airport—he should have sent her to the airport—but he couldn’t do it. He needed to hold her hand.

He looked around the room. Havoc and Len sat to his left, Riley at his right. Badger at her right. Show across the room, near the entrance, his arm around Shannon. Shannon had Gia, who was sleeping on Shannon’s shoulder. The front of Show’s shirt was dark and stiff with blood. Everyone was quiet.

Lilli sat alone, at the far end of the room. Her hands folded in her lap, she was staring into the space in front of her. He didn’t think she’d spoken to anyone or even moved since he’d come in with Riley. She had blood on her shirt, her jeans. Her hands. Her face.

The Prospects were back at the clubhouse, alone with the Scorpions and in charge of a bound and wounded Vic. Bart could only hope they’d be okay.

The more pressing concern was here. The Horde were needed here. When they'd all come together, Show told them what happened. Now the information scrolled through Bart's head as if it were on a teleprompter, looping over and over and over again.

Show and Isaac had found C.J. At Isaac's house. Seeing his bike on the side of the road about a quarter mile from the house, they'd split up to go around in opposite directions.

C.J. had shot Isaac in the back with his Mossberg 590.

He got off two shots before Lilli put a bullet through his head.

Now, Isaac was in surgery, his torso full of buckshot.

As they'd taken him in, the doctor who came out to explain what was happening and direct them to this waiting room had told Lilli that they were doing everything they could.

That's what Show knew.

They all knew what it meant.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Riley didn't know what she should do, or if she should do anything. The waiting room was so quiet. They were alone in it, but they hadn't been at first. At first, there had been another family—an older couple, a middle-aged man, and a teenage boy, all of them holding each other. But when the Horde had come into the room, the men in their leather, ink, and metal, and Show and Lilli covered in blood, the other family had gathered themselves up and left. The teenager had done a double-take as he'd walked past her.

She wondered where they'd gone. Was there another waiting room near the surgery wing, or had their fear of these men overtaken their concern for their loved one? Did the Horde inspire that kind of fear?

They didn't in Signal Bend. They were adored in Signal Bend. Riley had only been in town a week, but still, she'd never seen anything but affection and admiration for the Horde, and they paid that respect back in kind.

As she'd been preparing for her trip, nosing around on the internet, she herself had been nervous, wondering what she'd be coming into. But then she'd met them. Actually, she'd met Bart first of all, and he'd charmed her right away. After that, even when she'd been warned to be careful, she hadn't seen much to make her wary.

She liked them. Moreover, she felt safe with them.

Even today. That guy—Shiv, she guessed his name was—had been crossing the lot, walking away from a big, chrome-heavy Harley and toward the clubhouse as she'd parked her rental car. He'd growled, “'Bout fuckin' time,” and just snatched her right off her feet, before she'd even closed the car door. When she'd fought and kicked, he'd changed his hold, shoving his hand between her legs, and laughed at her. “Good girl. I like a fighter.” She'd stopped fighting and had a moment of despair.

But he took her into the clubhouse, and she'd known she'd be okay. Bart's bike was there. Isaac's bike was there. She'd be okay. As soon as she'd seen Len and Havoc and Badger, she'd screamed. The guy had covered her mouth, his hand vicious over her face, and she'd been scared, but still she'd known she'd be okay.

And she was. Bart had saved her. These men, the Horde, did not scare her. Those others—they did. Riley supposed the people who'd left the waiting room in this county hospital didn't know to make a distinction.

She wondered, too, if she was being naïve to make the distinction herself.

The people in this waiting room with her, though—they weren't dangerous. They were scared and sad, and they had turned to each other for strength. She knew that they would be dangerous to those who had hurt them—but that made her feel safe, too.

It was a lot to think about. A lot to try to understand. She wanted to understand—because the man holding her hand right now, holding it hard, who was scared and sad himself, and who had turned to her? She loved him. She was sure now. It was crazy and stupid and probably every possible kind of wrong. But she did. She thought he felt something like love for her, too. She'd felt it in his touch before, but never so strongly as when he'd kissed her forehead after he'd come back to his room for her. That was crazy and stupid, too, some ridiculous kind of Disney-romance notion, but it was what her heart said.

She had no idea what it meant. She couldn't very well give up her life in Los Angeles and park her butt in Bart's dorm room. A lot of people counted on her in L.A., and she couldn't let them down. More than that, she didn't want to. She loved being an actor. She didn't love being a celebrity, and she needed to make some changes and take control over her own life, but the work she did—she loved it.

And Bart was Horde. It was his life; he'd said as much. They did not travel the same road. They were two thousand miles apart, and that distance wasn't simply geographical. She couldn't see him as a guy who'd walk red carpets with her, who'd tolerate her filming love scenes with other men, who'd understand that sometimes her work took her away from home for weeks at a time. He wasn't the alpha caveman that some of the other guys seemed to be, but he didn't seem to be the kind of guy who'd be comfortable with his woman being the center of attention.

He didn't *seem to be* that kind of guy. Could she really love him if she didn't know for sure whether or not he was that kind of guy? Even after the things she'd learned too late about Devon, after she was in love with him—could she fall that fast again?

Yeah. She could. It wasn't smart, but it was true.

Her phone buzzed again in her pocket. She'd been ignoring it, but it had been quiet for a while, and she knew that soon she'd have to deal with frantic people wondering why she hadn't come home. Shortly after she'd left the airport, she'd gotten texts from Pru, Tanner, and Doug. She'd returned Doug's text, and she'd called Pru. Tanner she'd ignored.

Still holding Bart's hand, she shifted and pulled her phone from her pocket. Pru: *At layover. Need to talk.*

She brought Bart's hand to her lips. He turned at her touch and smiled a little. "Hey. You okay?"

"Yeah. I need to call Pru, so I'm going to step away. Okay? You need me to bring anything back? Coffee or anything?"

"No. Just you." He kissed her cheek and released her hand.

She found a quiet corner down the hall a little and tucked herself into it as she dialed. Pru answered right away.

"You still okay?"

Riley didn't want to go into everything that was going on, so she said, "Yeah. Everything okay with you?"

"You delayed our flight, walking away after your bags were checked, but we worked it out. I don't know how you'll get those bags back, or when, but otherwise, it's worked out. I already told Eleanor you decided to stay back for a few days. She's not happy, and she's super pissed at me for not staying with you, thank you very much."

"I'm sorry, Prudie. Really. I just...I had to come back."

"You are eventually coming home, though, right?"

"I am. Soon. I just couldn't leave everything so...confused."

There was a long silence on Pru's end. Then she said, "Ri, be careful. You're not in a place to be making decisions about a guy right now. I shouldn't have let you spend so much time with him."

A spike of anger shot through Riley's head. "Let me? *Let* me? See, Pru, that's the problem. Everybody in my life thinks they have say over what I do. I'm not a child. I'm not deficient. I don't know why people think I can't control my own life."

"You've never wanted to."

For a second, Riley was even angrier, and then that righteousness simply deflated. Pru was right. Other people had always run Riley's life, and for years now, she'd hated it. Yet this was the first time it had really occurred to her to take over. In fact, she was so used to her life being other

people's job, sometimes it didn't even occur to her that she had a decision to make.

"I have to go, Pru. I'll be home soon. In the meantime, don't sweat the tabloids or whatever. They'll do what they'll do, and eventually they'll find something more interesting than me."

Pru laughed; the exhaled breath of it was loud on Riley's end. "You know how many times I've said almost that exact thing to you?" She laughed again. "Anyway. Are you still ducking your mother? I'd like to know what awaits me in L.A."

"No. I'll take her calls as they come. She'll have to learn to deal."

"Yeah. Like that's gonna happen. Okay. Keep me posted, alright? And let me know what you need from me."

"Okay. Thanks, Pru. I love you."

Another silence. Riley knew why. She couldn't remember the last time either of them had said those words. They were true; at least for Riley, they'd always been. But they hadn't been said.

"I love you, too, Ri. Be safe."

~oOo~

When she got back to the waiting room, Show and Lilli were standing in the middle of the room. Bart, Len, Havoc, and Badger were standing, too, but a few feet back. Show and Lilli were talking to a cop. She'd have figured he was a cop even without the uniform and the gun belt. He was on the short side and stocky, with a greying blond crew cut and a sunburnt face. He looked exactly like a cop.

Lilli's arms were wrapped around her body, and Riley was struck by that stance. It looked wrong on Lilli, too vulnerable. Riley hadn't known her long, but the word 'vulnerable' was not one she'd ever have thought to use to describe her.

Knowing that she had no place getting closer to whatever was going on across the room, Riley headed back to sit where they'd been sitting. But then Shannon came up, a tote bag on her shoulder. She was leading a toddling Gia by the hand.

"I'm going to take Gia down and get her something to eat. You want to come with me?"

Riley looked toward Bart, reluctant to leave without letting him know. As if he sensed her, he turned. She tipped her head toward the elevators. He smiled a little and nodded.

“Okay, sure.”

Shannon picked Gia up, and they went down to the cafeteria.

They didn’t talk much as they rode the elevator, or went through the line, collecting fruit, milk, and a small box of Cheerios for Gia. Shannon asked if Riley wanted something, too, but she didn’t. Once they had Gia in a high chair and were settled at a table, Shannon helping Gia drink milk from the little bottle, she turned to Riley and asked, “How are you doing with all this?”

Riley shrugged. “I don’t know. Is there a way I’m supposed to be handling it?”

“I don’t really know.” Shannon laughed and slid a disposable bowl of dry Cheerios to Gia, who dug in with both hands. “This is a first for me, too. But Show warned me that things got violent around the club sometimes. I guess it depends on what Bart means to you, and how you feel about the Horde.”

It felt to Riley like an opportunity was presenting itself, a chance for her to try out her feelings and explore what they could mean. So she decided to be open with Shannon, even though they hardly knew each other. “I think he means a lot. I’m trying to understand what that means. But I think he means a lot. And I like the Horde. I feel good around them.”

“That’s good. Then follow Bart’s lead. That’s what I’m trying to do—let Show tell me what’s right for me to do. Trust my man. And be there for my friend.”

That seemed like exactly the thing Riley was beginning to fight against—the idea of someone else telling her what to do. But here, in this case, she knew Shannon was right. Nothing that was happening was anywhere in the realm of her own experience. “Doesn’t all this scare you? Are you okay with this in your life?”

Shannon plucked several grapes from their stems and dropped them into Gia’s bowl. Gia clapped and said, “Bapes!”

“Like I said, this is new for me, too. I’m feeling my way. And yeah, it scares me. As for whether I’m okay with it in my life, no—of course not. But I love Show. I want *him* in my life. If he brings this, then I guess, in a

way, I *am* okay with it. I'd rather this in my life than Show not. If that makes sense."

It did, and Riley nodded. She wasn't sure she felt the same, though. Only a week. Her head kept bringing that up. Only a week. Eight days ago, she had not known Bart. This should be a warning—a bright red flag telling her to get on a plane and put this fling behind her. If she went forward, if there was even a forward to go, she did so knowing that he could bring more of this into her life at any time. He was an outlaw. He was an ex-con. The tabloids would have a field day.

Her heart wasn't sure it cared.

~oOo~

They waited in that waiting room for hours. The whole day. Shannon had eventually arranged for food to be delivered to them, because none of the Horde would leave. They ate some, but not much.

Riley sat with Bart and held his hand. They talked a little—mostly, he asked questions about how her coming back had affected things in L.A. Show went down the hall a couple of times, his phone in his hand. But otherwise, everybody was just quiet. For the whole day.

Finally, as the afternoon was becoming evening, two doctors came into the room. One, an older man, was in scrubs, his head still covered in the green scrub hat. The other, a tall, slim, redheaded woman, wore scrubs, too, but a white coat over them. She didn't look like she'd been in the operating room. But it did look like everybody knew her.

Bart and the other Horde stood. Riley stayed where she was, not wanting to intrude. But she watched. The doctors sat on either side of Lilli. The redhead took her hand. Show went over and squatted in front of her, taking her other hand.

Lilli had never washed up. She'd worn Isaac's blood on her body the entire day.

Riley couldn't hear, but she watched. She couldn't help watching. Her eyes filled with tears when she saw Lilli's head bend down. Show lifted her hand to his face and held it there.

Oh, God. Was he dead? That huge, strong, mountain of a man. Was he gone?

She looked over at Bart. He was watching the same scene unfold, and she could tell that he was feeling what she was—only much more acutely.

Both doctors stood, and Show and Lilli did as well. The redheaded doctor said something and rubbed Lilli's arm. Lilli nodded. Show pulled her into his arms. She let him hold her, but her arms stayed straight at her sides. When he released her, he kissed her cheek. Then she went with the doctors, and Show turned to his brothers.

Shannon, Riley noticed, stayed sitting where she was. Gia was asleep in her lap. But Shannon was sitting ramrod straight, paying keen attention. Riley understood that it was right to stay back and wait for Bart to come to her.

When Show had said what he'd had to say, they all embraced each other. Len and Bart said something, and Show answered. Riley wished she understood what was going on. Or maybe she didn't want to. She thought she might, and it scared her. She didn't know Isaac well, either, or any of these people. But the thought that he was dead rent her heart.

At last, Bart turned back and came to her. He looked stricken, and he sat and took her hand. But he said nothing. He just stared at her hand in his.

“Bart, what? Can I ask? Is he gone?”

He shook his head. “No. They don't know if he'll make it. There's a chance, though, and he's strong. He's so strong. But the buckshot tore his spine up. If he does make it, they don't think he'll walk again. They're not sure he'll be able to move at all.”

He laid his head on her shoulder, and she put her hand on his face and held him there.

~oOo~

It was dark when Bart pulled up at the bed and breakfast. As he always did, he held out his arm to help Riley dismount. Then he swung his leg over, too. He took her hand, and they went inside. The rental car was still at the clubhouse. She'd only rented it for a day; she wasn't sure how to handle it if she stayed longer, but she'd figure it out.

The place was quiet—the actors had booked it for two weeks, and they were all gone. Vicki was there; she came through the swinging kitchen

door as Riley and Bart came through the front door.

“Hi, Miss Chase.” She’d never gotten comfortable calling Riley by her name. “Shannon told me to expect you back tonight. Your room’s been turned down. It’s all ready. Steve isn’t here, but can I help you with your bag?” She handed Riley a key.

She didn’t have a bag, except for the one on her shoulder. “No thanks, Vicki. I’ve got it. Good night.”

“Good night, Miss Chase. Breakfast tomorrow?”

Bart answered that. “I’ll take her to Marie’s, Vicki. No need for Beth to come in and put out a spread.”

Vicki nodded. She looked like she wanted to say more, and Riley understood that she wanted to know what had happened. But Bart put his hand on her back and led her to the staircase, leaving Vicki unsatisfied.

“Okay then. I’ll let her know. Well, good night—I’m staying over, so if you need anything, just press ‘1’!”

When they got upstairs, Bart took the key from her and opened the door. He put his hand on her lower back again and ushered her into the room. The bed was turned down, as Vicki had advertised, with little mints on the pillows. The lamp at one side of the bed was on. The room felt a little bit like home to Riley, and she took a breath and sighed away a fraction of the stress.

“You sound tired, babe.”

She breathed a weak chuckle. “I am. It’s been almost two days since I slept.” Turning to face him and his sad eyes, she said, “You, too. You look exhausted.”

“Yeah. Rough times.” He slid his hand under her hair, cupping her neck, his thumb over her jaw. “I’m sorry you were here for all this.”

Hooking her finger through his belt loop, she stepped up against him. “I’m not. I’m glad I was here for you. If I helped at all.”

“You did.” He bent his head toward hers, his eyes holding hers, and she knew he was going to kiss her. But she put her hand flat on his chest and held him off. He blinked, his brow furrowing.

“I need to tell you something, Bart. You don’t have to say anything. In fact, it would be easier if you’d just say nothing. I don’t want you to say something because you feel like you have to. So just...just shut up. Okay?”

His mouth crooked up, so sexily, in the beginning of a smile.

“Okay.” He turned his fingers in front of his lips, miming a key in a lock.

“Sealed.”

Her heart began to race wildly, and she could hear her pulse in her ears. This was stupid, her brain said. Nothing good could come of it. But she didn't care. Watching the Horde today, watching Show and Shannon, and Lilli, she knew. She knew what she wanted. She didn't know how to have it, and she was pretty sure it wasn't good for her, but she knew she wanted it. So she took a deep breath and forced herself to let it out slowly. Then she looked Bart, her biker, in the eyes.

“I've been thinking about it a lot. Today, nonstop, I think. I don't know what's to be done about it. I don't know if there's anything that *should* be done about it. But I know it's true.” She needed another breath, and she took it, still keeping her eyes on his. “I'm in love with you.”

Okay, now she maybe needed to throw up. She swallowed and let her eyes close, trying to rein in her galloping pulse.

He said nothing. Of course, she'd told him not to. But he wasn't moving, either, and Riley found that extremely unnerving. She opened her eyes and found him still looking down at her, his grey eyes dark and intense.

“Okay, I know I told you not to say anything, but—”

He cut her off with his mouth, crashing down on hers, his tongue plunging into her. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her hard to his chest, his hands moving down to hold her ass. His erection pushed hard against her, and she moaned. Not talking was good. It was right. She slid her hands to his back and pushed them under his kutte and t-shirt.

He tore away from her with a gasp. “I need to wash this fucking day away. I need to forget for a minute. Shower with me, babe. I want to fuck you in the shower.”

She nodded, and he lifted her up. When she looped her legs around his waist, he walked out to the bathroom and closed and locked the doors.

He set her on her feet, and they undressed themselves. He was naked first, and he got the water ready and stepped in. When she stepped in, he pulled her close and turned the water so that it rained over her head. She tipped her head back and let the water rinse her face, moving her hair back, too. The water was hot but not scalding, and she felt better in it, with his bare, muscular body pressed to hers. His cock was hard and beautiful, and she wrapped her hands around it, sliding back and forth until his head fell back and his hands dug into her shoulders.

His brows were drawn together and he was thrusting against the movement of her hands when he grabbed her wrists in a hurry. “Hold up, babe. I’m gonna go.”

“Good. I want you to.”

“I want to be in you.”

“We don’t have a condom in here.” She was horny, and she wasn’t being very smart about him, but she wasn’t going to let him come inside her. It was one thing to maybe start a long-distance thing with an outlaw biker. It was another thing entirely to risk having his baby. Not to mention that he slept with the girls at the club that all the guys slept with, so tests would need to happen, too. She sped up her hands, and his hands fell away, then made their way to her shoulders again.

“Fuck, Riley,” he groaned. Then he groaned again. “Fuck, yeah. Ah, yeah. That’s...it. Fuck.” He came hard, his fingers digging into her shoulders. She found herself fascinated by the way his semen covered her hands, her hip, even the wall behind her.

When he had his breath, he turned into the shower spray and washed himself. Then he moved her into the spray and began to wash her, picking up the little hotel soap and smoothing it over her body, washing himself from her, washing the stress and fear of the day away. No one had washed her since she was a little girl. And no one had ever washed her like this. After he’d attended thoroughly to her body, he shampooed and rinsed her hair. When he’d rinsed the soap and shampoo away, every cell in her body was bouncing with need. He was standing behind her, and she could feel his cock against her back, hard again. She was so turned on, she actually had a little internal debate about whether it would be okay, as long as he pulled out. *No. No, it would not! Don’t be a dope!*

With one hand, he reached again for the soap; with the other, he pulled gently on her shoulder, encouraging her to lean back against his chest. She did, and he lathered his hands and then smoothed them over her breasts, swirling the silky suds around her nipples until they were hard little points, and she thought she’d scream from the pressure and throb she felt between her legs.

“I love your tits so much. They’re so gorgeous, and I love the way your nipples are almost the same color as your skin. Like you’re made of alabaster.”

He plucked both nipples between his fingers, and she couldn't stand it. She arched hard and cried out, "God, Bart! Please!"

Chuckling in her ear, he slid his hand down her belly and between her legs. She started to come as soon as his fingers raked over her clit. He circled her waist with his arm and pulled her off her feet, his other hand working her clit furiously, perfectly, until stars exploded through her body. She went so rigid she couldn't make a sound.

"Ah, yeah, babe. That's so fucking hot." He flicked over her clit, and she jerked as if she'd been electrocuted. He did it again, and she grabbed his hand. Too much. God, she felt flayed—and sated, and weary in every corner of her body.

~oOo~

When they were dry, and naked in bed, Bart pulled her close, tucking her under his arm. Riley yawned loudly. She was so tired.

He chuckled and kissed her head. "Let's sleep. How's that sound?"

She nodded, loving the feel of his hard chest under her cheek.

He didn't say more, and Riley began to ease into sleep. Despite the turmoil and sadness of the crazy day they'd had, she felt safe and warm and snug, and sleep was rolling over her like a blanket, moving from her toes.

"Can I say something now?"

Her eyes popped open at that. She knew instantly what he meant. She didn't answer. She wasn't sure how to answer. So she lay there, not moving or speaking, Just waiting.

"I'm in love with you, too."

She jerked her head up on his shoulder so she could see his face. He was looking down at her, his eyes warm, his smile crooked.

"I don't know what we're gonna do about it. But we'll work it out. Okay?"

She nodded, tears blurring her vision. With a finger curled under her chin, he tipped her head up and bent his down to kiss her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

She was as beautiful when she slept as she was when she was awake. Sometime during the night, they'd moved a little apart, and now they were face to face. She was sleeping with her hands pressed together as if she were praying, and tucked a bit under her cheek. Her brow was smooth; she was a picture of peace.

Bart, on the other hand, had been tormented by dreams and had woken with a breathless start. The dreams broke apart almost as quickly as he'd realized they'd happened, but he knew what they'd been about—the sick, heavy weight in the pit of his stomach was a sure sign.

Everything was so fucked up.

And Isaac. Jesus.

He rolled over and picked up his phone off the nightstand. No word. He figured that was good—or good enough. It meant there'd been no change in Isaac's condition, and at this point, no change was progress.

C.J. had done this. How had his shit with Isaac gotten to this point? That he'd shoot his President in the back? He was the last surviving original Horde. Or he had been. And why the fuck had he been at Isaac's house?

And Vic—still tied up in the Room. They had to deal with him soon—today.

And the Scorpions had taken over their clubhouse—Jesus, maybe literally.

Everything was so fucked up.

Again.

He put his phone down and rolled back to face Riley. He loved her. He'd never felt the way he was feeling now, but he knew it was love. He'd sought her out instinctively. He needed her. If Rick's idea panned out, maybe they could even be together. But everything had changed since they'd discussed that idea. Now, if Isaac didn't make it—or maybe even if he did, if he was paralyzed—and Bart left, there would only be four patched members of the Horde.

They had to patch Dom and Omen. As soon as they could, they had to patch Dom and Omen in. The club was falling apart.

First, though, he had to get Riley safe. He had to make sure she got on an airplane today. This morning.

He scooted close and brushed his fingertips over her cheek. When she stirred and opened her eyes, he smiled. “Morning, princess.”

~oOo~

To guarantee that Riley actually put her tight little ass on an airplane this time, Bart bought a ticket so he could get through security. He set it out as far as he could, so he’d have time to cancel it after she took off, and he didn’t care where it was headed, since he wasn’t going anywhere. With a ticket to Des Moines in his pocket, he escorted his girl through security and to the gate for her flight back to Los Angeles. Her home.

There had been some complication about her bags, but she explained that there had been a family emergency that had pulled her away from the airport and had her too distracted to think to cancel her ticket and explain before she left. Bart supposed that wasn’t even quite a lie. Her fame wasn’t all that persuasive with the TSA. Her bags had been taken off the plane the day before and thoroughly searched, but there hadn’t been anything troublesome in them, so eventually, after she’d spoken with several people, they were checked again and ready to accompany her on her new flight.

The rental car was still in the clubhouse lot. He’d helped her arrange for a more open return, and he’d deal with that later. He didn’t know when—getting that car back was not high on his priority list today. He’d need help, and the Horde were depleted and stretched far past capacity as it already was.

So far, Show wouldn’t leave the hospital. And they were trying to keep at least two patches at the clubhouse as much as possible, in addition to the Prospects, while the Scorpions were there. And Bart had had to get Riley out. There was no time to worry about a fucking rental car.

Show was concerned that C.J. hadn’t simply been off the rails. Trust between the Scorpions and the Horde was thin at best, and C.J. had been talking to Sam. What if Sam had known about C.J.’s plans? What if he’d sanctioned them? They might have bona fide enemies as guests in their house. If it was still their house.

In a hurry to get her clear of whatever bedlam was still in store, he hadn’t taken Riley to Marie’s for breakfast, after all. So they grabbed

breakfast sandwiches at a fast food place in the airport and ate them at the gate.

As she took her last bite, she tossed her head back and closed her eyes. “Mmmm.”

The look was a lot like her sex look, and Bart’s cock started to fill out. He shifted awkwardly, but couldn’t look away. “That good, babe?”

She swallowed and opened her eyes. “Feels like my last meal. When I get back home, Trevor will be force-feeding me flaxseed and green tea.”

Jealousy hit him with a force that shocked him. He hadn’t heard that name before. “Who’s Trevor?”

There must have been something in his tone that exposed the feeling, because she narrowed her eyes. “My health and fitness guy. What—are you jealous?”

He didn’t answer. He was surprised by it, too. He didn’t think he’d ever felt jealousy before. He was also realizing that a lot of her life in L.A., as public a figure as she was, was a mystery to him.

She smiled, though, and put her hand on his leg. “He’s gay, Bart. Really, really gay.”

“Oh. Okay. Sorry.” He sounded stupid.

She wadded up her sandwich wrapper, took his from him, and threw them both away. When she sat back down, she asked, “How are we going to do this?”

He wished he could tell her that they would be together soon, but he couldn’t. He didn’t know if that was true. He didn’t even know if he *wanted* it to be true, at least if it meant him leaving Signal Bend. There was too much uncertainty now. With Isaac down, maybe dying, probably never riding again, with the betrayals of C.J. and Vic, with Sam and the Scorpions breathing down their necks...fuck, maybe the Horde were over.

But if they weren’t—if somehow the club survived all this, could Bart leave? Would he even have a choice, one way or the other? He didn’t know. He didn’t know shit.

Except that he loved this girl. That felt true. It felt right. In his gut, he felt it.

He pulled her close and kissed her head. “We’ll work it out. I don’t know how, but we will.”

As he was walking back to his bike after watching Riley's plane leave the ground with her on it, he got a text from Show. He was calling a meeting at the hospital. No change in Isaac's condition, but they had to figure shit out now.

He was the last one to arrive. Everyone else was assembled in the small hospital chapel. Bart remembered meeting here before, more than two years ago, voting to send Wyatt to his Maker for the way he'd gone against the Horde and given Lilli up to his brother. She'd almost died.

Now Isaac himself might die, again due to the treachery of a brother. And again they'd congregated in this same room to decide the fate of that brother. Bart scanned the faces of the men with him. He loved them. He trusted them. He would die for them. He would kill for them—he *had* killed for them. They were his family more than the people who shared his blood.

He would have said the same thing about C.J.

His feelings about Vic were more equivocal, especially since Marissa Halyard. But even with the way C.J. had been poking at Isaac the past couple of years, Bart had believed the old man to be perfectly loyal to the club he'd helped start.

He hadn't gotten far hacking C.J. The dude had been an old luddite, so it wasn't like he'd had a big digital footprint. Except for what Sam could tell them, if he would, they'd probably never know why he'd turned on the club. But Bart had his suspicions. He didn't think C.J. *had* turned—at least not in his own mind. Bart thought C.J., who absolutely hated the way things were changing in the club and in the town, probably, in his age-fried head, had been trying to save the Horde. Stupid fuck.

The why of it didn't matter now. Whatever the reason, C.J. had brought the Scorpions down on their heads, corrupting a decade-long friendship and alliance. And he'd shot their President in the back. In the *back*. It made Bart sick.

Had all this also corrupted the love and trust among the men who still wore the Flaming Mane? Bart looked from face to face. Badger. Len. Havoc. And Show. They were so few. But these men were solid. Maybe even more than ever, now.

Show stood in front of the simple altar and crossed his arms. The men in the room knew he didn't want the gavel, not under any circumstances, and certainly not under these. But he was the natural choice,

and not only because he was VP. He was a born leader, probably because he didn't want it. He thought before he fought, but he didn't shrink from a fight when it was warranted. When it was warranted, Show fought like no other. He was the only choice to lead, whether it was to keep Isaac's seat warm for him or to take the gavel permanently, if Isaac could not.

Assuming there was a gavel to take.

Clearing his throat, Show began. His voice was naturally deep, and his speech naturally measured and quiet—today more than ever.

“First thing—no change for Isaac. Right now, doctors say that's a good thing. He's right on the edge, I guess, but the longer he fights, the stronger he could get.” His voice cracked, and he stopped.

It was hard to think of Show without Isaac, or the other way around. They were a team. They'd been a team for as long as Bart had been connected to the Horde in any way. The thought of Show going on without Isaac—of them all going on without Isaac—brought a stone to his throat. He swallowed and looked at the floor, unable to watch Show struggle for composure.

“They got him in an induced coma, and he's all screwed into a bunch of shit. Like science fiction. He looks bad. But don't you fucking leave here without paying your respects. Lilli needs to know we're all standing behind her. What's left of us.” His voice cracked again, and he stopped.

Len said, “Of course, man. You know we're there. Not a question.” Havoc, Badger, and Bart all nodded their agreement.

“Yeah. Okay. We got big things to figure out, so let's just take them in turn. While Isaac's down, I'll step in. Len, I want you in VP. Hav, SAA. All temporary until Isaac's at the table again. You hear? This is a formality only, in case we got more shit headed our way.”

They all nodded.

Show shook his head. “Let's make it right. Vote it. All in favor of this temporary role change. Hands.”

They all raised their hands.

“Good. Now. The Scorpions. We—only we—decide where our line is. We know where Isaac's line is. That's my line, too. Sam's line is he wants us patched over, or he wants us history.”

From the front pew, Havoc abruptly stood. “Hold up, Show. You're saying the Horde is over, either way.”

“If we can’t beat Sam or change his mind, then yeah, we’re over.”

Bart knew right then what had to happen. As much as things had changed in the past day, that had not. “I think we can change his mind.”

The other four heads in the room turned to fix their eyes on him.

Show cocked his head. “Bart?”

The stone in his throat had become a boulder, and his blood was churning. He stood up and walked to the short aisle between the pews. “Rick doesn’t usually do runs like this. He rides enough to make his miles, but they don’t usually bring him on a job like this—which is, after all, an enforcement run more than anything. He’s along because Sam wants him in L.A. Besides our movie thing, Hollywood has been sniffing around the L.A. charter, looking to do some kind of reality show. They’re thinking the PR could work in their favor, make a distraction, but Sam wants a hacker keeping track of shit out there.

“Rick doesn’t want to go. It’s personal shit, but whatever. He’s going, but he doesn’t want to. When all the shit between us and the Scorps started up, he got an idea. Ran it by me. I told him no. But he showed me it could save the Horde. So I told him I’d talk to Isaac. Never got a chance.”

Show walked down the aisle until he was looming over Bart. “Get to it, brother.”

It took everything Bart had to say the words. As often as he’d wondered how well he fit with the Horde, in this moment, preparing to offer to leave it, he understood that he had always fit. His voice broke when he finally was able to speak at all. “Send me. Give Sam me. I’m not as good as Rick, but I’m good. And I’m less of a target. Lotta Feds in L.A. Rick was a Fed hacker.”

Show was shaking his head before Bart had finished his second sentence. All four of his brothers, those who could be in the room with him, were shaking their heads emphatically by the time he took a breath.

“No way, Bart. No fucking way.”

“It’s the only way, Hav. You know it’s true. We are five against ten, and that’s just the Scorps who are here in town right now. We have no friends in a fight against them. We patch over, we fold, or we give Sam something he needs.”

“We’re seven. We patch in Dom and Omen, and we’re seven.”

Bart didn’t respond to Hav’s statement. Everybody in the room knew that wouldn’t be near enough.

“Doesn’t make sense,” Len said. “Why would getting you change Sam’s mind? I mean, I know you’re good, kid. But are you all that?”

“It’s making him a hostage.” Show looked hard at Bart. “You see that, right?”

Bart nodded. He saw.

Show turned to Len, Havoc, and Badge and went on. “Used to do shit like that all the time in the days of empires and conquerors. Broker a truce, take a son or a brother from the other camp, keep everybody in line. In this case, they’d be getting a bonus—somebody who could be an asset to them in his own right. But if all the attention from the movie exposes the Scorps at all, they fuck Bart up bad.” He spun around and stared again at Bart. “Brother, the shit they would do to you. And your blood family. You understand that?”

Then Bart understood that Show was going to go along with this plan. And the others would follow. Havoc would take some convincing, but he’d follow.

“I understand. That was a risk before they fell on us like rampaging Huns. From L.A., I’ll catch the rhythm of the intel faster. I can lock in more easily and keep better track. And it’s the only thing that could save the Horde.”

Havoc looked furious. “You’re giving up your patch?”

“I don’t want to. I want Sam to take me on loan. But I will, if I have to. To keep yours on your back, Hav. I will.”

Havoc kicked a pew over and stormed to the side of the room.

Len was calmer. “I don’t mean offense, kid. I truly do not. But you’re not Scorpions material.”

“I know. Neither is Rick. Guys who are can’t do what we do. They keep his hands clean. I’ll stay back, in the clubhouse.”

“Lotsa bad shit goes down in a Scorp clubhouse. Don’t know if you could deal.”

Bart glared at Len. “We cut a girl in two in our clubhouse. While her father watched. I can deal with a lot.”

At that, Show pulled up tall and glared down at him. “Not the same, brother. That was a debt being paid. That was owed.”

“Not arguing that, Show. I know. I’m just saying shit gets deep here, too. I can deal.”

Stepping back, Show asked, “Do we know Sam will agree to this?”

Bart shook his head. “Rick seems pretty sure. But he wasn’t going to bring it up to Sam until we’d decided our play. Maybe Sam will just laugh and crush us. He’s definitely not acting like he’s been our friend all these years.”

Len gestured to Badger. “You been quiet, Badge. Anything to add?”

The kid shook his head, but then he shrugged and spoke up. “I don’t like Bart going. But I see the sense of it.”

Show turned, walked back down the aisle, and sat at the top of the steps leading to the altar. The others sat down, too.

“Let’s step back from that a minute. We need to think. While we do that, let’s move on. Talked to the Sheriff. The Scorps did a good job cleaning up Howler’s mess. Looks like C.J. will go down as the shooter for Wallace and the other guy—Grady—as well as Isaac. Lilli’s in the clear for killing C.J. So that’s off our plate, at least. C.J. will be cremated as soon as the investigation is closed. So his ink will be destroyed.”

After taking a deep breath, Show was quiet for several seconds. Bart knew he was regrouping, making order in his head before he spoke. “We need to vote on Vic. Two votes: patch and Maker. Do we need a discussion?”

Len shook his head. “He’s gotta die. But do we know what the fuck he was up to? Were he and Ceej stirring up shit together?”

Havoc laughed viciously. “He says he just saw an opportunity and took it. That’s worse to me, that he flipped so fuckin’ fast. He barely even fuckin’ thought about it. I want to cut parts off until he bleeds out.”

Show raised his voice at that. “No. If he meets his Maker, we take his ink and we kill him clean. Let’s vote it. Call it out.”

Unanimous for both. Vic was losing his patch and meeting his Maker. No surprise.

By the time the meeting was over, Vic was dying, Dom and Omen were patched in, and Bart was going over to the Scorpions. Eventually. If they would have him. He didn’t want to be going until they had a better sense of Isaac’s future, and until he had Dom trained to take over for him.

But Jesus, his life—all their lives—had just been dumped into a blender and pureed.

He, Len, Havoc, and Badge were heading back to Signal Bend and the clubhouse, to make arrangements for a meeting with Sam. Show would come back for that, but he was still loath to leave the hospital.

Before they left, they went up to pay their respects to Isaac and Lilli. It was the ICU, and they weren't supposed to be there at all, but the nurses turned a blind eye, insisting only that they go in one at a time and for no longer than five minutes each.

Bart was the last in. He'd seen the pale, broken expressions on his brothers' faces when they'd come out of Isaac's room, so he'd thought he was prepared for what he'd see.

He wasn't.

From the time Bart was in high school, Isaac had inspired him. Intimidated him. Awed him. He was big and strong, in body and personality, and he filled up a room—figuratively and nearly literally. He was really smart and, though he didn't broadcast it, almost as much of a geek as Bart himself was. Truth be told, Bart had always wanted to *be* Isaac.

Not now. It wasn't his President he saw in the big, strange bed in the room, bolted into a monstrous metal apparatus and buried in wires and tubes. They'd shaved his beard. He didn't know why. But that was almost worse than the tubing down his throat, and the bolts in his head, and the constant buzz and beep and pulse of the machines nearly surrounding him.

"Hey, bud."

Bart tore his eyes from the horror in that bed and saw Lilli, sitting in a chair that looked something like a recliner. She had it pushed right up against the bed. Her hand rested on the mattress, her little finger linked with Isaac's.

She looked haggard, but she smiled.

Bart went to her and kissed her cheek. "What can I do?"

"Make Show go home. He has too much going on to be this tired. He needs to sleep."

"So do you, Lilli."

She just shook her head and turned back to watch Isaac.

~oOo~

By impressing on him that they all needed to be sharp to sit down with the Scorpions, and suggesting that when he got back to the hospital he'd have a first-hand report for Lilli on Gia, who was with Shannon, they did manage to get Show to go home and sleep for a couple of hours. He

didn't look appreciably better when he came in to the clubhouse, but Bart supposed they all looked like shit. They sure all felt like it.

At least the Scorpions had calmed down. Whether Sam had gotten a handle on his crew, or they were simply thrown by what had happened to Isaac, they now were acting like the guests they were. Len had called in some of the more resilient girls, and the Scorpions had apparently been something approaching civilized with them, because the girls looked okay and into what they had going on.

So that was something.

They dealt with Vic first, and the Scorpions stayed out of it. To his credit, Vic was stalwart at the end. He grunted and groaned mightily as Len sliced his ink away, but they didn't have to hold him down. Then Havoc, in his first task as acting SAA, asked him how he wanted it. Havoc gritted the words out, and Bart knew he hated that Vic was being given the respect of the choice.

Vic said, "Bullet." When Havoc aimed at his head, Vic said, "I fucked up. Thing I was best at." He said nothing more, and Havoc fired once, putting a bullet in the middle of Vic's forehead.

Vic had no one. No living blood family, no one but the Horde. They wrapped up his body and called their friend at the funeral home and crematorium in Worden. They burned his kutte in the trash barrel out back.

Bart didn't even feel a pang of regret. Vic had signed his death warrant two years ago. If it hadn't been for C.J., they'd have carried it out then.

With that task behind them, they brought Dom and Omen into the Keep and presented them with their top rockers. The celebration was subdued. Both were young—now almost half the Horde was under thirty—but they'd proven their mettle, and their loyalty.

While their patches were still on the table in front of them, and they were still reeling from the briefing they'd just gotten, Show went out, intending to bring the Scorpions in and get the meeting started. He came back with only Sam, who, again, sat in what had been C.J.'s seat.

Expecting all the Scorpions to come in, Bart, Len, Badger, and Havoc exchanged confused looks. They all turned to Show at once, and Show just tipped his head. In that gesture, Bart read an admonition to shut up and wait.

Again, Show sat in his customary seat. The sight of Isaac's empty chair at the head of the table made Bart feel nauseated. What was the Horde without Isaac?

Maybe it was nothing. A lot depended on what Sam would say in this room. Rick had briefed him on their plan while the Horde dealt with Vic, so he should have had time to consider it.

Show spoke first. "This reunion hasn't been a smooth one, Sam. I'm hoping when we leave this table, we've found our balance again."

"I hope so, too, Show. That's why I'm in here alone. Before we talk business, I want to offer my sincere hope that Isaac recovers completely. I consider him a great personal friend, and I'm truly sorry if I had any unintentional part in what C.J. did."

Show nodded, but none of the other Horde responded.

"I'm also sorry for the disrespect my men showed you and your house yesterday. That's on me. I came in hot, and I had no cause to. My men keyed off that. You have different rules than we do, but this is your house. Shiv was way out of line. As restitution, I offer him to you for five minutes."

Bart and Havoc looked at each other. Show leaned forward. "Offer him?"

"Three men of your choice. In the ring with Shiv. Five minutes. No weapons, but whatever damage you can do in five minutes is clear."

Len turned and looked down the table at Sam. "Whatever damage?"

"Up to and including death. In those five minutes only. That goes for Shiv, too, of course. Whatever damage he can do."

That was some savage shit. Bart knew it would be him, Len, and Havoc. They could easily kill that asshole in five minutes. Shiv was Sam's SAA, and he'd just offered him up, like nothing. Bart had some new insight into the workings of the Scorpions MC, and his resolve to follow through with their plan was suddenly a little shaky. No—he'd known these guys were bad news. He knew what he risked.

Who he risked.

Even if he went to L.A., could he and Riley be together? Was that too much risk for her? Or maybe her celebrity made a safe space for her. They couldn't just make her disappear. Bart had to think about all that.

Show nodded. "Thank you, Sam. Len, Havoc, and Bart. Tonight." He looked at the men he'd named. "That work for you?" They all nodded.

With his forearms on the table Isaac had made, Sam looked at each Horde in turn. There were empty chairs, and young, new patches, and the President's seat was empty, but this was the Horde now. For now.

“Now for the real business. You know I came here to force a patch-over. That's no secret now. The Night Horde is too small an organization to handle so much attention. We have been friends for a long time, and despite the way things have been going down the last couple of days, I don't want that friendship to end. I mean it when I say I love Isaac. I watched him become the President he is, and I'm proud to say I had a chance or two to advise him. But I can't let that get in the way of our business. Right now, our alliance with you is a weakness. You make us vulnerable. That makes very powerful, very dangerous people vulnerable. I need to get you under control. I'm sorry for that.”

Sam focused on Bart then, and Bart sat straight and met his eyes, waiting. “I was prepared to come in here with Scorpions patches. They are ready to go. Not support. Full charter. But Rick pulled me aside while you were handling your...personnel issue. And he laid out a very interesting plan. So interesting that I'm looking away from the fact there was talk going on behind my back.”

He leaned back, rocking slightly in the chair. “I like the plan. I can see how it solves my problems. I can see how it makes it safe to trust my friends here in Signal Bend again. And it keeps my best hacker with me.” Again he focused on Bart. “I got one problem left. I can't have divided loyalties in my house. Nobody touches what the Scorpions have without a Scorpion on his back. None of this 'loan' bullshit. I will put this deal to my men, and I will get it through. But only if Bart patches over. Intel officer for the L.A. charter.”

Everybody in the room was looking at Bart now.

He'd known it would go down this way. Rick's idea of making it a loan had been pie in the sky, and Bart had known that as soon as he'd heard it. But now that the time had come to commit to the decision, he didn't know how he'd get the words out without crying. He could feel the flood at the back of his throat.

He took a breath and steadied himself. Show said, “Your call, brother. We got your back, either way.”

Bart nodded and met Show's eyes, but then he had to look away. Show's steady support didn't make this any easier. He looked at Sam. “I

need time to get things straight here before I go.”

Sam considered him for several seconds. The room was silent, except for the occasional squeak of a chair. “You got thirty days.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Give me five more.”

“Fuck you. You said that five ago.”

The look Trevor gave her very dramatically conveyed that he was unmoved by her discomfort. “Hey—I’m not the one who ate country cooking for a whole week. You play, you pay, cupcake. You’ve got a wardrobe fitting in three days.”

Riley rolled her eyes and finished the lunges. When she stood straight, Trevor smacked her ass. “There! That’s the tight little fanny the camera loves. You came back all salty and mean, but you know the Trevor knows what’s best. And that’s enough for now. You’ve got Colin this afternoon.” He handed her a towel and her water bottle.

As she took them, she rolled her eyes. She wiped her face with the cooled towel and swallowed a long drink of water.

Almost three weeks home, and she still felt out of sync somehow. Her life didn’t feel quite like her life anymore. It was strange.

Her first week back was barely more than a blur. She’d caused a real stir, staying behind, especially once the others got back and Stan found out about the reason for their mass exodus. That fracas had gotten the press jumping, and she was totally swamped, and totally on her own, at LAX. She’d been swamped at the baggage claim, and the driver they’d sent—not Joe, but someone she’d never met—had been slow to dig her out of the scrum.

Once he finally got her to her limo and pulled away, she’d sat alone in the back and wept all the way home.

She’d been hounded for about that first week, and then a bigger star got pulled over for DUI and punched the cop, and the vultures moved on. That week was hell, but she’d survived it. The worse of it was that one cable entertainment news show kept trying to get Riley to talk to the woman who’d had Devon’s baby. That chick was all over the place. No question that she was all about the payday. Now it looked like she planned to sue Devon’s parents for a share of his estate.

Whatever. Not Riley’s problem. She kind of thought the woman had done her a favor. What Chrysta Ewing, Junkie Mom, had really done, after the dust had settled on the scandal, was give Riley a way finally to put her

Devon keepsake box away. Her anger had given closure to her grief. She could think of Devon now as someone she had loved. Not someone she still loved.

She hoped she wouldn't be thinking of Bart in the same way, but it was beginning to look like that might be the case. She hadn't heard from him in a week. Her texts and calls during that time had not been returned.

He'd called daily—at least—the first week. He'd called three times the second week. And nothing this week. She knew a lot was going on in Signal Bend, but she didn't know whether to be worried or pissed about him not calling. So she was both.

The first calls had been the highlights of that unhappy week. He'd seemed to know when she was missing him most, because he'd always call at just that time. He'd asked tons of questions about what was going on in her life. And then he'd say unbelievably dirty things. She'd quickly gotten into the habit of dashing to her room and locking the door. Because he was very good at phone sex. Very, very, very good.

She wasn't, not at first. She blushed crazily when he asked her to talk to him the same way. But after a few calls, she'd figured it out. It was even hotter, she thought, to hear him get himself off than it was to take care of herself.

He'd mentioned FaceTime once, but she'd shot that idea down. Absolutely no way was she going to video chat with him, especially since he went dirty at the drop of a hat. The last thing she needed was to have that out in the ether. She didn't think Bart would capture it, but she figured it was possible that someone could hack in. Better not to risk it. The dirty talk was enough.

Though he grilled her about her life (when he wasn't talking about where he'd put his tongue if they were together), he hadn't talked much about himself or the Horde, except to say that the Scorpions had moved on, and everything was smoothing out. Late in the second week, he'd called to let her know that Isaac had woken up. She'd been relieved and thrilled, but he hadn't sounded happy. He wouldn't go into much detail at first, but when Riley pressed him, he'd told her that Isaac was paralyzed from the chest down. They didn't know yet whether it would be permanent. Understanding that a man like Isaac would probably rather be dead than confined to a bed like that, she'd cried. Bart had been abrupt with her at that, ending the call while she was still wiping tears from her face.

In fact, that had been the last time they'd spoken. She didn't know if something about her crying over Isaac's plight had pissed him off badly enough to turn away from her completely, or if there was something bad happening, or if he was just busy—or if he was just over her. She was beginning to fixate on the question.

But she was *not* going to call or text him again. She had some pride. Unless he was hurt or something else bad was happening. Angry or worried; she didn't know which to be. Oh, shit. This long distance thing was for the birds.

She and Trevor came back into the house from the yard, and Riley rolled her eyes when she saw her mother rooting around in her pantry.

"I swear I really am going to change the locks. We talked about new boundaries, Mother, remember?"

Eleanor turned around, an empty canvas grocery sack in her hand. "Sorry, muffin. I know, I know. You want your 'independence.' But I was at the market and I picked up a couple of things for you."

That was weird. Marta did Riley's grocery shopping, as Eleanor well knew. In fact, Eleanor didn't buy her *own* groceries. Riley set aside her irritation at her mother's continued use of audible quotation marks whenever she spoke of her intention to take control over her own life. She was more interested in the image of Eleanor Piedmont pushing a shopping cart.

"What were you doing at the market?"

Eleanor made a regally dismissive wave. "I needed to bring some flowers to a friend, and while I was there I snooped around. They had some really lovely things. And everything so bright and perky. There are people all around offering little tidbits to eat and drink—it was almost like a party! I might do my shopping more often."

Shaking her head, Riley sat at the island and propped her head in her hands. "Are you here for anything else, or are you just delivering food?"

Trevor and Eleanor exchanged Hollywood kisses, and then Trevor sidled into the pantry, probably to ensure that he approved of everything she'd bought. Her mother came around the island and kissed Riley's head.

"Ew. Sweaty." She wrinkled her nose. "I did want to talk to you about something, actually. But the way you've been acting lately, I'm not quite sure how to bring it up."

The first few days Riley had been home, she'd been overwhelmed with the Devon story blowing up, and with missing Bart, and with a kind of hangover from everything that had happened in Signal Bend just before she'd left. She'd quickly fallen into her old patterns of behavior, letting Pru and Trevor and Eleanor run her show. Then she'd had a horrible dream. She could remember much of it, but it was about Bart and so packed with anxiety that she'd woken gasping for air, the cover wet from her sweat. Riley never had bad dreams. She rarely remembered dreaming at all. But that dream, for some reason, had shaken her out of her old skin. That morning she'd called all three of them together, sat them all down around the dining room table, and told them that things had to change.

Trevor and her mother had basically patted her on the head, obviously humoring her. Pru, though, had met her eyes steadily and then nodded. Pru had been in Signal Bend. She understood better why things had changed for Riley. And now Pru was helping her learn the ropes of her own damn life. It turned out that a lot went into being RILEY CHASE, all caps.

She was intimidated, but not dissuaded. It was time for her to take those ropes and try not to hang herself with them.

Trevor and Eleanor, though, were proving to be more difficult to convince. It didn't help matters that there were things going on that were very much part of their normal purview. She'd gained five pounds in Signal Bend. Five pounds! Since her Hollywood-ideal weight was about a hundred pounds, five pounds was not insignificant. And, as Trevor never forgot to remind her, she had wardrobe fittings for the film coming up fast. So she needed him to monitor her food and kick her ass.

As her manager, her mother was elbow-deep in what was going on with the pre-production phase of the film—Riley's part of it, anyway. So Riley had sat everyone down, told them she was going to take charge of her life, and then, essentially, sent Trevor and Eleanor off to do what they always did. Apparently, this take-charge thing was going to be a work in progress for a while.

She'd thought things were going to be different when she got back. She'd thought that she'd make her life her own. She'd thought she'd have Bart, at least to talk to. But everything seemed to be pretty much the same. She was alone. Except for all the people pulling the RILEY CHASE strings. All caps.

She shook those maudlin thoughts away, sighed, and faced her mother. “Go ahead. Hit me.”

Eleanor sat on the stool next to Riley. “It’s about the party tonight. At Stan’s?”

“Yes, I’m aware of the party of which you speak.” As pre-production was winding down, and production was beginning to get underway, Stan, the producer of the film (working title, *Signal Bend*), had invited cast and crew to a party at his house in Laurel Canyon.

“I think you should make nice with Tanner Stafford.”

“Um, what?”

“Don’t play naïve. You know what I mean.”

“I do. I’m a little shocked my own mother is telling me to hook up with the serial costar-banger. What the fuck, Mother?”

Eleanor’s lips thinned primly. “Don’t talk like that. It’s ugly. You look ugly when you say words like that. I don’t know why all of a sudden you have to talk like a sailor. And I didn’t mean you should...do that, necessarily. I just meant that he gets a lot of press for his love affairs. The women do, too. And if you know what to expect, then you won’t get hurt.”

“Jesus, Mother. That’s...God!”

“You need to show the world that you are past the drama about Devon and that nasty whore.”

“She’s not a whore, Mother. I’m pretty sure he didn’t pay her.”

“Oh, no? What do you think’s happening now?”

Good point. “You want me to fuck Tanner so that people stop seeing me as the broken girl who got fucked over by her dead junkie boyfriend.”

“Riley, please! That all sounds so...sordid.”

“But it’s what you want.”

“The Devon story is a black mark on your brand, sweetheart. Tanner is handsome and talented and a good palate cleanser for all that.”

Her brand. Even her mother thought of her like that.

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell her mother that she already had her palate cleanser. She almost told her about Bart. But then she didn’t. She didn’t know if she still even had Bart. And she wasn’t in the mood for one of Eleanor’s patented hissy fits when she learned that Riley had gotten entangled with an outlaw biker from Missouri. She’d dealt with a whole series of those fits when she’d gotten home, incited by the way she’d blown her mother off while she was away.

Instead, she stood and went to the fridge for a bottle of Pellegrino. Trevor had wisely scampered off somewhere, but Riley was sure he was within earshot of all this juicy talk.

She closed the fridge and turned back to her mother, opening the bottle and taking a dainty sip. “Huh. I guess I’m the whore, then.”

“What? Riley!”

“You’re damn sure acting like my pimp. It’s time for you to go, Mother. I’m meeting Colin at the dojo this afternoon, and I have some things I need to do before then.”

Eleanor just sat, her mouth agape, and Riley turned her back and left the room. A few minutes later, she heard her mother go out the front door.

Riley wandered around her house for a few minutes, not sure what to do with herself. Her brain felt fried, and she didn’t even want to try to sort out her thoughts and feelings. Finally, she went out to her terrace. She sat on one of the lounges and looked out over the city, emptying her head until she felt calm again.

She heard the kitchen door open behind her. Then Trevor asked, “Want some company?”

“Sure.”

He sat in the lounge next to hers and picked up her hand. “You found yourself a biker, didn’t you? Or a cowboy. One of those.”

Stunned, she turned to look at him, but didn’t say anything.

He grinned. “The Trevor knows all, gorgeous. You get a look about you when you’re in love. You get a look about you when you’ve been hurt, too. I’ve been seeing that one more than the other the past few days. Did it not take? If this is an ice cream and pizza emergency, we’ll have to be careful. That fitting.”

His face was twitching with guilt. For all his draconian demands on her body, he coddled her heart, and she knew he hated not being able to indulge it if it was hurting. She smiled. “It’s not. At least, not yet. I just haven’t heard from him for awhile, and I don’t know what that means. It’s hard not to know.”

“I won’t ask if you called him. I’m sure you did. So is there anything I can do?”

“No. I’ll be okay. Maybe I’ll rebound with Tanner. Eleanor would soak her Spanx.”

Trevor's eyes went wide, and then he giggled. "Mercy! Well, she's right about one thing—one week in bikerland, and you bring back a mouth like Sarah Silverman!"

~oOo~

Stan Blumberg had a gorgeous, enormous, ultra-modern mansion in Laurel Canyon. He shared it with his wife, Leah, their teenage boys, Jake and Seth, and three rescued greyhounds. Other than the framed photos everywhere, though, there was no sign of the kids or the dogs on this night.

Riley drove herself to the party, letting her little Ferrari California have some fun on the twists and turns of the canyon roads. She loved to drive. She didn't get many chances, really, but she loved it.

When she pulled up to the gate, she marveled at the brilliant glow of the house, so full of windows the walls were almost made of glass, and bright golden light shining from every one. It was magical. She wasn't a huge fan of parties like these, as a rule, but she did love the houses. She'd been born into this life, or something not terribly far from it. Eleanor had been a top fashion model in her day, and Riley's father had been—well, she wasn't completely sure what her father had done. Her mother had told her only that he was a "self-made man." He'd died when she was very young, and she'd never known any of his family.

She herself lived, by these standards, modestly, and she liked it that way. During the few moments of each day that she wasn't surrounded by people who were working for her in one way or another, she was alone, and she didn't want much empty space around her.

At any rate, Riley had lived well in Los Angeles her whole life. But she'd never lost her little-girl wonder at the magical castles of the ostentatiously wealthy. As she traveled up the long sweep of the drive to the Blumbergs' Magical Castle, she looked on in awe.

She pulled her little blue roadster up to the front, and a valet trotted out to take her keys as she stood. After three weeks in Trevor's emergency boot camp, she'd lost the weight and taken on even more tone in her legs, ass, and arms, so tonight, despite the fall chill in the air, she was wearing a figure-hugging, very short cocktail dress, in champagne silk, with lingerie straps and a bodice beaded with crystals and silver. A pair of nude, four-

inch Jimmy Choos embellished with crystals and silver completed the look. Her hair was loose and blown out, and she felt pretty damn good.

She needed to feel good. Feeling good about the way she looked was helping stave off feeling bad about losing Bart and failing to wrest control of her life away from the people around her.

She caught the valet looking her up and down. He stammered, and she smiled. “Here you go.” She handed him her keys.

“Have a good evening, Miss Chase.”

One thing about being an actor—she knew how to play a part. Tonight’s part was the friendly, funny, totally at ease party guest. She wrapped the role over her shoulders like a shawl, put on her smile, and strode into the house.

~oOo~

It wasn’t so bad. After a few of the fruity little cocktails that were wandering around the room on silver trays, it wasn’t bad at all. The pre-production crew, who were just finishing most of their work, and the production crew, who were ramping up in earnest now, were there, but Riley didn’t know almost any of them. The makeup and wardrobe people, she knew. A couple of stunt people—including Colin Stonewood, her sensei, with whom she’d worked out earlier in the afternoon. Almost all of the actors she’d just seen in Signal Bend were there, and she spent quite a lot of time talking to Doug Warness. He gave her insight about how life in the military can shape someone’s mind—an insight she thought she could use to play Lilli. She really did like him. He was calm and not easily impressed, but not in a cynical, snarky way. Just unflappable. He was a gentleman, too, making sure she had a drink or something to eat, taking her elbow to pull her away when she’d almost stepped off a step to a recessed part of the room. He felt like a big brother or an uncle or something.

For the first hour or more that she was there, Tanner wasn’t. And Riley had liked that quite a lot. It looked like he wasn’t going to show. Stan, Doug, Peter, Riley, and a few others spent some time talking shop, as Stan gave an impromptu briefing on the production plans. After the quick exit from Signal Bend, Stan and his fellow producer-types had decided not to film there. They’d sent a photographer in months ago to scout the location, and he’d taken a lot of footage, on video and on film. They would use what

of that they could, and otherwise they were going to film in L.A., for the most part. For the critical shootout scene, they'd fly up to Vancouver.

That didn't involve Riley. Lilli had been kidnapped then and wasn't there. So Riley would stay in L.A. She was really disappointed that they wouldn't be returning to Signal Bend, but she wasn't surprised. And anyway, it was definitely better this way if she and Bart were over before they'd really gotten started.

Angry. Or worried. Or should she be embarrassed? Had she made a fool of herself? Was he laughing at her, braying in the clubhouse about nailing the dumb blonde TV star?

No. Not Bart. He wouldn't.

How was she so sure?

Those thoughts hounded her until she'd had a few more of the fruity cocktail thingies—which were really, really good. Like Jolly Ranchers with a kick. That probably meant they were full of calories and all sorts of other things that would have Trevor chasing her up and down the hilly streets of her little neighborhood, but for right now they were totally delish and totally worth it. Besides, she wasn't thinking about Bart anymore. Oh, except for right then.

She was standing at a wall of windows, looking out over the pool, which was glowing bright blue in the dark night. The patterns of light and water had her entranced. Somewhere in the back of her head she knew that she was quite drunk—and oh, shit. She'd driven herself. She'd forgotten. Well, that was stupid. She was going to need a cab, and then she would have to come back in the morning to get her car, and then she'd be all embarrassed, and oh, geez Louise.

“Hey, Sport.”

She turned and had to put her hand on the window to keep her feet. When did Tanner get here? “Tanner, I tol' you that's gross. ‘Specially now. Don't call me that.” He knew what had happened to Isaac, and even tipsy, Riley felt like using that name was a horrible intrusion into a very personal space. It felt like even more of a violation, considering what Isaac and Lilli were going through now.

His grin was annoyingly know-it-all-y. “Had a few, have you?”

She grinned right back at him. “Maybe. They call it a cocktail party for a reason, ya know.”

“I have heard it said. May *I* say you look right brilliant tonight, Riley, my love? That is quite the dress. Dazzles the eye, it does.” He stroked his index finger over the top of her beaded bodice.

Riley was having a hard time thinking. She hadn’t had a drink in... well, it felt like it had been awhile, but she was feeling more drunk, not less.

“I need to go home now. Bye.” She took a couple of steps, trying to get past him. But had her shoes gotten taller? She wobbled, and Tanner put his arm around her waist, steadying her.

“Easy there, love. Let me walk you out. I assume you’ve a driver waiting for you outside?”

She smiled up at him. “Nope. I drove myself. I don’ need people to do everythin’ for me. I am cap’le—cape—cap-a-ble of doing things for myself.”

“I’m sure you are, love. But not driving. Not tonight.”

Oh, right. She was going to call a cab. “Okey dokey. I need a cab.”

They were almost to the front door now. “I’ve a better idea. Why don’t I take you home? I *do* have a driver waiting.”

She didn’t trust him even a tiny little bit. Not even drunk. “You’re jus’ tryin’a get me in the back of your car. I know how you work.” She wagged her finger at him for emphasis.

“I’m not, Riley. Truly. I’m attempting chivalry here. Can’t a bloke offer assistance to a pretty girl in need?”

She knew it was a stupid idea. All the ideas she’d had seemed to have been stupid lately. Like falling in love with another bad-news guy. Tanner wasn’t any better, but at least she knew what she was getting with him. Not that she wanted him. She tried to make her brain put some order to the thoughts that were reeling around in her head. Then she just gave up. It was too hard to make order.

“Okay. But no messin’ ‘round. Jus’ a ride.”

“On my honor.”

And he was a gentleman on the ride. As far as she knew, anyway. She fell asleep at some point and woke when he shook her gently, parked in her own driveway. She’d been leaning on him, her head resting on his arm.

“Um, okay. Thank you. I’ll see you.” The driver opened the door, and she tried to slide out as gracefully as possible, still drunker than she could remember being. She could feel her very short dress hiking up over her ass as she got out, but she decided not to think too long about that.

Trying to pull her dress down, she wobbled on her feet, and then she sensed Tanner getting out of the car, too. She spun on a slender heel, and the world went topsy-turvy for a second. He grabbed her arms.

“What are you doing?”

“Seeing you safely to your door. Devon will wait.”

“What? What do you mean? How do you know Devon?” She was really confused. Maybe she wasn’t hearing words right.

“Devon. My driver.”

She turned back to scrutinize his driver, squinting through her cocktail goggles. Okay, not her Devon. Wait. She didn’t have a Devon. Oh, geez, could she just get inside and pass out?

Tanner walked her to her door, pulled the keys from her hand, unlocked the door, and handed the keys back to her.

She scowled at him. “You know I don’t like you.”

“I do know that. You’ve not exactly been coy about it. I suppose I earned it. I was a bit of a twat whilst we were away.”

“Twat. Douchebag. Tomayto, tomahto.”

He smiled. “I don’t suppose an apology would suffice?”

She shrugged. He was very tall. She liked the way she felt bookended by her door and his body. “My mother thinks if I fuck you people will stop thinking of me as the damaged girl who wasn’t enough for her junkie boyfriend.”

He winced; she wasn’t sure why. “Your mother, eh? She seems rather...progressive, I must say. Does she know your heart belongs already to another?”

She shook her head.

He leaned in a little closer. “*Does it belong to another, in fact?*”

After a moment’s hesitation, she nodded.

He brushed his beard over her cheek. “That’s a right shame, love.”

With one hand, he pushed open the door. With the other, he pushed her through it.

“G’night, Riley. I’ll see you soon.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Bart waited until the sun was up before he got out of bed. He didn't think he'd slept much. His head had been too busy for sleep. He felt strange in his body, like he wasn't quite in step with the world around him. He'd lain on his back in his bed and let his thoughts have their way. The Horde, the Scorpions, Riley. So much in his head, all the time.

This was it. His last day in Signal Bend.

Once the sun was truly up and bright, he got up, showered, and dressed. Pulling his kutte over his shoulders, he paused. It was probably the last time he'd ever put this kutte on.

Alone in his dorm room, with no one to see, he sat down on the end of his bed and cried.

When he was able to pull himself together, he washed his face and left his room. He didn't really have anywhere to go this early. His job at Keyes was over, and there wasn't much on his agenda for this last day: a final check with Dom to make sure he understood his job as Intelligence Officer, making sure Omen got everything he was shipping to L.A. off intact, and then the party, where he'd say goodbye to his brothers and friends, give up his kutte, and have his ink blacked out.

Some party.

The other thing he was going to do was head to the hospital to say goodbye to Isaac.

It was far too early to do any of that now, though. So Bart went out to the bays to his baby, his '67 shovelhead, the one Havoc had helped him restore from a couple of boxes of its bones, before Bart had even been old enough to prospect. He was leaving it here, under Havoc's care. He pulled the cover off with a sweep and let it fall behind him. Damn, this bike was gorgeous. Gleaming black on white, the chrome so bright it almost cast its own light. The Horde tended to ride blacked out bikes—not a rule or anything, just a tendency. Most of the guys rode Softails or Dynas. Bart himself had ridden a Dyna until it had been shot up a couple of years ago. He'd taken some good-natured shit when he'd replaced it with the flashier Night Rod.

But this bike was both flash and substance, the complete package, all rolled up onto two wheels of fucking cool. He hated to leave it, but he

didn't want it anywhere near the Scorpions.

“Saying goodbye?”

At Havoc's voice, Bart looked over his shoulder. “Thought you'd be at the garage.”

Havoc and Bart had worked together at Keyes Implement and Repair. Once, three Horde had comprised the full staff of mechanics at Keyes: Dan, Bart, and Havoc. Dan had died in the shootout, and Don Keyes hadn't replaced him. Now, with Bart leaving, Havoc would be training new mechanics. He wanted to get Dom hired on.

Havoc walked over and picked up the cover Bart had discarded. He folded it and set it on a worktable. “Nah. Called Don, told him I needed the day.” He nodded at the shovelhead. “Wanna ride?”

Bart grinned. A ride on a bright fall morning with his best friend. Something good—sad, but good—in this shitty fucking day.

“You know it. I'll meet you round front.”

Havoc slapped him on the back, went over to unlock and raise the bay door, and ambled out through the clubhouse.

~oOo~

They rode for the rest of the morning, staying on the winding country roads. The trees were in the midst of their seasonal turning, and the sides of the road were on fire with color. The wind was crisp and carried the rich, dry smell of autumn. Except for a few straightaways on which they raced, Bart led, following a trail of familiarity and nostalgia, trying to etch this place into his head forever. Signal Bend wasn't his hometown, but it was his home.

The morning was aging into noon when they rolled back onto Main Street. As they were heading through town, Havoc goosed his throttle, making the engine of his Softail roar. Bart turned to see him pointing toward Marie's. He nodded, and they pulled into the diner's gravel lot.

It wasn't quite noon, but the diner was full. These were country people—early-to-bed-and-early-to-rise types, for the most part—and they tended to eat their meals earlier, too. When Bart and Havoc came in and headed toward the counter, the only place with seats available, the loud hum of chatter dimmed. Everybody watched them sit.

Bart knew it was him they were looking at. They all knew enough about what had gone down with the Scorpions to know that he was giving up his patch. They knew, too, that he'd done it to save the Horde. People in Signal Bend equated saving the Horde with saving the town. He'd accepted his share of handshakes and hugs over the past couple of weeks, as word spread. With the party tonight, everybody also knew that this was his last day in town.

Marie wasn't behind the counter to take their order; she was serving a lunch order to the Reverend Mortensen and his niece, Lori. Dave Bakke, Marie's husband and the diner's cook, came around from the grill, wiping his hands on his apron. He walked up to Bart. "On the house today, boys. What'll you have?"

They both ordered their usual: bacon cheeseburger, onion rings, and a vanilla Coke for Bart, and double BLT, fries, and Dr. Pepper for Havoc.

While they were waiting for their lunch, people started to come up to Bart. It wasn't long before there was what amounted to a receiving line from the counter to the door. Bart shook hands with all the men and hugged all the women. There were a few people waiting when Marie brought their lunch plates to the counter, but, seeing that their food had arrived, the others nodded at Bart and went back to their tables to let him eat in peace.

Good people. This town was itself a family.

When Bart turned back to the counter, Marie was setting a wide slice of pumpkin pie, replete with whipped cream sprinkled with nutmeg, next to Bart's Coke. Bart loved pumpkin pie. He loved Marie's pumpkin pie best of all.

"Wow, thanks, Marie."

She grabbed his hand in hers. Her hands—spotted with age, the knuckles swelling with arthritis, but fearsomely strong—always made him think of his grandma. They'd been friends, Marie and his grandma Tess.

"You're a good boy, Bart Elstad. Always have been. You do your grandma and grandpa proud. Tess, she used to worry that you kids were growing up rootless, what with your dad being Navy and all. But she was wrong. We're your roots. And don't you forget it."

She squeezed his hand hard and didn't let go. He curled his fist and squeezed back. When her eyes began to swim, Bart had to look down at his plate. No way was he going to cry out in public. No way.

When he dropped his head, she released his hand and gave it a pat. “Gonna miss you, hon. That’s all I want to say. You keep yourself safe, hear?”

He smiled. “Yes, ma’am.”

With a sniff and a nod, she picked up a full coffee pot and went out to the booths.

When they were alone, Havoc, who’d watched that exchange in silence, his BLT in his hands, set his sandwich down and took a drink of his soda.

“I fucking hate this, B-man. Hate it. It’s fucking wrong. We need you here. And they’re gonna chew you up and spit you the fuck out.”

“No choice, Hav. You know it.”

“Well, it fucking *sucks!*” He shoved his plate away.

“Joseph Mariano, you watch the way you talk in here.” Marie was back behind the counter, glaring at Havoc; she shook a large glass jar, that had once held pickles or something, and coins rattled among a few dollar bills. Taped to the glass was a small hand-lettered label: *Cuss Words Cost*. When she had his attention, she twisted the lid off the jar.

Not many people got away with using Havoc’s given name. Marie was one of them. He rolled his eyes and pulled out his wallet. When he held out a single dollar—every word had its own cost, and ‘fuck’ was a high-ticket item—she tipped the jar away.

“I heard two.”

Havoc scoffed, but he pulled out another dollar and put both in the jar. Marie closed the jar and, with a cocky little nod, went back to serving lunch.

Bart laughed, “You’re getting off easy, brother.”

Havoc went still and somber, staring down at the counter.

“‘Brother.’ Yeah. Not for much longer.”

He might as well have punched Bart in the gut. “Don’t, Hav. Come on. Always brothers, right?”

Havoc looked up. “Yeah. Yeah.”

For a few minutes, they ate quietly. Bart wanted to savor what might well be his last Marie’s meal, but he wasn’t tasting much.

As Havoc squeezed a lake of ketchup onto his plate, he asked, “You gonna stay with your girl when you get out there?”

Bart shrugged. “Haven’t thought about it. Probably the clubhouse, at least to start.”

That was a bald-faced lie. He thought about Riley constantly. He dreamt about her. He missed her so much it was like an actual wound in his chest. He had his phone in his hand five or more times a day, on the verge of calling her. But he had to stay away. At least until he understood just how much his life would change, and just what kind of shit he’d be doing and how far over the line he’d be living, he had to stay away. She wasn’t the kind of girl who belonged anywhere near that world.

The last time he’d spoken to her had been the day Isaac had woken. It should have been a great day. They’d taken him off the drugs that were keeping him under on purpose, but for days longer, he hadn’t woken. And then, as the doctors were beginning to talk to Lilli about the possibility he’d need long term care, he’d opened his eyes. Within a few hours, he was coherent and talking, and the Horde were convening at the hospital, waiting to tell the boss welcome back.

None of them had gone in to see him that day, though. Show had come out and sent them away. Isaac couldn’t move anything but his head. He could feel his arms, but had no control over them. And he was dead from the chest down. He’d called Riley, looking for comfort and focus, but when she’d cried, all he could think of was how much of his life was filled with this kind of pain. How he would fill her life with it, too.

How it had already started. The way Shiv had treated her. She’d come through that okay, but it had only happened because she hadn’t been able to stay away from Bart. Shiv had paid dearly for his offense. By the end of those five minutes in the ring, besides being generally made a bloody mess, he’d lost an eye, but when Len had the chance to kill him, he’d pulled back. That had surprised both Sam and Shiv, and Bart wasn’t sure their impression of the Horde’s restraint had been favorable, even though it meant Shiv’s life. The Scorpions went hard in everything. That’s what Bart would be bringing Riley into.

He should be straight with her and tell her why he’d backed away. It had been two weeks since they’d spoken, and more than a week since she’d even tried to contact him. He knew he was being a complete dick. But he didn’t know how to tell her why, and he wasn’t ready to make a clean break. He wanted her. Fuck, he really did. If he could have her, he wanted her. He

had to figure out how. He knew that backing away without a word risked her giving up and moving on, but he couldn't seem to do anything else.

He'd said nothing to anyone about Riley since she'd left, and everyone had been too preoccupied to ask. It wasn't like they were guys who sat around talking about their relationships and their feelings. Until now, apparently.

Havoc had stopped in the middle of making his ketchup lake, the bottle still upended in his hand; he gave Bart a sharp look.

"That over already?"

"No. I don't know. I need to know what I'm getting myself into before I pull her into it, too."

Nodding, Havoc finished with the ketchup and set the bottle down. "Smart. Chicks complicate everything, anyway."

Bart felt emptiness rolling up through him. He closed his eyes and pushed it away.

~oOo~

When Bart went into the hospital, he was alone. He and Havoc had parted ways at Marie's; he wanted to be on his own for this.

Normally, when a brother was down, there would always be Horde at the hospital, usually more than one. But Bart hadn't seen Isaac since he'd been awake. No one had, except Show. Isaac wanted them away, and they'd stayed away.

Bart didn't know if he'd have left Signal Bend without seeing him, even if that had been Isaac's wish. He didn't think so, even if it meant pissing Isaac off. But Show had told him that Bart was leaving, and he wanted to see Bart before he left.

So he was here, on his own.

The door to Isaac's room was closed. They'd finally moved him from the ICU a week ago. Bart figured that was a good sign, but he didn't know enough to be sure. Isaac and Lilli had turned inward, only letting Show very far in. Show's updates to the Horde were broad-strokes, but his demeanor was always somber when he talked about Isaac. So Bart figured 'good' was relative.

He didn't know whether to knock or just go on, or to wait for somebody to come out, or what. As he stood there undecided, the door

opened, and two doctors came out. One of them nodded at Bart as the moved past. They'd left the door open, so Bart stepped to the threshold. He stopped there, though, when he saw Lilli leaning over the bed, brushing her hand over Isaac's face. Her face was close to his, and she was talking. Bart could hear her voice but not her words, and he didn't try. After a second, he cleared his throat.

Still leaning over the bed, Lilli looked toward the door. When she saw Bart, she smiled.

"Hey, bud. Come in."

He came in, and she walked over and hugged him. She looked a lot older than she had a month ago. Or not older, exactly. Just weary beyond measure. "I'll leave you two alone for a few minutes. Don't go without seeing me, though, okay?"

He nodded, and she turned back to the bed. "I'll be back in five, love." Bart saw Isaac's head move slightly in a nod.

Then Lilli was gone, and Bart stood where he was and took in the state of his President.

He was flat on his back. The bizarre contraption he'd been bolted into the first, and last, time Bart had seen him here was gone, but now he was in some kind of rigid brace. His legs were enveloped in what looked like thick, vinyl pants. There were still machines everywhere, though not as many as before.

It looked like Lilli had washed and braided his hair; the braid lay across his pillow. His beard was growing back in, and that was good. Bart thought without that beard and braid, Isaac would be unrecognizable. He'd lost forty pounds in the month since he'd been shot. At least.

Bart swallowed back the thickness in his throat and stepped up to the bed.

Isaac looked Bart straight in the eye. Those vivid, intense green eyes that could practically cut a man in half. “Bartholomew.” His naturally deep, gruff voice had lost its strength and gained an even heavier rasp.

Bartholomew was the name on his birth certificate, but no one in his entire life, to his knowledge, had ever called him that, not even the people who’d given him the name, except Isaac. Bart swallowed again and blinked hard.

“Hey, boss.”

Isaac shook his head. “Not anymore.”

Bart couldn’t find his voice. After a long, empty space, he cleared his throat. “I didn’t know what else to do. Sorry if I fucked up.” His own voice was barely a whisper.

Again, Isaac shook his head. “You saved the club. It’s me who’s sorry. I let you down.”

Bart actually gasped in surprise. “What? No!”

“Yeah. I let you down. I let everybody down. Took us straight down this shithole and never could figure a way out.”

“No, boss. No.” He didn’t know what else to say, so he said no more.

Finally, Isaac asked, “You going to the girl? Riley?”

Bart meant to laugh, but it came out a sob, and then he was fighting tears hard. He couldn’t cry in front of Isaac. He did not want to be a pussy in front of Isaac. But the tears came anyway. “I don’t know. I’m not sure what I signed on for with the Scorpions. I don’t want her hurt.”

When Bart had blinked away the errant tears, he saw something that astonished him: a tear running from Isaac’s eye down his temple. Just that one. “Men like us need something to balance out the bad, or we just go wrong. Like Vic. Or Howler, or half the Scorps. Loving Lilli changed my life.” He stopped and closed his eyes. When he opened them, something in his eyes had changed. “Right now, without her, I guess I’d be looking for my way out. But I’ll stick around, even in this dead body, because of her and Gia. I’m not so sure that’s a good thing, but it’s a true one.”

He grabbed Isaac’s hand where it lay at his side. “I love you, boss.” The words were out through his clenched throat before he’d even thought about them.

Isaac shocked the hell out of him by grabbing back, and Bart jerked his eyes down to see that big paw clenched on his fist. Last he'd heard, Isaac could feel his hands and arms but not move them.

“I love you, brother. You watch your back. Never say die, right?”

“Never say die.”

~oOo~

When he left Isaac's room, he had to stop and lean against the hallway wall and get control of himself, his face in his hands. Once he thought he'd found composure, he dropped his hands to see Lilli standing in front of him, smiling a little. Even tired and gaunt as she was—she'd dropped a lot of weight, too, this month—she was beautiful.

“He grabbed my hand.”

Her smile got bigger. “Yeah. That's new this morning. I woke up to that.”

“That mean—”

She cut him off with a brusque wave of her hand. “It doesn't mean anything yet, except he's healing. They thought he'd get movement back in his hands and arms, since he had feeling in them. He still can't feel anything from his breastbone down. They say it's still too early to say for sure, but every day he fails their tests, the chance gets fainter.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. I killed that fat old fuck way too fast.”

“I'm so sorry, Lilli.”

She shook her head. “I'm glad you came to see him. He's pretty eaten up about you going.”

Bart nodded, feeling that stupid fucking knot in his throat again. “Me, too.”

She surprised him by wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing his cheek. “Take care of yourself, bud. We love you.”

~oOo~

When he got back to the clubhouse, he parked the shovelhead in the bay and replaced its cover. Before he did so, he bent down and kissed the

gas tank. He'd resisted the urge for a few seconds and then thought, what the hell. He was alone back here.

Then he spent the rest of the afternoon with Dom, making sure he was good to go as Intelligence Officer. He was. Dom was the only other Horde who knew code, and thus the only one who really could take over for Bart. But he'd never done much hacking. So Bart had spent the month teaching him how to get around in the dark spaces of the virtual world. Dom was a pretty quick study, and now his hacking skills were okay. He'd keep improving, though, and Bart would keep tabs on his progress and help as he could.

The party that night was pretty subdued, at least at first. Bart was going to leave early, put a hundred miles or so between him and Signal Bend before he bedded down for the night. He didn't want to pass out and wake up in the morning with a rotted melon for a head and then have to climb over his unconscious brothers to leave town. That thought depressed him far more than the thought of leaving while the party was still cooking.

He was doing okay, drinking, playing pool with Havoc, and laughing with his brothers. Then Tony, the Horde's tattoo guy, came in. He'd been invited to party, but he was there with a purpose, too, and the whole tone of the night changed. Bart knew that, for all intents and purposes, his farewell party had just become a wake. His life as a member of the Night Horde MC was over.

He swallowed the rest of his beer down, left the bottle on the pool table, and headed straight for Tony. Show grabbed his arm.

"No rush, brother."

"No, Show. He's here. Let's just do it. Get it over with."

Show stared hard at him, then nodded and let go of his arm. Bart walked up and held his hand out to Tony. "Hey, man. If you don't mind, let's take care of business first, party later?"

Tony, a short, heavy guy with ink on almost all of his visible skin, nodded. "Sure, Bart. Up to you. Where should we set up?"

"Right out here, Tony." Show gestured at the ratty old recliner in a corner of the room. Len leaned over to Doogie, one of the new Prospects, and Doogie pulled the chair forward into the room. They were making this inking a kind of ritual. What Bart was doing had never been done before. He wasn't being excommunicated. He'd offered himself up. But his ink and

his kutte had to go. If he stepped foot in Scorpions territory with either, they'd kill him on sight.

The only ink he had that was specific to the Horde was the club name inked across his stomach. That was the mark they all shared. His steel horse, though to him it signified the club, was not a specific symbol, and so he could keep that, for which he was no end of glad.

So he took off his kutte—and then he realized that this was it. He'd just taken it off for the last time. He held it and stared down at it, feeling the pebbled leather in his hands. Seeing the fraying on the Flaming Mane, showing its years of daily wear. He turned it over and saw the smooth patches on the leather, from his habit of holding it at the bottom of the placket. The newest patch, brighter than the rest, over the left breast pocket, that read *Never Say Die*. They'd all gotten that patch after the end of Lawrence Ellis.

This kutte was like a road map of his life.

There was a loud, wet crash, and Bart looked up to see Havoc storming out of the room, and broken glass scattered at the base of a wall, beer running down the dark paneling.

He folded the leather reverently and handed it to Show, who took it from him with the same reverence. Then he pulled his t-shirt off and sat down in the recliner, circled by his brothers—most of them—and his friends. He pushed back so that he was stretched out and put his hands under his head.

Tony was a quality artist who'd worked with the club for years. He understood the life. He knew what ink meant. And he was serious as he began the somber work of eliminating Bart's connection to the Horde.

It hurt like a son of a bitch—it hadn't hurt anything like this to get the ink in the first place. But Bart was glad for the pain. It seemed right that his gut felt torn up on the outside like it felt torn up on the inside. He didn't talk. No one talked. For as long as it took to remove the Horde from Bart's life, the clubhouse was silent but for the hum and buzz of the tattoo machine.

When it was done, and Tony had finished wiping the ink and blood from Bart's stomach, he finally looked down. Tony had done him a solid. What he'd left in place of the Horde's name was a perfectly symmetrical, perfectly lined black arch. It didn't look like an erasure. It looked like a work in progress.

~oOo~

After that, Bart was just ready to go. He was being sliced apart from the inside, and he had to get away. Within half an hour of Tony covering the fresh ink, Bart was in his dorm room, hoisting his backpack on his back. He was wearing a hoodie and a plain black leather jacket. He felt naked. No, worse. He felt skinless.

He walked out into the Hall—it was empty. That spun him for a minute, but he walked on through and went out the front door. Everybody was there, standing near his bike. Everybody but Havoc. Bart stopped and looked around. No. He wasn't out here. Goddammit.

He turned, thinking he'd go hunt Havoc down, but then thought better of it. If he couldn't deal, he couldn't deal. Bart headed toward his bike.

“Hold up, asshole.”

Bart turned again and saw his friend coming through the front door. He walked up to Bart and held out his hand. “Here.” A pendant on a chain dropped and dangled from his closed fist.

Bart grinned. “Jewelry? Are we, like, going steady or something?”

“Fuck you. It's St. Christopher. Patron saint of travelers. He got defrocked or unsainted or something, I guess, but anyway. It was my granddad's. He wore it in the war.”

Bart stared down at the silver circle glinting in the lot lights as it swung from his friend's hand.

Havoc pushed his fist at him. “Will you fuckin' take it?”

Bart took it and clutched it tight in his own fist. “Thank you, brother.”

Havoc pulled him into a hard hug. “Always brothers.”

Stepping back, Bart pulled the medallion's chain over his head. Then he turned to finish the walk to his bike. Each of his brothers hugged him hard in turn. Show was last. As they stepped back from each other, Show said, “We always got your back, brother. You remember that.”

He nodded and mounted his bike.

When he pulled out of the lot, the crowd of his friends and brothers—his roots—parted and made two straight lines, and he rode away through a corridor of family.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Riley was sitting around a large table with the rest of the cast. The director, Gerry Blakely, sat at the head of the table. Ensconced in armchairs around the perimeter of the space were Stan and the other producers, studio executives, and various other higher-ups, there to monitor the progress of the project.

The cast was dominated by men, most of them, especially those in secondary roles, quite rough-around-the-edges sorts. She figured the table looked a little bit like a super-size version of the Horde's table. The thought made her feel melancholy, and that was a problem.

This was the second full table read for the film, which was still titled simply *Signal Bend*. They were scheduled to begin principal filming in just under a week, which was cutting it close. There really was no time for problems. There had been some fuss after the first read-through. The script had gone back for minor revision, and Riley had been called in to meet with Gerry and Stan—because she was the problem.

She knew she was the problem. She could feel it at the first read, and she was still feeling it today. She was reading Lilli far too soft. She knew it, she could feel it, but she couldn't shake it. Her reading was throwing the whole table off, and she could feel that, too. The film wasn't a romance, the focus was on the club and the town, but the Lilli and Isaac relationship was still its heart, and she was turning Lilli into a wilting flower.

Sitting at this table, living a story set in Signal Bend, trying to be Lilli, responding to Tanner as Isaac, and, worst of all, watching Peter be Bart, just made Riley so damn sad. It had been nearly a month now since she'd heard from Bart. No word at all. He'd turned his back, leaving her to wonder until time made it obvious. She was hurt and angry and so damn sad. She had the absolute worst taste in men. Just the worst. And the worst part was how much time she'd been spending wondering how she'd screwed up and made him turn away. She'd played their last conversation over and over in her head, but she just couldn't understand.

No, that was wrong. The worst part was that she loved him. Still. She'd only been with him for a week, but she'd fallen hard in that time, and she hadn't been able to get back up.

She didn't want to make this film anymore. She was under contract, and she had never been one to flake out on the job, but she could not get into Lilli's head. She didn't *want* to be in Lilli's head. With everything Lilli and Isaac were dealing right now, it felt unconscionable to be playing make-believe with their real lives. It felt disloyal.

But she was trying. She really was. At the moment, she and Tanner were reading an emotional scene, where Lilli tells Isaac she's pregnant. She had her lines down—she always had her lines down early—so she was barely looking at the script, mostly just to keep up with the page turns. Tanner seemed to have his lines down pretty well, too.

"It's the wrong time, Isaac. There's too much going on, too much at stake." She tried to be Lilli saying the words.

Tanner leaned in close and grabbed Riley's arms. His eyes were ablaze. He was totally in the zone. "It's the right time. It's the future, and we need that. We need to see it. I won't let anything happen to my family. I promise you that. I love you, Sport."

Riley jerked away. "Fuck! Tanner, will you *stop* with that crap?"

Everybody at the table reacted in frustration, collapsing back in their chairs or slamming their pages down. Gerry, the director, leaned forward. "What is it now, Riley?"

She brandished her script, waving it at Tanner, then at Gerry, and again at Tanner. "This 'Sport' crap. The script says, 'Lilli.' L-I-L-L-I. Read your fucking lines!"

Still speaking in the rural Missouri accent he'd taken on for the role—which was a pretty solid rendition of Isaac's speech, if not quite his timbre—Tanner said, "I'm creatin' a character, Riley. It's how it works."

"It's a violation. It's practically obscene."

Gerry sighed and dropped his half-lens reading glasses to the table. "Okay, everybody. That's lunch. Back here in an hour, please, and we'll pick up where we left off." He turned back to Riley and Tanner. "Except you two. You two come with me. Now." He pushed away and stood, then walked to the door without a backward glance. Riley stood, and then Tanner, and they followed him.

He led them into a small, nondescript room with a round table surrounded by six chairs. A mini conference room, she guessed. When they were all in, Gerry closed the door and leaned back on it, his arms crossed.

He was a slight guy, short and thin, about fifty or so, but the look he turned on Riley chilled her through.

“I don’t give a fiery *fuck* what is offending your delicate sensibilities, missy. I do not have time to play nursemaid to your fucking neurosis or whatever is wrong with that little fucking head. We start filming in six days, and I do not have the time or fucking money to find myself another Lilli. If I did, fucking security would be carrying your tiny ass out and I wouldn’t have to be having this fucking conversation at all. I didn’t want you. You are not the caliber of actress I wanted in this role. I was fucking overruled. But if you fuck this project up, then you and I will have the kind of long term trouble that could fuck your career up and good. Do you understand what I am fucking telling you?”

Riley had stood through that diatribe feeling smaller and smaller until she thought she’d just disappear. She wanted to disappear. In all her years in this business—her whole life—she’d never been berated like that. She was the consummate professional, always with her lines memorized, always happy to take a note, always willing to do another take, to give more. That was her reputation, and she’d worked hard to grow and maintain it. The upside to all that hard work was that people were nice to her.

She nodded meekly, afraid to speak, lest she cry in front of these men.

“Fuck. Okay. The two of you stay in this fucking room until you can fucking find some fucking chemistry. Understand?” Without waiting for an answer from either of them, Gerry turned, yanked the door open and stormed off, slamming the door behind him. They heard a muffled “FUCK!” as he apparently continued storming his way down the hall.

Riley stood where she was, staring at the door. Tanner rolled a chair to the side and sat on the edge of the table and crossed his arms.

He sighed. “You need to get out of your head, Riley. We have the connection. You know it and I know it. It was there for the screen test. These are deep waters you’re in now.” He was still speaking in his Isaac accent.

She was starting to really hate him, and that feeling shook off her shock. Spinning on her heel, she snapped, “God! Don’t talk to me like the only thing I’ve done is summer stock! I know the business! I know my job!”

“Yeah? Then why are you makin’ such a mess of it?”

“It’s you! You and the creepy way you keep trying to call me Sport. That’s just so fucked up.”

He stood straight, towering over her. “I’m not calling *you* Sport, Isaac is calling *Lilli* Sport. Those are the parts we’re playing—and that is what he calls her.”

“That’s why it’s so fucked up! That’s their thing, and they didn’t give it to us. It’s hard enough to do this knowing everything they’re going through without tramping all over their private stuff!”

“Riley, it’s a part. A job. That’s all. And they signed on for this. Why do you care so much what they think?”

“You are such an asshole. Why *don’t* you care?”

“P’rhaps because I didn’t spread my legs and turn biker bitch the moment we got to Signal Bend!” He’d dropped the accent all at once and shouted at her in his natural British lilt.

Shocked and enraged, Riley wound up and swung at him, her hand open, aiming to slap him as hard as she was able. But he caught her wrist as she swung, and then, before she could react or even fully understand what he was doing, he’d crushed her to his body and dropped his mouth hard onto hers, taking advantage of the shock that had left her gaping to push his tongue in.

She fought him, pushing at his chest, trying to turn her head, but he was much bigger and stronger than she was. She worked out, and she knew something about several different martial arts, but she was still only a hundred pounds—ninety-nine, actually—and had been taken unawares.

He didn’t let her up, and finally she stopped fighting. They would do a lot more than kiss soon, assuming Gerry didn’t decide to fire her after all. There was a pretty long love scene, in which they would be all but nude, and there were a few intensely romantic scenes. So she might as well get comfortable kissing him. It wasn’t like there was any reason she should be feeling as guilty as she was.

As soon as she relaxed, Tanner pulled back. He smiled a little.

“There. Have you found your inner Debra Winger?”

Feeling a little dazed, she didn’t understand. “What?”

Still holding her, now with her hands at ease on his shoulders, he said, “Say the lines.”

She did, and she realized that she could feel Lilli in the words. “It’s the wrong time, Isaac. There’s too much going on, too much at stake.”

“It’s the right time. It’s the future, and we need that. We need to see it. I won’t let anything happen to my family. I promise you that. I love you, Lilli.”

She smiled when he said Lilli’s name. “And I love you. But don’t make a promise like that. A promise like that is a lie.”

Tanner moved closer, his mouth hovering over Riley’s. “It’s not, Lilli. We’re that promise—you and me and that little piece of us inside you. We’re the truth.”

Tanner’s—no, Isaac’s—mouth came down on Riley’s—no, Lilli’s—mouth, and she hooked her arms around his neck and kissed him with abandon.

When the cast reconvened at the table, the rest of the read-through went off seamlessly, and everyone applauded as Tanner spoke the last line.

~oOo~

She came home near dusk to an empty house. She was hardly ever alone in her own house for more than a couple of hours before bedtime. Somebody was usually around—Marta or Trevor, her mother or Pru, and usually more than one. But Marta had taken a long weekend off to travel to Mexico for her nephew’s wedding. Pru had a date. Trevor was probably clubbing with Dante. And Eleanor had been staying away a lot more in the past week or so, since Riley had screamed at her.

She’d come back from Signal Bend intending to make a change, to be more active in her own life. Then she’d gotten home and had fallen quickly into her old patterns. But she hadn’t lost the new way those old patterns had chafed at her, and her mother’s attempts to get her into bed with Tanner had finally impelled Riley to stand up and build the boundary she wanted. She’d needed to literally scream to get her mother to shut up long enough to hear her. Then Eleanor had stomped off in a huff.

She was still pouting, but she had begun to back out and let Riley make her decisions. Riley knew her mother was waiting for her to fall on her face. And maybe she would—she was a novice at her own life, and she was scared out of her mind. Every time Pru showed her something about the way her life worked, every time she explained the process that went into something as simple as booking a dinner reservation, Riley got a little more scared. But she knew that she’d get the hang of it. She had to—now that she

understood how naïve, how fucking child-like, she'd been all these years, she was humiliated. No wonder the world still thought of her as a teenager.

She'd been afraid that failing at this job would be the thing that would have her mother crowing in triumph, proving that Riley couldn't handle things on her own. But today, she'd found her character. She could be Lilli. She could be the right Lilli. And she had Tanner to thank for it, even though she knew he'd had ulterior motives. He was still trying to get in her pants—he'd really laid it on trying to get her to go out with him after the read-through, to 'celebrate'—and she had to admit she was beginning to consider having a little backlot fling with him, if only to get her head on straight about Bart being over. Even though it would prove her mother right, she was still turning the idea over in her head. But the truth was, he just didn't really do it for her. Even when he wasn't being a douche, he didn't really appeal.

And she felt guilty even thinking about it. That was stupid. She was clearly available. She hadn't meant enough to Bart that he could even be bothered to end it cleanly. There was no reason at all she should feel guilty about kissing Tanner, on screen or off, or about considering sleeping with him. But she did. She felt guilty, and that made her feel lonely.

She'd been looking forward to a rare evening in her empty house, but now that she was alone in it, she just felt sad.

She went to her room and changed out of the clothes she'd gone to work in. Despite the new changes she was trying to make, when she left the house she still always dressed for the possibility that she would be photographed—which was the case much more often than not. But now that she was safely home, she didn't need the costume. She stripped to her skin and pulled a long-sleeved t-shirt dress over her bare body. Then she went into the bathroom, washed the makeup off her face, and looped her hair into a loose ponytail. Tonight was a wine and book night. She supposed she should eat, too, so she'd see if whatever Trevor had marked for her dinner seemed interesting at all. It probably wouldn't; dinner was usually the lightest meal Riley ate.

Still thinking about Bart but trying to push him aside, she padded to the kitchen and opened the fridge. Trevor had prepared a plate of fruits and nuts—what a surprise. She rolled her eyes and closed the door, then pulled a bottle of pinot grigio from the wine cooler next to the fridge. She poured

herself a big glass, then went to the living room and tucked herself into her sofa with her wine and her iPad.

The wall facing the sofa was almost all window, leading out onto the terrace. In mid-fall, even in Southern California, it was too chilly to be outside tonight, but still she loved the view. Despite the reflection cast by the lamp next to her, the night view of the city below, twinkling and flaring in so many colors, entranced her. She set her iPad in her lap and stared out the window, thinking and sipping her wine.

Why couldn't he at least just tell her he was done? She felt weak and needy about it, but she did, in fact, need some kind of closure. Without it, a little voice camped out in her head, finding ridiculous reasons to hold out some hope—or to find reasons to feel guilty, to wonder if he needed her and couldn't get to her. It was all absurd. She wanted that voice to shut up.

She finished her wine and looked down at her iPad. She woke it up, intending to open her bookshelf and select one of the books she'd been reading—maybe the spy thriller for tonight. Instead, she tapped the Messages icon and scrolled to Bart's name. It had been weeks now since she'd even tried to contact him, but she just needed to know. She just needed him to say he didn't want her. Then she'd be able to quiet this constant drone of loneliness.

In her head, she wrote the sentence, *I just need to know*. On the screen, she typed the letter "I," then paused, her fingers hovering over the touchscreen keyboard.

Wait! What the fuck was she doing? Had she no pride at all? Was she *trying* to give him more reason to laugh at her? Or roll his eyes? No. No way. She was stronger than this. She didn't need him to give her closure. She could simply close that door herself. She canceled the message.

Except she didn't. She'd accidentally hit "send" instead. She stared at the screen in horror as the message popped up in the thread. Only the letter "I."

"Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Riley sat there, feeling embarrassed and anxious, waiting to see if he would respond in any way. No. After five or ten minutes, she set the iPad aside and went to refill her glass. When she came back to the sofa, she finally opened her book and started to read, making a Herculean mental effort to ignore this fresh humiliation and close the door on what had, in the

end, been nothing more than a fling that she'd allowed to take too much hold over her heart.

~oOo~

By the bottom of her second glass, she was doing pretty well at not thinking about Bart or that stupid message she'd sent. The book was good, and she was feeling warm and cozy, her knees and elbows tingling pleasantly, the way they did when she got tipsy. She thought about getting up for another glass, but she'd pulled the cashmere throw over her legs a while before, and she wasn't inclined to get up. She even thought she might just sleep here on the couch tonight, next to the glittering city. It was her couch, her house. She could do what she wanted. She settled in a little deeper and swiped her finger across the screen, turning the page.

She was starting to drowse and lose the words she was reading when her doorbell chimed. She sat up and looked down to check the time on her iPad, but it had gone to sleep—so she must have, as well. The doorbell chimed again, twice this time, and she woke up the screen to check. Not even nine o'clock. Oh, she was a wild one tonight. She tossed back the throw and went to her door. She hardly ever answered her own door. And people all but never rang unexpectedly.

She turned the lock and opened the door, not even thinking to check the window in it first.

Bart was standing on the other side.

He smiled crookedly. "Hey, princess."

CHAPTER TWENTY

“What—what are you—what?”

Riley looked seriously confused—and maybe a little drunk. She also looked gorgeous, so tiny, standing there barefoot, in her loose, dark blue... shirt? Dress? He wasn't sure. Her hair was mussed and messily tied up. And dark brown. After the initial shock, Bart saw how much it suited her.

Her eyes narrowing, she let go of the door and took several steps back, as if she were backing away from him. “Why—how—why are you here?”

He ignored the distinct lack of welcome in her eyes and stepped over her threshold. “I missed you, babe. We need to talk.”

Her laugh was tinged with acid. “Are you high? Turn around and get the fuck out of my house.”

He hadn't expected anything else. Hoped, maybe, but he'd known he had no right to expect anything but anger from her. He'd been a total dick. No—it wasn't even that. He'd been a coward. But he wanted to try to make it right if he could. He needed to try. He needed to fill the hole in his chest. Fuck, he'd missed her so much.

“No. Please, Riley. I'm sorry. I've been such a dick. But let me try to explain. Then I'll go, if that's what you still want. But I told you the truth when I told you I was in love with you. I still am.”

She snorted in derision and crossed her arms. From across her entryway, he could see her pulse beating in her throat.

“I know. Haven't been acting like it. But I swear, babe. It's true. If you feel anything like you did in Signal Bend, then hear me out. Please.”

He listened to the drum of his own pulse in his ears as she stared him down. Finally, she asked, “What are you even doing here?” Her voice was softer in the question, and he felt some ember of hope that she'd let him try to explain.

“That's what I want to talk to you about. Can I?”

After another long, motionless silence, she nodded. Then she turned and walked into the house. Nearly faint with relief, he followed.

He'd been in town for a week. Coming into the Scorpions clubhouse, patched in before he'd even met his new brothers, had been a surreal experience—it still was a surreal experience. There'd been a party

the night he arrived, at which he was presented with his new kutte, and at which he'd had to show that his Horde ink at been blacked out—and then they'd inked him. The whole night had been a weird concoction of welcome and hostility, and he'd come to understand that he was being forced down the L.A. charter's throat.

In the week since that night, he'd made an effort to find his place and see these men as his brothers and to show them he was ready and steady, that his ties to the Horde were broken. But inside, he felt like he was falling apart. He wouldn't have said he could have missed Riley more, but once he was in the same city with her, and feeling homesick as all fuck, she was basically all he thought about.

Still, though, he'd been staying away, trying to get a grip on what it meant to be a Scorpion, how much risk their business put their loved ones in. Before he went to her—if he went to her—he'd needed to be sure he could keep her out of harm's way. He still wasn't sure.

But then he'd gotten her text. Just one letter, "I," and nothing more. He'd stared at his phone for a long time, waiting, hoping to get another message, one that finished the thought, but that single letter was all he had. The more he'd stared at it, the more it had seemed like a complete message in itself—an assertion, a question, a demand, a plea, all at once. And then he couldn't stay away any longer. They were in the same city. She was half an hour away—less, on his bike. The distance that had for weeks seemed unspannable, even since he'd been in L.A., was suddenly insignificant, and he'd walked out of the clubhouse and ridden to her, not knowing what to expect when he saw her, but sure he had no right to expect a welcome.

But here he was, following her into her—spectacular—home. The space was open and airy, seeming bright even with few lights on and the wall of windows black with night. She walked through the living room to the kitchen; there was no discernable break in the space from one room to the other. He saw an empty wine glass and an iPad sitting on a sleek glass and wood table, next to a long, white leather sofa.

The view out those windows was breathtaking—the whole of the city spread out at the foot of the hills, the lights seeming to move and sway with life. Jesus.

She switched on the lights in the kitchen, and the space blazed bright. There was a long dining table next to the window wall, its pale wood the same as the kitchen cabinetry. A wide island separated that eating space

from the kitchen workspace. The counters were pale grey marble. The appliances were top of the line.

She stopped behind the island, gripping the edge of the countertop in her hands as if she were using it as a shield. She looked especially small in this airy, wide space. He stopped on the other side, trying to respect the boundary she clearly wanted.

“Your house is...amazing, babe. Damn.”

She didn't really react to the compliment. Her voice without affect, she said, “Thank you. What is it that you need to say to me?”

He was going to need to do this right, not screw it up. But he was flying blind. He'd never cared so much about a woman. He didn't really know how to talk to one who was angry with him, not when he wanted to make her stop being angry.

He cleared his throat and gripped the island, unconsciously mirroring her posture. “The first thing I want to do is explain why I stayed out of touch.”

She huffed. “You can try.”

Undeterred, he went on. “A lot has changed since I saw you. I wanted to make sure you wouldn't get hurt if you were with me. I wanted to know I could keep you safe before we got started.”

“I thought we were already started.”

The light caught her eyes, and he saw that they brimmed with tears. He wanted to touch her, to hold her, to make her feel how he felt about her, and he walked around the island to her side. She took a step away, farther down the island, but only that one step. He stopped and put his hand on the grey marble, reaching toward her. “I know, babe. But you know how intense things were. They got more intense after you left. I had to understand my own life before I could risk bringing you into it.”

She blinked, and the tears overran their limits and streamed down her face. She let them, and Bart watched as they dripped daintily from her chin. He took another step, and this time she didn't move away. “I thought I was already in it. And then you were just gone. Without a word. I thought I'd done something wrong. I thought I'd been a fool.” She sobbed once, and then shook it off with angry jerk. “I thought you were laughing at me.”

“What? Riley, fuck no!” He closed the space between them and loosened her grip from the counter, wrapping his hands around hers. The

touch of her skin on his went through him like a bolt, through his arms, down his spine, and into his cock. He nearly gasped aloud.

She didn't pull away, but his touch seemed to weaken her, as if that bolt he'd felt had been energy sapped straight from her. Her head tipped down so that all he could see was the sweetly messy knot of dark hair at the back, and she whimpered quietly. Without looking up, she said, "Why didn't you just tell me?"

He had to strain to hear her. Fuck. He'd really hurt her. He'd known it, but to see her here, so small and beautiful—and so sad. Fuck.

"I didn't tell you because I'm a coward. I should have. I knew the whole time that I was being an absolute festering dick, but I didn't want to tell you what was going on and have you say you couldn't deal with it, and I couldn't talk to you without telling you. I didn't know what to do." He let go of one of her hands and lifted her chin so that she had no choice but face him. Her expression was an uneasy, unsteady blend of anger and hurt.

"I never stopped missing you. Not for a second."

Regaining some strength, she yanked her head out of his hold. "And I'm supposed to just forget what the past few weeks have felt like?" She scoffed and put her hands on his chest to push him away. Then she stopped, her eyes fixed on his chest. "This is different. Your...vest thing. It's different."

"My kutte. Yeah, it is." He wrapped his hands around her wrists and held her hands on him. "That's the other thing I need to tell you." With a breath for fortitude, he continued, "I'm not Horde anymore. I'm a Scorpion now. L.A. charter."

"What? But—you said being Horde was your life. And the Scorpions—those are the guys who...that guy who had me..." She pulled back, fighting to free her arms from his grasp, but he held on.

His throat was constricting, but he forced his voice to be strong. "I know, Riley. I need to explain. I'll go after I explain, if that's what you want."

She was still trying to pull away, and he realized that she'd underplayed how badly Shiv had scared her. Yet he held on. "Riley! Babe, please. Just hear me out."

"Then let go of me! I need some space! I can't think with you so close!"

He let her go, a little flame of hope catching in his chest. She turned and went around the island, stopping near the table, looking out through the windows at the city below.

“So say what you came here to say. How did you end up one of those animals?”

Bart stood where he was, the island between them once more, and told her. He told her everything that had happened that weekend, including what had happened to Wallace and Grady, how CJ and Vic ended up, and why the Scorpions were in Signal Bend so hot in the first place. Then he explained the bargain he’d made.

Throughout his whole, long monologue, Riley never turned from the window, and she never said a word. When he was finished, they stood silently, the wide space of the room between them, her back still to him. He watched her small body, looking for signs in her posture about what she was feeling.

At last, she turned around. “We did this? The film? It’s our fault?”

It was so far outside his own mind that he didn’t understand at first what she meant. When he did, he came around the island and went to her. He stopped a couple of feet away. “No, babe. The Horde signed up for the movie. You didn’t just jump down our throats. We brought it on. We thought it would help the town. And it did. But everything has a dark side, too, you know? But this isn’t Hollywood’s fault.”

“It’s mine, though. That guy was trying to take pictures of us, because of my shit with Devon. He’s dead because of me. Wallace, too.” She took a shaky breath. “God!”

Unable to stand there and let her deal with this on her own, Bart pulled her close. She let him, leaning into him at once, and he held her as tightly as he could without hurting her, bending down to press his lips to her head. “Don’t, Riley,” he whispered against her hair. “It’s not on you. None of it is on you.”

Her face tucked into his kutte, her voice muffled by the new leather, she asked, “How can you say that?”

“Because it’s on me. The Horde and the Scorpions. What my life is. This is what my life is. Especially now.”

As soon as he said the words, he knew that he had to go. He loved her—fuck, he *needed* her—but he couldn’t pull her into this world. As a Scorpion, even if they left him in the clubhouse, at his computer, he was

outright outlaw. The L.A. charter ran a huge, well-known custom bike shop, and that was their work of record, but what they really did was run drugs and guns, full time and in quantity.

The Horde had clung to a Robin Hood philosophy of saving the poor and downtrodden, but Bart had always known that was a rationalization as much as it was the truth. Still, they had done actual good, and they had kept Signal Bend together. They still were.

The Scorpions, though, they were in it for the jack. Pure and simple and no joke. And they made it in stacks.

So far, the L.A. Scorps seemed like they could be decent guys, for the most part. They were definitely mellower and just in general more socially acceptable than Sam's crew, but still, they were not the Horde. The vibe in the clubhouse befit men who routinely spent their waking hours on the wrong side of the law and not infrequently on the edge between life and death. It was wilder, rougher, and louder than the usually laid-back atmosphere in the Horde house. The women were more plentiful and harder around the edges. Bart could not imagine delicately beautiful little Riley ever stepping foot into that space. Actually, he could imagine it. He had—he had nightmares about it.

He put his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her away. He couldn't do it. He couldn't make her life what it would be with him. "I'm gonna go, Riley. I love you. I really do. Too much to make you part of what my life is now." He bent down and kissed her forehead.

When he started to turn away, his chest heavy, she grabbed his arm, her manicured nails hooking into his hoodie. "What? Stop! You can't come here and lay all this on me and then just disappear again. You arrogant bastard—who are you to decide what's right for me? Fuck, I am so tired of people treating me like a child!"

"Babe, you don't understand—"

"I do understand. I'm not a moron. I get it. You've done bad stuff. Well, *duh!* You moved crystal meth. It's not like the whole world doesn't know that, you know. I don't care about drugs. People should be able to fuck up their bodies any way they want, and they will, illegal or not. I watched Devon do what he did to himself, and to me, and to everybody else who loved him, and I never thought, 'oh those terrible people who sold him drugs.' He made his choices. We all make our choices."

She let go of his hoodie and crossed her arms. “You’ve killed people. I knew that. It doesn’t surprise me that you’ve killed more people than just those guys in the shootout. Yeah, it’s scary. But okay. I know you, or I feel like I do. I feel like I know what’s important to know about you. Maybe I *am* being a moron, but I feel it. And I don’t believe you go around randomly killing people for the fun of it. I don’t feel like I have to keep a knife under my pillow in case you go into a sudden homicidal frenzy. The opposite, actually. I thought about this when I was still in Signal Bend. Who you are makes me feel *safer*.”

He shook his head. She was turning what he was into some kind of romantic fantasy—and she didn’t know half what she thought she did about the things he and the Horde had done, or what had happened to the people they loved. She never would. “It shouldn’t. Riley, we have enemies. Not all of our enemies follow the code we do. Some of them go for families first. Like what happened to Lilli. And to Show’s daughter. It’s all so much worse than it is in the script. You have no idea how much danger you could be in.”

“You keep saying it was so much worse, that I have no idea. What really happened?”

“No. I can’t tell you. It’s not for me to say. But I can’t put you in that situation.”

She grunted in frustration and stomped her bare foot. He saw her breasts move as she stomped and realized she wasn’t wearing a bra. Even in the midst of the argument, his cock, at half-mast since he’d first touched her, went rigid.

But she was shouting now, and he forced his focus away from the pulse in his groin.

“What makes you think you can put me *anywhere*? Or *keep* me from somewhere? Or even keep me safe whether you stay or go?”

“Riley...”

“No! Shut up!” She hit him with the flats of her palms, catching his gut and making him grunt a little at the lingering sting there. “You’re not a god, in charge of where I go or what I do or whether I live or die or *anything*. You told me who you are and what you do. I get to decide whether I’m okay with it. If you don’t want to be with me, that’s one thing, but don’t pull this noble bullshit like you’re doing me some big favor when what you’re really doing is trying to make decisions about MY FUCKING LIFE!”

He laughed. He couldn't help it. He loved this feisty side of her. Maybe it was even that, watching her take on Isaac that first night they were together, that had made him fall so hard for her. So small, so delicate—she made him want to pull her close, shelter her. But piss her off, and she was a fearless spitfire.

“Don't laugh! Asshole!” She crossed her arms.

“I'm sorry, babe. I just—God, I love you.” He settled down and put his hands around her upper arms. “I really love you. And you're right. It's your choice. I want to be with you, if you think you can handle what that means. If you can, I'll do everything in my power to keep my shit out of your way.”

She glowered at him for a minute, her eyes boring into his, obviously unconvinced. He didn't look away. Then she huffed. “I'm not sure I completely understand what it means. But I understand how I feel. And I love you, too. I want to be with you. Like you said before—we'll work it out.”

“Riley, are you sure? You need to—oof.”

She'd socked him in the gut. “Shut. Up. I decide what I need.” She grabbed his kutte in both hands, high up on his chest, and pulled. He bent down until his nose brushed hers. “Just fucking kiss me, okay?”

He did as she asked, and oh, shit, he really had missed her. As soon as their lips met, she released his kutte and looped her arms around his neck, pulling herself as close as she could get. He put his hands on her ass and lifted her up until she could wrap her legs around his hips.

Sweet Jesus, she was naked under her long t-shirt.

He hadn't been with anyone since he'd last been with her—it had caused talk in his new clubhouse, but he didn't want to be with anybody else, and he didn't want to fuck things up with her any more than he already had. Instead, he'd drunk himself stupid every night, as cover and because it felt better to be drunk.

Right now, with her twined around him, he was so fucking glad he hadn't boned some random skank, and he was so fucking horny. Groaning into her mouth, he kissed her harder and clutched her more tightly, until he could feel her heat against his crotch. Her hands were knotted in his hair, pulling, holding his head firmly to hers.

Consumed with a need so intense it felt like literal fire in his loins, he turned, thinking he needed to get her to bed. But he didn't know where

her bed was. In his impatient confusion, he faltered, and his feet tangled in the legs of a dining chair. He kicked it away, and then his thigh bumped up against the smooth edge of her long, sleek table. He turned to face the table and tore his mouth from hers.

“I need you right now, babe. Right now. I want you on this table.”

Her eyes were unfocused and heavy-lidded, and her parted, panting mouth was already swollen from the heat of their kiss. She nodded and thrust against him with an incredibly sexy little moan.

Trying to think like a gentleman and not a rutting boar, he nodded to the windows. “Can anybody see in?”

Her eyes focused and she squirmed until he sat her down on the table, sorry to lose the hot pressure of her pussy against his crotch. She grinned and pulled her dress thing up over her head, throwing it to the side. She got some good air—it landed over one of the bar stools at the island.

“Unless they’re in a helicopter or standing out on the terrace, no.”

At the thought of somebody lurking on her terrace, Bart turned and squinted. With all the lights on in the kitchen, the glass made a better mirror than window; there wasn’t much he could see outside. But he could see their reflection—her small, naked body, with her legs still hooked around his thighs, his much larger body, still armored in leather and denim, leaning over her.

Good Christ, what a sight.

She pulled on his kutte, and he turned back to meet her soft green eyes. “Hey—if they’re out there, let ‘em look. I don’t care. I don’t care anymore. I’m tired of always being afraid somebody will see me actually living a real life. Since I went to Signal Bend, and since I’ve been home, I realized that in my entire life, I’ve never been able to just be a person. My mom wanted me to be famous. I don’t even know why. I don’t mean to blame her, but she did, and I am, and I’ve always been a *brand*. I just want to be a real person.”

She pushed his kutte off his shoulders. Of reflex, he caught it in his hands as it dropped down his arms. It wasn’t his Horde kutte. Feeling a sharp pang of loss, he almost let this one drop to the floor. But he didn’t. He was a Scorpion now. His loyalty was to them. His respect was for *this* kutte, *this* patch, before any other. In order to survive the life he’d chosen, he had to make that true. So he swung the kutte around on one arm, folded it, and draped it over the back of the nearest chair, all without moving from

between Riley's legs. He unzipped his hoodie and let that drop to the floor at his feet. Then he brought his hands back to her hips.

She put her hand over his wrist and watched her fingers trace the braided leather of the bracelets he wore. Then she looked back up at him. "So if somebody's out there getting their jollies watching me fuck my big bad biker, then let 'em. The worst thing that could happen is I don't work again. Well, I'm seriously loaded. Being a brand pays great. So I don't have to work." She pulled his t-shirt up, and he grabbed it and took it the rest of the way off. The chain for his St. Christopher medal got tangled up in his shirt, and he pulled it free as he tossed the shirt toward the kitchen.

Then she gasped. "Oh! What—?" Reaching out with one hand, she touched his new ink, in the peeling stage, on the trailing edge of healing. It was a little sore yet and a lot itchy, and his stomach twitched and jumped at her touch.

"Not Horde anymore, babe. Couldn't keep that ink." She traced the solid black arch where the word HORDE had been for years. Then she traced the large scorpion below it, its head and pincers ending a couple of inches above his pubic bone, its tail looping around his navel. The Scorpions' guy was good; it was quality work. Someday he'd be proud of it.

There had been some upset that he hadn't blacked out the steel horse on his arm, and for a few minutes on that first night, Bart had thought he was going to have to black it out or just be killed right there, his bags still packed. But Sam had agreed that he could keep it, and had told Hoosier, the L.A. President, as much, so Hoosier had backed everybody off. The common bond in Horde ink, what they all wore, was the name. The rest they'd done at their discretion. Bart wanted to keep that ink. He knew it meant he'd have to work even harder to prove his loyalty to the Scorpions, and he would.

Her hands left his ink and lifted the medal dangling above it. "What's this?"

"St. Christopher. Hav gave it to me when I left."

"God. You really are a Scorpion."

He pulled the medal out of her hand. "Yeah. You sure you can be good with that?"

As an answer, she opened his belt and unbuttoned his fly. When she pulled his cock free, her small hands holding him snugly, he groaned and kissed her. Her hands started to work him, milking him and sliding over his

needy flesh. He grabbed her wrists and pushed her back, until she lay before him on the table. Her eyes on his, she licked her lips and arched her back, bringing her pert, pale breasts up. Her perfect, shaved pussy rubbed against him, and he groaned again.

“Fuck. You are the most beautiful thing I ever will see.” He grabbed a condom from his wallet and got that sucker on fast. Then he grabbed her hip and shoved into her as hard as he could. She cried out and arched even more sharply, her thighs clamping hard around his hips.

Her lovely body was laid out before him like a fucking buffet. Finding a steady rhythm, reveling in the way her tight, searing heat held him, he released her hip and let his hands wander over every inch of her—sliding over her thighs, her hips, her sides. He slid his palms over her pearly nipples, loving her responsive shiver and whine. Taking each one between his fingers, he pinched and twisted, just lightly, slightly.

She jerked and screamed, her muscles clamping hard around his cock. “Oh, God! Oh, God, yes!”

He gave them a tiny pull, and she came off the table with a cry, trying to get her arms around him. Still thrusting solidly, he pushed her down and held her there.

“I want to see you. I like you like this, where I can see and touch you.” It was hard to get the words out through his own panting, strained breath.

Then, her eyes flashing and her pupils wide with heat, she reached down and put her own hand between her legs. *Holy fuck!* As he watched in fascinated delight, she rubbed hard on her clit, making herself twitch and moan even more energetically, as he pounded harder and deeper. Her hand slid down until his cock was sliding between her fingers. The sensation of her pussy and her hand clutching him at the same time was going to drive him mad before he could get her off. He brought his hands back to her perfect tits and plucked and twisted, this time more sharply.

And she was off. Moaning in time to the beat of his body against hers, her hand working them both, she flexed and bobbed wildly until she went still and silent, her eyes rolling up.

He loved her sex face so much.

He let go of her breasts and grabbed her hips so that he could slam her against him as he pounded into her, until his own release hit him like a Mack truck. He bellowed until his voice gave out, and then he dropped over

her. He couldn't relax in the position they were in, so he used his last ounce of energy to collect her in his arms and bring them both down to lie on the cool, pale wood floor. He slid out of her as they moved.

She giggled and settled onto his chest with a content little purr, her fingers toying with his medal.

Yeah. He was keeping her. Never letting her go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Jesu Christo, cupcake, are you going to hide under the covers all—AAIIEE!”

“What the fuck?”

Awakened by the commotion, Riley sat up with a start, her head foggy with sleep and her body achy and sore. Bart was standing up at the side of her bed, fully naked and in a fighting stance, all his muscles tense. Confused, she followed his line of sight to see Trevor standing near the door, in his usual black lycra pants and neon-colored baselayer shirt—this one pink. One hand was over his mouth, the other over his heart. Like a church lady who’d just accidentally walked into a Satanist sex party.

She raked her hand through her hair. “Trevor, what are you doing here?”

“Me? What am *I* doing here? *I* was worried. *I* was checking up on you. It’s almost eleven a.m., and no one’s seen your pretty little booty”—Bart reacted to that, and Trevor gasped and stepped back, eyeing him warily—“all morning. What is *he* doing here? And *who* is he?”

Bart stood straight and turned to look at Riley. Wow, he was fine. All those muscles. And even soft, his cock was impressive. “Riley?”

She sighed and tucked the sheet more snugly across her chest. “Sit down, Bart. It’s fine.”

He sat down, but he looked pissed. “Who is this guy?”

“This is Trevor, my trainer and nutritionist—I told you about him. Trevor, meet Bart.”

Both men spoke over each other.

“He comes into your bedroom whenever he wants?”

“Bart? This is your biker? Here?”

“Boys! Chill! Yes, Trevor. This is my biker. Why don’t you wait for us in the kitchen or something, okay? I’ll explain when we get there.”

Having regained his sassy self, Trevor popped a hip. “Well, I guess you don’t need a workout today then, do you, cupcake?” He ostentatiously checked out Bart’s cock, as if he hadn’t had plenty of time to get a load of it while Bart was standing at the side of the bed. With a vicious scowl, Bart yanked the sheet up to his waist.

“And good for you! If that’s how they grow boys in the heartland, I have been wasting my life in California.” With that, Trevor turned and sauntered out the door, closing it behind him.

“What the hell, Riley?”

Bart still looked pissed, but she herself found the whole thing hilarious. She laughed at his furrowed brow. “Oh, come on, Bart! As I’m sure you could tell, Trevor is very, very gay. He’s also married. You can’t possibly be jealous.”

His expression didn’t ease. “Well, it’s weird, him just walking in while you’re sleeping. How does he know if you’re alone in here? Which you weren’t.”

Okay, she needed to take another tack. She rose up onto her knees and crawled over to him. He shifted on the bed and put his hands on her hips as she straddled him. Feeling his cock stir and swell between her legs, she pressed feathery kisses over the lines in his brow, talking as she did. “First, you’re cute when you’re jealous. But second, if you’re going to be jealous of a *gay* man in my life, we’re going to have a problem. Third, he figured I was alone because I’m always alone.”

He grabbed her face in both hands and held her off, staring into her eyes. He just held her like that, his grey eyes stormy, his cock hard and pressing against her core.

“Not anymore,” he rasped. His fingers pressing into her scalp, he pulled her to him and covered her mouth with his.

She kissed him back just as fervently, pushing her tongue against his, sucking and tasting him, nipping at his lips. When he groaned and thrust up against her, she reached down and took his rigid cock in her hands, rubbing its tip against her clit. They both gasped. Trevor could wait.

“Fuck, babe. Let me in.”

She released him and leaned over to the nightstand, where the box of condoms she’d had in the drawer was out and open and considerably depleted. They’d spent a wild night, which accounted for them sleeping the morning through. When she sat straight again, before she could open the foil packet, Bart pushed her backwards and took a nipple into his mouth, sucking forcefully. She cried out, knowing Trevor could hear—she couldn’t help it. Her breasts were almost as sensitive and erogenous as her clit. She could go from absolutely-not-in-the-mood-there’s-no-way-in-hell-it’s-happening, to fuck-me-now-and-fuck-me-hard with one good pluck of a

nipple. Flexing her hips in time to the rhythm of his mouth on her, she could feel his cock sliding between her folds, his tip almost entering her with every enticing pass.

He released her breast with a growl and tried to grab the condom from her hand. She pulled it away, feeling puckish, and dangled it over his head. Grinning at the game, he went for it again, but she jerked it away. Then he grabbed her hips and yanked her against him with a grunt, and she didn't want to play any longer. She tore the packet open and rolled the condom onto his gorgeous, thick, long cock, then lifted up and settled down onto it, leaning her head back and savoring the sensation of him filling her up.

As they moved together, he wrapped his arms around her and held her close, whispering her name. She brought her head forward to see him staring at her, and she slid her hands over his arms and shoulders until her fingers were laced at the nape of his neck. They rocked and surged, nearly silent, staring at each other, until pleasure overtook her and she closed her eyes, all of her muscles tensing and contracting as if they were all drawing into her core. While the climax still dominated her, she felt Bart's body harden in and around her as he found his release, too.

When they both could relax, Riley rested her head in the crook of Bart's shoulder. He combed his fingers through her hair and whispered, "I love you."

She felt good. She felt whole. She felt real.

~oOo~

They showered before they left her room. Trevor was waiting for them in the kitchen, wearing Marta's yellow striped apron over his Day-Glo clothes. While they were taking their time getting out of bed and getting dressed, he was making them lunch. He'd laid out two full plates on the island, complete with prettily folded napkins and Pellegrino in crystal wine glasses.

Riley rolled her eyes at him when she saw the spread. "What's this?"

"A romantic luncheon, of course. I thought the two of you would need some nourishment—and you're gonna want to air out your room today, cupcake." He winked dramatically. "Just sayin'."

He stepped in front of Bart. “And you’re the biker, hmmm? Well, you’re lovely. Truly. But”—standing akimbo, his eyebrow raised critically, he examined Bart, who was dressed in his t-shirt and jeans—“you’re overdeveloping your lats, honey. Symmetry’s off just a hair. Maybe ease the weight off a little on your pull-downs. But your obliques? Mmm-mmm. Very nice.” He put his hand low on Bart’s waist, rubbing his thumb over his hip muscle. Riley thought that was a pretty awful idea. She also knew what he was up to. He’d done the same thing—or something similar, anyway—to Devon. He liked to push buttons, see if a jerk popped up. The game was potentially a lot more dangerous with a guy like Bart than it had been with Devon.

But Bart just scowled and knocked Trevor’s hand away. “Step back, dude.”

“Ooh, he’s kind of a caveman, isn’t he?”

“Come on, Trev. Enough with the hazing.”

He turned to Riley with a mischievous grin. “Just trying to take the measure of the man. Come on, you two. Have a sit, have a bite. And tell me how a biker from Missouri ended up in your California bed without me knowing first.”

They sat, and as she ate, Riley explained only that Bart had moved. While Trevor prodded for more information, asking questions that she mainly deflected, Bart pushed the food around on his plate. He was scowling at his plate the way he’d scowled at Trevor, and finally Riley turned to him and said, “You okay?”

“What is this?”

Trevor answered. “Grilled vegetables in a lemon pesto glaze on brown rice capellini.”

Bart laughed. “Yeah. I don’t eat that.”

“Don’t tell me—beef and potatoes, right? Maybe some corn, right off the stalk? Honey, that stuff will kill you. The Trevor can get you sorted right out, though. You hang around here long enough, and we’ll have you symmetrical and eating healthy.”

“You’re an asshole, dude.”

“Bart, chill.” Riley was annoyed with both men—Trevor for insisting on being a shit disturber, and Bart for not even trying. Of course, they’d gotten off on the wrong foot, what with Trevor walking in on them sleeping naked together and all.

But Trevor hated being called ‘asshole’ more than most other insults, and now he cocked his head, an enigmatic and not at all sincere smile on his face. “Definitely caveman.” He pulled the apron off and laid it on the counter. “Well, I’ll leave you both to enjoy your day of debauchery. I’ll see you Monday, cupcake. Bright and early! Ciao!” He swayed off with his head held high; Riley let him go. She knew he wanted her to stop him so he could finish his scene, but she wasn’t in the mood.

When the front door closed and they were again alone in the house, Bart said, “I hate that guy.”

She sighed and took her empty plate and his full one and put them in the sink. “He was poking at you on purpose, trying to get you to be a jerk.”

“What? Why?”

“Because he loves me and doesn’t want me to get blindsided. Which I still always do anyway.”

“So all that flouncing...and touching was an act?”

“No, his dramatic streak is a mile wide. He’s very in touch with his inner queen. But the attention he paid to you was designed to goad you. A test of your tolerance, if that makes sense?”

“I failed, right?” He stood and walked over to her.

Riley shrugged. “You didn’t slug him, which I thought was probable.”

He laughed. “It was close. His hand was—not where it should have been.”

“Well, he’s not going to be that handsy all the time. I’m surprised he was so shocked to see you in my bed. He must have seen your bike.”

“I parked on the street.”

“Why?”

“Didn’t want anybody getting curious about a big Harley in your driveway, in case there were cameras around.”

She was ridiculously moved by that, the concern for her it showed. “That’s so sweet. But park in the driveway from now on, okay?” She leaned back on the counter and Bart put his hands on either side of her hips, then came down to kiss her.

When he pulled away, she asked, “Can we spend the day?”

“I’m sorry, babe. I have to go back. I’m doing a shift in the garage today. And I have to be around the clubhouse a lot until I’m established

there. But I can come back tonight, if you don't mind me coming in late, maybe after midnight.”

She was disappointed, and she was also scared. She had a fear that the night they'd just spent would break apart and fade into unreality, like a dream, when he left. She knew it was irrational, but it was a fear nonetheless. But she couldn't very well lock him up and throw away the key. Then a new thought occurred to her. She tested it out, decided it was risky, then decided the risk was worth it.

“Hold on a sec.” She pushed his hand away and went to the office. She rooted around in the credenza until she found the red box she knew Pru kept tucked away. When she came back into the kitchen, Bart was leaning against the counter, his arms crossed.

“What's up, princess?”

She held her hand out. “Just let yourself in when you can get here. The alarm code is 1103.”

He took the key and then took her hand, pulling her close and wrapping her up in his strong arms.

~oOo~

Riley woke the next morning cocooned in Bart's arms and legs. He had come to her late, long after she'd gone to sleep. She'd roused as he slid naked into bed with her, but he'd simply turned her away from him and pulled her against his chest, all without a word. They'd slept wound together like that the rest of the night. Riley couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so deeply.

She ran her fingers over the braided leather bands around his wrist. They were so sexy to her; she wasn't sure why. Maybe it was just the way they drew attention to his hand and arm—the sculpted muscle of his forearm with its intricate ink, the solidity of his wrist, the rough grace of his hand. She tipped her head forward and pressed her lips to join of his thumb and wrist. He stirred a little, his hold on her tightening briefly, then groaned quietly and was still again. She stilled, too. She didn't want him to wake; she wanted to enjoy this moment of peaceful shelter.

She didn't know what time it was, and she didn't want to disturb him by reaching for her phone, but the morning light was still soft, so she assumed it was fairly early yet. It didn't matter, anyway. As far as she was

concerned, the day was theirs, and they should be undisturbed. Marta was away, Trevor wouldn't be back until tomorrow, Eleanor was still pouting.

And Pru's Friday night date had turned into a weekend in bed. Good for her—she'd not been much of a dater before, but their trip to Signal Bend had incited change in Pru, too. Her fling with Omen had apparently been just that—a fling, over as soon as Pru left the town limit behind. But she'd gained a confidence and self-assertion that was new. Pru had spent the formative years of her life in Eleanor's care and therefore in Riley's shadow, and she'd built up the habit of that situation, devoting herself to Riley, just as Riley had built up the habit of letting her. But since they'd returned from Signal Bend, they were both present in their own lives in new ways. It was giving Eleanor apoplexy.

When she met Bart, she might actually stroke out. Riley smiled at the thought, but then, as she began to play the scene out in her head, the smile faded, and her brows drew in. Eleanor displeased had two settings: icily civil and outrageously rude. She chose the setting according to the value of the target. Bart, Riley knew, would be subjected to outrageous rudeness. Eleanor would see him as miles beneath her. She wanted to avoid that as long as she could, so she lay there, snug in the warmth of his body around her, and tried to plan a way to keep them apart.

It didn't take long for her to realize how stupid and childish such a plan would be. Eleanor was her mother, and also her manager. Bart was her—what? Boyfriend? Lover?—Bart was her biker. If things worked out the way she hoped, then keeping them apart was impossible.

So, then, put them together and let them figure it out.

Bart stirred again, this time taking a deep breath; it tickled her shoulder when he released it. "Hey, princess. You okay?"

She turned her head to look back at him. "Hey. Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

He squeezed her close. "You're tense."

Rolling in his embrace until she faced him, she smiled. When she felt his cock harden against her, she smiled more. His hand slipped over her hip to clutch her ass, and she flexed her hips, making them both groan. He tucked his head and kissed her neck, and her eyes rolled back. "Wait. There's something I want to say."

He pulled back and looked at her, concern creasing his forehead. "You sure you're okay?"

“Yeah. It’s just...” She felt ridiculous, about to say what she was about to say. “I want you to meet my mother.” The urge to bury her face nearly overwhelmed her, but she forbore.

He leaned back, his eyes narrowing. “Eleanor?”

“Wait—what? You know her?” That would be beyond weird.

“No—well, yeah, I guess. I talked to her when you were in Signal Bend.”

“What? Why?”

“When the Devon story broke. I was helping keep a lid on your location, remember? I talked to a lot of people out here. Your mom was one of them. I don’t think she liked me.”

There was so much of Riley’s life that happened without her ever knowing. It was crazy. It was humiliating. But she shook that off. “She probably didn’t. But if you’re really with me, then I want her to know that you are. I want her to know that we’re together, and she’s just gonna have to deal. If she can’t, then fuck her.”

His grin slanted roguishly. “I like you feisty. And I’m with you, babe. All the way. So when?”

“Today? Can you stay around today?” Might as well get to it.

“Unless I get a call, I’m yours today, so yeah. Let’s offend your mother. In the meantime”—he rolled, putting her on her back, and then slid tantalizingly down her body until his face hovered between her legs—“I’m gonna taste your pretty pussy until you stop thinking about your mother. Maybe stop thinking at all.”

When his tongue moved against her clit, her mind went blank.

~oOo~

After the call ended, Riley stared at the phone in her hands. She felt her nerve shrinking away.

“What’s up?” Bart was sitting next to her on the terrace.

“She wants to meet for lunch at Farfalla.”

“Is that bad?”

Riley looked out over the city and thought about that. Farfalla was one of the new hot restaurants, a place where industry people went to see and be seen. It was a supremely Eleanor choice, especially considering the prickly place their relationship was in right now. With a perverse desire to

spring Bart on her, Riley had called and told her mother only that she wanted to talk. Eleanor had picked the place, and Riley knew exactly why she'd picked a place where they were guaranteed to be seen and photographed. She thought Riley was calling to beg for forgiveness and admit defeat, and she wanted to make her squirm in public. It spoke to how pissed she was, actually.

But Riley was bringing Bart to lunch. Or she'd been planning to. If they met Eleanor at Farfalla, that meant a guaranteed outing. A guaranteed cover of at least one tabloid. Riley Chase, bereaved and betrayed love of Devon Gaines, rebounding with outlaw biker. The vultures would get fat off that feast.

The question was, did she care? She'd told Bart that she did not, that she was done thinking like the brand and wanted to be a real person with a real life. Well, here's where that got put to the test.

And what did it mean for Bart? Publicity, or the fear of it, seemed to be what got the Horde in trouble in the first place, and what made Bart have to become a Scorpion and move out here. Not that she could feel very sorry about that.

"Farfalla is a super hot restaurant. There's always a ton of famous people there, which means that there are always two tons of cameras around. We will be photographed, we will be blogged about, and we will make the cover of at least one of the rags. No question."

He pulled her close and picked up a lock of her hair. Now that she'd dyed it dark to play Lilli, he touched it often, more often than before. "I thought you didn't care about all that now."

With a stiffening of her spine, she made a decision. "I don't. But what about you? It's going to be a lot of publicity. Isn't that bad for your club? Isn't that why the Scorpions were so pissed at the Horde?"

"Things seem different in L.A. I mean, I just got here, but the vibe is different. Three of the guys work in movies and TV, doing technical advising. One of them does stunt riding for movies, too. A bunch of famous people come into the bike shop for custom work. The charity work the club does is high profile stuff, with celebrities involved. And they're in talks for a reality show *about* the club. I don't know how the fuck that's gonna work, but it's my job to find a way to make it work and keep the other shit off the radar. But Sam transferred P.B. into L.A. about the same time I came in, and

for all I can tell, he did it because P.B. is good looking—the initials stand for Pretty Boy—so I guess Sam’s on board with Hollywood.”

“But why’d he come down on the Horde, then?”

“I’ve been thinking about that a lot. I think it’s because the movie is about shit that really happened, and the Scorps were involved in it but not in control of it. It’s a helluva lot harder to control old secrets than it is to keep a lid on new ones. If that makes sense.”

Riley thought about the careful, vigilant way she’d lived her daily life, never letting cracks develop, much less show, and then the way news of Devon’s baby had blindsided her—not to mention the turmoil of her life after his sudden death. “Yeah. It totally makes sense.”

“Anyway, I don’t think the publicity is a problem for me. And it could be a shelter for you. With your fame, a public link to the club keeps you safer from club shit. If something happened to you, the negative attention would be intense.” He grinned. “So let’s go get scandalous, babe.”

“Will you wear your kutte?”

“Depends. If I ride, I wear it. Won’t wear it in a cage, though.”

“Then let’s ride.”

~oOo~

When Bart pulled up down the block a little from the valet stand, a young, handsome man in standard valet wear—almost certainly an actor; Riley had the idea that every valet in the Greater Los Angeles area was an actor—trotted down the block toward them.

“I can park that for you, sir.” His expression and tone were barely civil; Bart was clearly not someone to whom he felt he owed obeisance.

Bart laughed. “No, dude. Nobody rides my ride but me. It’s good here.”

“Actually, it’s n—” Riley had taken off her helmet, and the valet recognized her. “Oh! Miss Chase! Of course, the bike is fine where it is. May I check your helmets?”

Bart took a step toward him, his expression dark. “They’re good here, too.”

Actor-with-a-day-job took a quick step back. “Of course. Enjoy your lunch.”

He scampered off, and Bart turned back to Riley with a smirk. “Okay, that was fun.”

“Dork. Let’s go. Eleanor hates to be kept waiting.”

Bart took her hand. As they walked to the restaurant, cameras clicked all around them.

Farfalla was, as expected, blinding with star light. At virtually every table was an A-list actor, or a producer, a director, a studio exec. In fact, most of the tables were full of such luminaries.

Eleanor had a good table but not the best one. She was sitting primly, a glass of white wine in front of her. They weren’t late enough that she’d lost the studied aspect of privileged contentment that she affected most of the time. She hadn’t seen them yet, and Riley had a moment to wonder how her mother looked to Bart.

She was a beautiful woman. Tall and slim, with long, silky hair that had naturally aged to gorgeous streaks ranging from slate grey to brilliant white. To her credit, she had never colored it. She’d never had cosmetic surgery, either, or even, to Riley’s knowledge, Botox, and karma had repaid her with an utter lack of need for any of it.

Riley had gotten her good looks, including her fair coloring and greyish green eyes, from her mother. Her height, or lack thereof, and her constant fight against her natural curves, she’d inherited from her father, who’d been heavysset and several inches shorter than Eleanor. But several zeroes richer.

“That’s your mom?” Riley nodded. “Damn, she’s hot.”

They had been walking toward her. Now, Riley stopped and yanked on Bart’s hand. “Dude.”

He laughed. “Yeah, sorry. That was kinda gross.”

Eleanor was looking around the room, and Riley knew she was cataloguing the guests, making note of people she should stop and chat briefly with, as was the way in this world. She didn’t notice Riley and Bart until they were maybe six or eight feet from the table. She began to smile, but as understanding cleared her eyes, her expression became aghast. Ever the exemplary socialite, she recovered quickly, but her eyes darted around, and Riley knew that now she was cataloguing the people who’d noticed Riley’s entrance with the broad-shouldered man wearing a biker’s kutte. Which would be everyone.

“Hi, Mother. I’d like you to meet Bart Elstad. Bart, this is my mother, Eleanor Piedmont. Mother, you spoke to Bart on the phone once, if you remember.”

Eleanor’s attention was fixed on their linked hands. Bart held out his right, the one with the leather bands and the big tattoo. “Pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

Despite her pale shock, Eleanor didn’t miss a beat. With a glance at his ink, she took Bart’s hand. “Yes. Lovely. Well, please do sit down.”

When the server had brought drinks (Bart had ordered a Jack Daniels, straight up, which was unusually downscale for the normal patrons here and caused the server to blink) and then had gone away again with their lunch order (Bart had ordered the vitello parmigiana, and had pronounced it well, which had impressed Riley and surprised Eleanor), Eleanor turned to Riley, as if Bart weren’t even at the table, and asked, “What on *earth* do you think you’re doing—bringing him to California at all, but bringing him *here*?”

“You picked the place, Mother.”

“Well, I certainly would not have if I had known you were going to bring your pet biker out to lunch with you. Riley, think! My God, how many pictures were taken of you walking into the restaurant? Were you *holding hands* out there, too? And what if there are long-range zoom lenses out there? You know there are.”

At that, Riley felt Bart’s hand on the back of her neck. He leaned toward her, and she turned, knowing what he was going to do. He raised his eyebrows, and she nodded, reading the question he was asking. Then he kissed her. Hard. Full tongue. And he took his time. When he sat straight again, Eleanor’s color had gone from waxy pale to what could best be described as puce, and the tables nearest them had gone strangely quiet, but only for a second or two.

“*What are you doing?*” She drank down her full glass of wine in three swallows.

“You wanted me to bang Tanner to get the press talking about something besides Devon.” Bart’s hand was on her knee, and it clamped hard around her at that, but for now, she only set her hand over his to calm him, and continued. “I think I’d rather go one better and have an actual relationship with an actual person I love.”

At that, Eleanor laughed viciously. She had never directed that kind of bile at Riley before. “Love? Oh, please, Riley. You are so naïve. You say you want to run your own life, and then you do something like this? It’s absurd. *He’s* absurd. I won’t have it. You are clearly incapable of making a wise decision. You need to stand back and let those of us who know better take care of you.”

“You don’t know your daughter at all, do you?” It was the first time Bart had spoken since he’d told Eleanor it was nice to meet her. Now, she turned frigid eyes on him and literally looked down her nose at him.

“Who are *you* to say anything? Who are *you* to make any observation about *my* relationship with *my* daughter? *My* only child? You’ve known her for, what, six weeks? At the topmost limit? Don’t you *dare* presume to make a claim about how well I know *my* Riley!”

She’d shouted. Eleanor Piedmont never shouted. She most certainly did not shout in a restaurant crowded with entertainment illuminati—all of whom were now silently watching the show.

Riley stood up, and Bart stood with her. “That’s just the problem, Mother. I’m not *your* Riley. I’m *my* Riley. Deal with it or don’t, it’s up to you. But until you do, we’re through. And either way, Bart is with me. Deal with that, too. Have a nice lunch.”

She turned and headed to the door. Bart caught her hand and pulled her back to move in front of her, shielding her as he led her outside. Their lunch hadn’t yet arrived.

When they got out of the restaurant, Riley’s knees buckled, and Bart caught her and led her to stand against the frescoed façade of the building. Riley could hear the frenetic click of cameras—and then she saw the paparazzi, like the carrion feeders they were, beginning to close in on them. Bart leaned protectively over her, his hands on the wall on either side of her head.

“Can you ride, babe? I’ll get you out of here, but you have to be able to keep your seat.” He turned his head to the side. “Or I can just knock this asshole right here out, give you some room to breathe.” Riley looked and saw a photographer about six feet away, clicking shots off madly. If they stood here much longer, they’d be surrounded.

“I can ride. I’m okay. Just freaked out, mainly.”

He pulled her into the shelter of his arms. “Okay. Let’s get you home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Their picture was everywhere. On every cover, at the top of every feed, on all the entertainment news shows. An obscured image of their restaurant kiss got some play, but the one that had really captured the attention of the world was of Bart sheltering Riley against the wall of the restaurant. Second to that, a snap of them riding away, Riley's hands linked low on his waist, her head resting sideways on his back.

His Scorpions kutte featured strongly in both.

In the two weeks since the lunch-that-wasn't, there had been a marked upswing in the number of photographers who showed up whenever Bart took Riley out in public. They'd started to cluster on the street outside her house, too. But the paparazzi stayed well away from the Scorpions compound, and that was good.

In fact, so far, there didn't seem to be any negative blowback from the publicity. The talk track of the entertainment commentators was positive, painting Bart as an alpha hero, taking care of his dainty woman. One intrepid blogger had done an image match and figured out that Bart was one of the Signal Bend Bikers, as the Horde were known out in the world. When that story broke, about a week in, Bart had gone into the clubhouse more than half expecting to get his head blown off, but all Hoosier, his new President, had said was, *Stay on top of it*. And now the Scorps were giving him affable shit, calling him Prince Charming.

If he wasn't careful, he was going to end up with a very annoying road name, something he'd avoided in seven years of association with the Horde.

When he'd been outed as former Horde, the blogosphere had erupted, and now the story was that they'd found true love when Riley was researching her part (which was true), and her heroic biker, unable to be parted from her, had given up his club family to be with her (which worked, in terms of truthiness). Entertainment news was hardly ever interested in truth or depth, so that was the story that took. Soon it would be the only truth anybody cared about, and that worked strongly in their favor—Riley, Bart, and the Scorpions.

The reality show talks had gotten hotter, with bigger numbers in the offer. The patches doing TA and stunt work were getting more calls. The

bike shop was starting to get more work than it could handle. All in the past two weeks. The Scorpions LA were riding a high tide of public regard, simply because Bart had taken Riley to Farfalla to meet her mother for lunch. It gave him some room in the clubhouse, definitely.

Eleanor wasn't coming off very well in the story. A lot of people had heard her shouting, demeaning Riley, and not everyone in that restaurant was averse to sharing gossip with the media. So it was also known that Riley's mother had made a scene, insulting her and being rude to her handsome, heroic biker. The spin was sharp enough to slice, and Eleanor was on the wrong end of it.

That seemed to have encouraged her to reconsider her approach to her daughter, and a few days ago, Riley and her mother reached a *détente*. Since then, Bart had been in the same room with her twice, and she'd been civil enough.

Moving around in Riley's life was taking some adjustment, but everything about living in L.A. was taking some adjustment. Bart had grown up in coastal cities where his dad was stationed, so urban life wasn't that unusual to him. But he'd been in a tiny town for a lot of years, most of his adult life, and L.A. was a different kind of urban. The Scorpions, though this charter was a lot easier than the mother charter, much easier than he'd been anticipating, were a different kind of club. And Riley's very public life was a different kind of living.

And it was almost always public, even when she was home. Her house was practically as busy as the clubhouse. He was shocked at the number of people who just let themselves in—Trevor, obviously. Pru. Eleanor. Marta, Riley's housekeeper and cook. Shit, even the gardener had keys to her garage, where her fucking \$200,000 car lived.

Her \$200,000 Ferrari. Her amazing house on the hill overlooking the what seemed like the entire L.A. Basin—a house she insisted was 'modest,' and after attending a party with her at a more famous person's house, he understood what she meant.

And shit, at that party, he'd had an actual conversation with last year's winner of the Best Supporting Actor Oscar. Standing at the bar, talking engines with the guy. Jesus Christ.

That life was nothing he understood.

And neither was this one.

He dismounted and set his helmet on the handlebars, then joined Hoosier and five more of his new brothers as they crossed a dusty span of empty land just southwest of Escondido and met the representatives of the Perro Blanco cartel.

Bart lined up with Lakota, Diaz, Sherlock, and Connor, all of them with their legs wide and their arms loose at their sides. They were all wearing double shoulder rigs and ready to use the guns resting in them. Hoosier and Blue, his SAA, stood forward, meeting two cartel primaries, a like array of soldiers behind them. They were making an exchange: guns for coke. The Scorps ran guns south and drugs north. This was a friendly exchange, but cartels were fractious organizations, and you didn't go into a meeting unprepared to take fire.

Or so Bart had been told. His job was supposed to keep him in the clubhouse, working intel. And he believed, for the most part, that would be true. This was the first run they'd brought him in on in his three weeks in town. But, coming in as a patched officer without prospecting first, he had to prove his loyalty on the road. And he was going to need to do his miles, anyway. Unlikely they'd let him log them all on charity runs.

But this gig was nothing at all like the outlaw runs the Horde had done. Then, there, for the most part, with a few very notable exceptions, the biggest risk was getting pulled down by law. Now, here, the risk was getting Swiss-cheesed by a hotheaded Mexican with an AK.

The exchange went off smoothly. When the leads had their business done, the soldiers unloaded and reloaded their vans, exchanging one cargo for the other. Then the Scorpions turned around and headed north, delivering their new cargo to its distributor.

When they got back to the compound, the only cargo they still carried was two large black duffels full of cash, their payments for the run. No more Robin Hood. He was a real outlaw now. Full stop.

~oOo~

The next day Bart stood on the set of *Signal Bend* and watched Tanner Stafford fuck his girl.

Well, not exactly. But close enough that it was all he could do to stay where he was and not jump in front of the cameras and beat the unholy shit out of that son of a bitch. His girl was up on that bed wearing nothing

more than a little beige G-string, and Tanner was up there in nothing but the same, and he was *sucking on her actual tits*. No fucking make-believe about it. There were a good dozen people on the set with them, all of them watching as Riley arched her back and moaned.

He knew what those tits were like. He knew how she felt when they were sucked. That was for him. Only for him. Jesus Christ, he was going to lose his fucking mind.

His fists were clenched so hard he could feel his palms getting wet with blood. His whole body was that tense, so rigid his head ached, red pain pulsing behind his eyes.

It didn't matter that the director was telling them what to put where. It didn't matter that they'd stop and start and move and be still according to what that dude—Gerry Blakely, he was famous, whatever—said, or that every time he said, 'cut,' and they changed something, both Riley and Tanner came completely out of the moment.

What mattered was that somebody else was lying on top of his girl—and oh, shit, now Blakely had her on her hands and knees. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. That was so not going to happen. He took a step forward, and then he felt a hand on his arm. He jerked it away and looked over. Eleanor. Well, that was just awesome.

"What?" He snarled. She'd been decent to him for the past few days, or at least not outright shitty, but he was not in the mood to be nice to her.

"Why don't you come over here with me and talk while they work? They have some really lovely pastries at the craft services table. Fresh coffee, too."

"No." He was going to stay right where he was. Who the fuck knew what was going to happen next.

"Bart. She's just doing her job. She doesn't even like Tanner."

"He likes her."

"Why should that matter? Come with me before you make things difficult for her. Come on, you know this is part of the job."

Yeah, he knew. He'd already borne up under the sight of her making out with Tanner—*twice*. It had happened more than that, he knew, but he hadn't been able to be on set to monitor the situation those other times. He knew that Riley was frustrated with his insistence on being present, since he was always so mad after, but he had no choice. When he wasn't here, he

imagined her enjoying these scenes, and it made him practically homicidal. But this, what was happening now, was so very much worse.

But he wasn't going anywhere. Eleanor finally gave up and simply stood next to him, her hand on his arm.

Boiling acid rolled around in Bart's gut as Tanner simulated taking Riley from behind. He stood there and listened to her making come sounds—they weren't her come sounds, they were the come sounds Blakely was telling her to make, and that was the only thing keeping Bart's feet where they were. Blakely finally called "Cut! Print!" And that was the end of this torturous scene. A girl in a headset trotted up with a robe for Riley, who was staring across the set at Bart, her expression equal parts compassionate and furious—and something else he couldn't name. And then Tanner stood up, eschewing the robe that had been offered him.

He was hard as a goddamn rock.

Bart lost his shit. He tore past the cameras and the lights and the sound equipment and the people and flew at Tanner Stafford, ignoring Riley's shouted pleas to stop. He had that asshole on the floor and he got three good swings in before a couple of huge security goons dragged him back. One of them punched him in the side of the head, and the lights went out.

~oOo~

He came to in her trailer, lying on the couch. Riley was sitting in a chair, watching him. Fuck, his head hurt. That security guy had been a beast. He blinked to clear his eyes and then sat up, groaning and holding his head. He focused on Riley.

She'd been crying. She wasn't now, but she obviously had been, and for some time. Her eyes were red and puffy.

"Hey, babe. What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? You dick. Are you kidding me? Tanner's face is a fucking mess. You just pushed back the wrap date by at least a week. I just got shouted at by Gerry and Stan both. I'm to blame because I brought you on set. Because I trusted you to be an adult about it. What's wrong. Fuck you!"

He leaned forward, ignoring the angry pounding behind his left eye, and reached for her hand. She yanked it away. "Riley, I'm sorry. I saw him

standing there with a huge boner, and I just lost my shit. I can't deal with that, with him on you like that. All over you."

"Then stay away! This is my work! It's just work! It's not like he's actually fucking me!"

"I can't stay away! I go even crazier imagining what's going on than I do seeing it!"

"Bart, it's more than today. It's the way you're such a moody jerk for hours after a scene where I even kiss him. Like you think I was cheating. God! Can't you see? This isn't going to work if you're going to be so jealous." She sobbed once, and then took a breath. He could see her fighting for calm, and he felt like the dick she said he was.

"After the holidays, I start filming the new season. You watch the show, right?"

"Yeah." His head hurt too much to follow the leap from what Tanner was doing to her on this movie to her regular TV job.

"Well, Desdemona has a steady boyfriend, right? Corson? They make out—at least—almost every episode. I am going to kiss other men all the time—Jon Gunther in particular, what with him playing Demi's boyfriend and all."

Right. "Jesus Christ."

"I'm drawing a line here, Bart. You have to get right with it. You have to trust me. If you can't, then we can't do this."

He wasn't about to even consider the possibility of not doing this. There was a solution. There had to be. "You said you didn't have to work."

Her eyes went wide, and then they went hot, and, too late, he understood the subtext of his statement.

"I don't have to, but I want to, and I am not giving up a job I like because you're a fucking territorial douchebag."

"No, I didn't mean—can't you choose, though? Be selective?"

She put her hands on her knees, her arms locked straight, in a classic posture of someone trying not to explode. When she looked up, her eyes were still flashing fire, but her voice was calmer. "I will choose the roles that I think are interesting. I will not choose them based upon whether or not you'll turn into an incoherent rage monster because you don't trust me enough to believe that I am unaffected by choreographed, simulated sex in front of a crew of people and with a camera in my face."

"Tanner sure as hell wasn't unaffected."

“So fucking what? He’s not me. And you know what—that sucked, that hard-on slamming against my ass during that take. It made me sick. It would have been super awesome if when it was over I could have come back to my trailer and had you hold me so I could regroup and not feel like I was practically violated on camera and then violated again when I was surrounded by shouting, angry men because you bloodied the star of the fucking film!”

Now he was overrun by a confusing crush of emotion. He wanted to kill Tanner for making her feel like that. He wanted to beat the shit out of all the men shouting at her. He felt miserably guilty for making everything so tough on her and not being there when she needed him. He wanted to hold her now and try to make it right. And he was still reeling with jealousy at the thought that he’d always have to share her in this way.

If he wanted her, he’d always have to share her, period—with her costars, with her family and friends, with the public. He would never be alone with her, not really.

Could he deal?

His head hurt a lot, but before he said anything more, he forced himself to think it out. This love thing was new to him, and he didn’t understand a lot of what he was feeling. Like this jealousy, the way it ate him up with fire. He was not hotheaded—or he’d never been before. But she was right to describe the way he was earlier as an ‘incoherent rage monster.’ He’d thought about nothing but tearing Tanner apart. He’d ended up hurting Riley, and he never wanted to do that. But if he was going to share her with the world, then he needed some grounding. Something to help him find his balance, to remind him, and everyone else, that she was his.

“I need you to be mine.”

She jerked a little, clearly surprised. Then she leaned forward. “I am yours, Bart. I don’t know how to make you believe it.”

“Take my ink.”

“What?”

“My ink. A tattoo that means you’re mine. My old lady.”

“What are you talking about?”

The research she’d done for the role had apparently missed this tidbit. “The stencil on your neck right now—the replica of Lilli’s tattoo?”

That's Isaac's ink. That's why his name is in it. It's his mark, saying she's his."

"You want me to get a permanent tattoo that says I'm yours? Like I'm a cow?"

"No. It's not like that. It's more like... like a ring. But more permanent. And it can keep you safe. Remember when Shiv had you, and he told me to show him my ink on you? He'd have backed off immediately—he never would have bothered you—if you'd had my ink."

Her expression had softened from challenge to curiosity. "Like a ring? What are you saying, Bart?"

Part of him couldn't believe he was doing this. The rest of him knew it was right. "I'm saying I love you and I need you to be mine. I want you to be my old lady, and I want you to show my ink."

The air in the trailer seemed unstable to Bart as she considered what he was saying. He tried to be still and let her work her way around it. At last, she asked, "Will you do it for me? 'Take ink' for me?"

He grinned, his chest expanding as the pressure of jealousy eased from it. "Yes, absolutely. We can do it together."

She moved to the couch and sat next to him. "Eleanor is going to have a heart attack."

"Well, that's just a bonus feature."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Scorpions clubhouse was dim and nearly empty when Riley went in on a January afternoon. Apparently, biker clubhouses had a common theme, because this was mostly just a bigger version of the Horde's. The floor was cracked linoleum over concrete. The walls were paneled wood. The décor was Early Modern Beer and Motorcycle Sign, with an accent of Porn Pinup. And the furniture was Second Wave Salvation Army.

The smell was similar, too—stale beer and booze, sex, cigar, weed, and a just a dash of sweat, urine, and vomit. A delightful mélange.

She only saw three Scorpions and one Prospect, none of whom was Bart. And no girls. Of the five times she'd been here, that was a first—there seemed always to be a lot of women hanging around. A lot of very obviously very willing women. And Bart was the jealous one in the relationship. Right.

That jealousy was still palpable, but it had eased noticeably once she had an ornate 'B' inked into the back of her right shoulder. And honestly, she didn't exactly mind seeing the 'R' with a star trailing from it on the back of his right shoulder. In fact, it was downright sexy.

It turned out that she didn't mind being in the clubhouse that much. She hadn't been to one of their notorious parties yet, and Bart was in no hurry to bring her into one, but she'd met the whole club. A few months ago, she would probably have been anxious, even frightened, around them. But her world, and her worldview, had changed a lot in those few months. Now instead of seeing a bunch of big, mean-looking men covered in ink and leather, she saw big, mean-looking men covered in ink and leather who laughed a lot, drank a lot, called her 'doll' and 'honey' and 'darlin',—and stood up when she needed a seat, called for a drink for her, and stood on the street side of the sidewalk when they were with her. It hadn't escaped her notice that the way they treated her and the other old ladies was not the way they treated all those very obviously very willing women—those women were treated pretty rudely and roughly, expected to serve the men in all sorts of ways, and otherwise ignored—but as far as Riley could tell, they were there of their own free will, and they had made their choices.

The other old ladies. There were three: Bibi, who was Hoosier's wife, Connor's mother, and the queen of the clubhouse; Margot, Blue's old lady; and Ingrid, recently married to Diaz. Riley actually knew Ingrid—she was a well-established model, and they had done a makeup campaign together a couple of years back. Riley's entire perspective about being old lady to a Scorpion had changed fundamentally upon seeing Ingrid in the clubhouse. She'd instantly felt like it wasn't quite so strange to be a girl like her in a world like this.

And they all had ink that marked them as belonging to their men, all of it different. Apparently, that fact was unique among Scorpions clubhouses the world over. Most Scorpions old ladies wore, well, a scorpion, usually a smaller replica of the ink their man wore. It was expected. But Bibi hadn't wanted a bug on her body, and she'd apparently caused a legendary stink about it. So Scorpions LA women chose their own ink. Riley liked that a lot. A whole lot. She didn't like Bart's scorpion. The thought of having it on her, too...would have been a problem. She liked their initials, something they shared just between the two of them.

The women had all welcomed her warmly, and Margot, who seemed to be sort of in charge of her, was being kind and patient in explaining the ways of the club. There were a lot of ways of the club, not all of them things Riley thought were so awesome. Like the 'run rule,' which basically stated that Bart could do whatever he wanted when he was off on a run, and there would be nothing she could do about it. Not even ask.

There was a lot of not asking in the ways of the club, too.

Okay. That wasn't exactly a surprise. She knew they weren't Boy Scouts, that when Bart went off on a run, he usually wasn't delivering toys to sick children—though they did that, too. She knew that stuff she couldn't ask about was stuff she was better off not knowing anyway. But she didn't give even one fuck about the stupid 'run rule.' He didn't get that one. Nope. No guy as jealous and possessive as Bart Elstad got to scamper out of town and get his extracurricular jollies when he had a woman at home. Uh-uh.

"Hey, little starlet, how's it going?"

Riley turned and smiled up at the handsome blond Scorpion walking toward her. A lot of the Scorpions were handsome. But with all their ink and muscles and beards, they all also looked unmistakably like bikers. Just high-end versions. "Hi, Jesse. Bart around?"

"He's over in the garage. I'll call him."

“Can I just go over? Surprise him?”

He laughed. “You don’t want to surprise a man working with power tools, doll.” He leaned back and thought for a minute. “But go ‘round front, talk to Janine. She’ll send you back so he can see you coming. And don’t go strolling through the bays. You could get hurt, and we wouldn’t want that. Want me to walk you over?”

The Scorpions’ compound was a city block on the southern end of La Cienega Boulevard. Not the world’s best neighborhood. But in order for Riley to get from the front door of the clubhouse to the front door of Cali Classics Custom Cycles required her to walk about twenty feet. On the perimeter of a biker compound. She was perfectly safe. And this was a paparazzi-free zone. None of those douchebags could handle the idea of a whole club full of pissed off bikers coming for them.

“Nope. I can handle it.”

His forehead wrinkled suddenly. “Where’s your cage? You didn’t park that fine ride on the street, did you?”

“No way. I had somebody drop me off. Hoping to get a ride on a Harley instead. So, I’m gonna go over and hook that up. Thanks!”

“Any time, doll.” He bent down and turned his cheek. “Pay me with some sugar.”

“Flirt.” She kissed his cheek and went out into the warm sunshine of a California winter.

The bike shop was nothing at all like the clubhouse. The showroom was bright and modern and so clean it was practically sterile. Beautiful motorcycles gleamed under brilliant white lights. The color scheme was black, red, and white—a gleaming black floor, pristine white walls with the shop logo painted in vivid red on the back wall. There was a cluster of sleekly modern chairs in black and red leather surrounding a low chrome and glass table. There were two offices in the back corner, separated from the showroom by a wall of smoked glass.

Janine was the receptionist. She smiled when Riley came in. “Hi, Riley. Bart’s in back. Hold on—I’ll call him up.”

“Can I just go back?”

She put the phone back in its cradle. “Sure. Just stay on the wall side of the red line.”

Riley nodded and went through the red steel door behind the desk.

She never been back in the workspace before. It, too, was gleaming and bright. A long bank of tall, red and black toolboxes lined one wall. The music was loud, and Riley realized the soundproofing must be really excellent, because up front there had been no ambient sound. Back here, the concrete walls fairly vibrated with Metallica. Not to mention the sounds of engine work.

Bart was standing at a long red worktable situated in the center of the room. What must have once been a motorcycle engine was arrayed before him in small metal bits. He was wearing a black coverall, folded over at the waist, and a gloriously tight white t-shirt, smeared with black grease. He was all but facing her, so she stood and waited for him to notice. The other guys—Lakota and Connor—were squatting at bikes with their backs to her, so no one as yet had noticed her presence. She liked it. She felt like she was seeing into a part of Bart’s life that had been dark to her before now. In fact, she didn’t want him to see her.

But then he did. He looked up, and his eyes widened with surprise. And then his beautiful crooked grin moved up the side of his face, and he set down the part he was working on and walked over, wiping his hands on a red towel as he came.

“Hey, princess!” He stopped short of her, still wiping his hands, but she didn’t care about the grease. She grabbed his dirty t-shirt in her fist and pulled him to her. Still grinning, he bent down and claimed her mouth, his hands coming to rest on her hips. They kissed until the guys were whistling and howling behind them. Then Bart pulled back, his eyes hot, leaving her gasping.

“Why the surprise? No trouble, right?”

She blushed. “No. I just...I was excited. I was at that cast meeting this morning, and all I could think of was that you’d be coming home tonight. Not just coming to stay over, but coming home, and I was excited and wanted to see you. It’s okay, right?”

Bart was moving in today. Moving into her house. Their house. Living with her. Living together.

Not alone, not anymore.

“I like you excited.” He wiggled his eyebrows. Then his look shifted to one of concentration. “Hold up. Let me get all those parts put up so I can pick up where I left off, and I’ll see if Moscow’s around. I’ve got the van

packed already, and I'll have him drive my stuff over. Then you and I can get the hell out of here."

"Are you sure? You can leave early?" She knew her huge smile was belying the sincerity of her concern.

"Babe, nobody cares, long as I get the job done on time, and as long as I answer the call. So let's blow."

~oOo~

Late that night, after Riley had closed the door on a departing Eleanor and Pru, she turned off the lights in the living room and the kitchen and went out onto the terrace. Bart was standing at the far edge of the lawn, looking out at the black and blue expanse of night sky and the glittering city below. In Los Angeles, without a telescope the like of which could only be found at the Griffith Observatory, stars did not exist above. Only below.

When they'd gotten home this afternoon, she'd led him to the terrace to show him the homecoming gift she'd bought him, and one of the reasons she'd been too excited to wait until he'd come home on his own, after dark: a huge, top-of-the-line gas grill. Her terrace wasn't really big enough for a full outdoor kitchen, but she'd done the best she could. As these things went, it looked nice, stainless steel with marble prep tops on either side. The guy at the shop had rattled off several dozen supposedly wonderful features, none of which she'd understood. But Bart liked his red meat, and she wanted him to be able to do the manly cooking thing.

He'd been even more pleased than she'd hoped, picking her up off the ground to hold her. And then he'd surprised her more, suggesting—nay insisting—that she call Pru and Eleanor, and even Trevor, and invite them over for dinner. With no small sense of trepidation, she'd done so. And then she'd handed over the keys to her Ferrari, and Bart had raced down the hill to the market. He'd returned with half a barnyard's worth of raw meat. And some salmon steaks for, as he'd said, grinning like an idiot, "All you food pussies."

They'd all come. Trevor had even brought Dante, his husband. And after Trevor's violent attack of the vapors upon seeing the grill and all the red flesh sizzling on it, they'd actually had a good time. Riley and Bart and their first dinner party. The actress and the biker, pouring wine and grilling steaks. Making a statement that they were as one.

She'd never had anything like this before. Her only other really powerful relationship had been with Devon—she'd had boyfriends, lovers, before him, but never anything that had gotten into her psyche and soul. She and Devon, as wildly as she'd loved him, had not been a couple like this, not ever. They had been sad and intense and needy and sweet, rolled up in each other in ways that had clearly not been healthy—not to him, obviously, but not to her, either. Now, looking back on what they'd had, and what they'd become, she saw that she'd been, in important ways, as alone with him as she'd been anywhere else. He'd consumed her.

She'd lived her life surrounded by people, people who had, by design or by opportunity, controlled her. Until recently, except for the hours of sleep, she'd hardly ever been without a companion of one sort or another. And still she'd been completely alone.

And now she wasn't. Now Bart was with her. What he did didn't matter, because who he was was perfect for her. He was hers.

She walked up behind him and circled her arms around his waist. He looked over his shoulder with a smile and looked down at her. "Hey, princess."

"Hey. Thanks for tonight. I loved it. I love you."

His smile grew, and then he pulled her to stand in front of him looking out, and he wrapped his arms around her shoulders. "I will never get tired of this view. It's like the world is upside down, and the stars are on the ground."

She chuckled; she'd been thinking something not so different not so long ago. "I've lived here almost five years, and I'm not tired of it yet. It's my favorite thing about this house. Our house."

She felt his hand on her right shoulder, brushing her—blonde again—hair away and pulling her shirt down. He traced her tattoo with his thumb, and she could feel the letter as he drew it on her skin, the long, curved sweep of the stem, the rounded swells of each bowl: *B*. Then he bent down and kissed the spot where his thumb had last been.

He kissed over her shoulder, and she tipped her head to the side so that he could continue on up her neck. When he got to her ear, he whispered, "You know what else is my favorite thing?"

Focused on the way her body clenched and hummed at the touch of his hands, his lips, his breath, she could only answer, "Hmmm?"

"Privacy. Wanna skinny dip?"

She opened her eyes and turned her head to give him a look. “Seriously? It’s January.”

“It’s seventy degrees, and the pool is heated. You chicken, princess?”

“I’m not chicken. I’m smart.”

He laughed out loud at that, his head thrown back. She was confused. She hadn’t thought it was that funny. When he looked down at her again, his eyes dancing in the night lights, he said, “Don’t you remember the first time you said that to me? The night I took you out to look at the stars?”

Now she smiled, remembering. She also remembered the seriously intense sex they’d had later, up against the door of her hotel room. That memory, and the way her body loved it, sealed the deal, and she rounded him without a word and headed for the pool, pulling her top off as she went.

She heard him mutter “Score!” and could imagine the fist pump that had accompanied it, and she laughed. He could be such a dork. She stood at the side of the pool and slid her jeans off. She did hesitate a bit when she got to her underwear—really? They were going to do this? Outside—naked? And then Bart came streaking across the lawn, cannonballing into the pool.

Yep. Dork.

She divested herself of her underwear and stepped into the tepid water. He swam up and grabbed her, pulling her under and kissing her. When they broke the surface, he had her wrapped around him, and she could feel his swollen cock pressing temptingly against her core. Feeling bewitched by happiness, she shifted so that his tip was poised to come into her and then flexed downward, drawing him in. He grunted and thrust, and then he was inside her, deep.

And bare.

She hadn’t thought. She’d just felt. And he was there, and he felt amazing, so much hotter than he felt wrapped in lubed latex. She flexed again, gasping at the richness of the pleasure.

He grunted again, and she could feel the restraint thrumming through his body.

“Wait, babe. Hold up.” His voice sounded gruff and tight. In the shimmery glow of the pool lights, she could see the heat in his eyes, their lashes beaded with pool water.

“I know. I don’t want to stop.”

“Riley. What are you saying?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t want to stop.” She flexed again, and with yet another grunt, he matched her with a thrust of his own.

“What if—?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad. Would it?”

He stared hard at her, searching her eyes. She stared back and let him. She wasn’t sure what she was doing or why she was doing it—if something happened, it would change everything about her life, and she hadn’t given this a moment’s thought—but she was content with that, with whatever might happen. Wrapped around him in the middle of their pool, almost floating, bobbing slightly with the water, she waited to see what he would say.

“I don’t know. But I don’t want to stop, either.” He kissed her fiercely and his hands moved down to clutch her ass, and then they began to move in earnest.

And it was the most astonishing feeling Riley had ever known. The hot slide of his skin inside her, the contrasting chill of the water, the way their buoyancy made for a whole new kind of fluid motion—it was only a few minutes before Riley had to tear her mouth from his so that she could take in a huge whoop of air, and then she screamed his name into the black heavens.

Then he walked them, still hard and thrusting gently, up and out of the pool, and laid her on one of the lounge chairs. She vaguely noted the still slightly warm feel of his t-shirt under her. He pulled her legs up into his arms, holding them aloft, and pounded into her until she was screaming through another climax. This time, he followed her, shouting, “God, babe! Oh, yeah!”

And then he pulled out with a sudden backward jerk, and, with a groan, he came onto his t-shirt. His breath rasping heavily, he lifted her and resettled so that he was on the chaise and she was on him. There was a chenille throw folded on the table next to the chaise, and he pulled it over them. And then, finally, they relaxed.

Lying on his warm, solid body, she was content, but a little confused. She twisted her fingers into the chain around his neck, thinking. Finally, she asked.

“Why’d you pull out?”

Still panting, he murmured, “We should think about that. Talk about it. Yeah?”

He was right. “Yeah.”

“We just need to think some, make sure. But I think I’d like it.”

“Me, too.”

He held her close, and they watched the world from their high perch.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Bart's personal phone, still with a Missouri number, chimed in his pocket. He leaned back from his laptop and pulled it out with a grin, figuring it was Riley.

It wasn't, but he only grinned wider as he answered.

"Hey, asshole. What's going on?"

Havoc laughed. "B-man. You good?"

"Not bad. You?"

"Got news. 'Bout Isaac."

Havoc's voice sounded tight, and Bart's grin left. He sat forward. Last he heard, when he'd last talked to Havoc a couple of weeks ago, Isaac was home, but there hadn't been any more improvement. He was in a wheelchair, and the odds of him getting back use of his legs were fading fast.

"Trouble?"

"No, man. I don't know the details or the lingo or whatever, but Show says his last test, both feet twitched. They're not saying it means anything, but they checked him back in for intensive therapy, so that's gotta be good, right?"

Bart blinked back the tears that had suddenly threatened, borne by the same emotion he heard constraining his friend's voice. "Yeah! Yeah, that's great. How's Lilli doing?"

"You know Lilli. She likes a fight. Fuckin' drill sergeant or some shit. Isaac'll get his legs under him just so he can get her off his back."

Bart laughed. Lilli liked a project. Well, she sure had one. Then emotion was on him again. It wasn't a project she should have to work, though. They'd been through the shit enough already. "How's everybody else? Good?"

"Yeah, yeah. It's quiet around here these days. Everything's cool with the club. Scorps are—" He stopped, and Bart knew he was recalling that Bart was a Scorpion now. He hated that his best friend felt he had to be careful what he said.

"It's okay, man. We're good."

After another beat, Havoc said, "Scorps are off our back. It's all good. And Tuck's is back like it should be. Fights every night, near 'bout."

The smile in his voice was almost visible.

“How’d you work that?”

“Got the ‘wine bar’”—the hoity-toity accent Havoc used made it clear what he thought about it—“up and running. Valhalla Vin. Looks like it might make decent bank, too. Ain’t you keeping track of our shit? I figured you’d know all, the Great Bartini.”

Once the actors were done with the real Signal Bend, the press had been, too. He was still keeping tabs on media traffic, but that focused his attention on L.A. Rick had the east coast. When the movie came out, they expected another uptick of interest in the Horde, but they’d catch it before it went far. And the Horde were laying low, regrouping from this latest series of setbacks. So he didn’t need to have his nose far into their business.

Still, at first, he had been keeping track, mainly out of homesickness, but also to make sure that what he’d given up had been for a damn good reason. But then the Scorps kept him hopping, in the bike shop, on runs, doing their own intel. And he had Riley. After several weeks, he hadn’t been pining for Signal Bend the same way anymore. And now, four months since he’d left, he felt at home. He still missed the fuck out of his brothers, and he still needed a few minutes to get his head back together after each time he talked to Havoc, but he was okay in L.A. Finding his way. Happy.

And he’d made his place in the Scorpions. He stayed back as far as he could from the heavy shit, and they mostly let him. He was becoming a famous face, linked as he was to Riley, and as such, there were some outlaw runs they just didn’t want him on. Fine with him.

“Been busy.”

“Yeah—Dom said they’re doing a reality show in your clubhouse? What the fuck with that?”

“L.A., man. What can I say?” That show was another thing giving him some distance from the drugs and guns—the company producing it wanted to capitalize on Bart’s familiarity, and they wanted him featured, with a couple of the prettier Scorps—and Fat Jack, the VP, who was a salty, randy old fuck and guaranteed to bring humor and controversy to the proceedings. Bart had his doubts about whether the producers really knew what they were getting themselves into, but he had his hand on the lid, so the Scorps would be okay.

“How’s your girl—or, sorry, *old lady*? Shit. You still okay living with a chick?”

“Yeah, brother. Great with it. You should try it out.”

“Not gonna happen. Never gonna happen. I like my chicks carry out.”

“Whatever, man. You’re missing out, all I’m sayin’.”

~oOo~

The driver opened the limo door, to a constant strobe of flashes. As Bart got out of the car, the strobe effect eased slightly—he wasn’t who they wanted to see. Then he leaned in and held out his hand. Riley took it, and stepped a dainty, sparkly foot, and then the bottom of a satiny, sparkly emerald green dress, out of the limo, and the flashes went insane. When she stood, looking small and delicate, and yet regal, in this gorgeous strapless dress, her hair rolled up elegantly, and about a million dollars in diamonds resting around her slender neck, the world went thick with din—the flashes, the screams from people on risers behind barriers across the street, the shouts of the fucking paparazzi—damn, Bart hated those motherfuckers, every one of them—yelling her name: “Riley! Over here!” “Here, Riley!” “Show us your back, Riley!” “Over your shoulder—hey! Over your shoulder! Hey!”

Like they knew her. He supposed they did, in a way. Like she owed them. She most certainly did not.

Bart was nearly blind from the strobe effect of the constant cameras, and his protective instinct was working overtime, desperate to get her out of this mania. He knew how she hated it. She was squeezing his hand until it was numb. But she was smiling beautifully, and she granted every request she heard, letting them move her with their shouts.

It took them fifteen minutes to move half a block toward the main entrance of the Dolby Theatre. And then they were in a line of famous people in fancy clothes—he pulled at the collar of his black dress shirt and the black silk tie currently strangling him—but the cameras and din had backed off a little, as if they’d made a barrier around the door. Maybe they had.

They were at the Oscars.

His life was nothing like he’d ever thought it would be.

Riley wasn't nominated for anything, and *Signal Bend*, though people were talking about it as probable Oscar bait, wouldn't be released until the end of the year, for the *next* award season. But publicity for it was already underway, and that meant the stars showing up on red carpets. She'd told him he didn't have to go, but there was no fucking way he was going to let her run this gamut she hated on her own. Her days of withstanding that shit were done. She was not alone in the crowd. Not anymore.

So here he was, being blinded by flashing lights and strangled by his all-black tuxedo getup, his hand gone numb in Riley's death grip. But she was beautiful. God, so fucking beautiful, and every time he saw his initial on her shoulder, knowing that many of these pictures people everywhere were taking would show it, he felt a little thrill of elation.

Somebody with a microphone tried to pull her away from him, and her grip clamped down even harder. He followed, keeping hold. Then a guy next to the woman with the mic tried to physically separate their hands, actually putting his hands around their wrists, and Bart went chest to chest with him, ready to go. There was a hush that rippled away from them, with a range of about ten feet. Everybody was waiting to see if he'd throw a punch.

"Bart, no!" Riley hissed, under her breath.

He heard her, but he didn't move. He stared until the guy stepped back. After a pause, when time seemed static, everything went back to normal, and the woman with the mic asked Riley a few insipid questions and sent them on their way.

If he was going to walk red carpets with her, he was going to have to figure out where the line was between supportive and overprotective. But he didn't give a shit how many cameras were around. Somebody who tried to separate Riley from him was going to get put down.

~oOo~

"Let's skip the party. That okay with you?"

They were back in the limo, waiting in a long line of limos to head away from the theater. She was supposed to stop and change into another gown, and they were supposed to go to a party thrown by a big magazine. But Riley had her sparkly silver high heels off, and her legs draped in their

emerald satin over his legs, and he was rubbing her little feet. He'd already relieved himself of that fucking tie and had his shirt open at the throat.

"Great with me. Home?"

"No. I have a better idea. She scooted up and knocked on the glass separating them from the driver. It slid open. "Hey, Joe. You know where I want to go?"

Bart watched something pass between the big driver and Riley as they looked at each other in the rear view.

The driver smiled. "I do. Want to make any stops first?"

She peered through the glass of the tiny fridge. "There champagne in here? Yep. No, Joe. We're good. Just take us away!"

"You got it."

"You're the best!"

As Joe closed the divider, Riley came back and resumed her position over his lap.

"Where we goin'?"

She gave him a saucy grin. "My secret place. Which is, you know, a secret. You'll have to wait."

"Gonna take long to get there?"

She understood why he was asking right away, and her grin got positively devilish. "Long enough."

"Excellent." They had decided that they both wanted a family, but they wanted to wait a little first. Riley had gotten on birth control, hallelujah. Unwrapped sex had been a fucking revelation.

He slid his hand up her dress to rest on her thigh, and he saw the divider go dark. Good man, Joe. Good man. He slid his hand up until he met the silk barrier of her panties. Her eyes flared, and she let her outside leg drop off his lap, opening herself to his touch.

~oOo~

Her secret place turned out to be a little stretch of beach near Malibu. The rocks were clustered to make something like a sheltered cove. Joe pulled the limo over, and Riley grabbed the champagne and dashed out of the car and across the Pacific Coast Highway, her dress wafting out behind her, before Bart could recover from the stupendous head she'd just given him and get his cock put away and his pants closed.

“Riley! Shit!” He chased after her, but she was already halfway across the beach, pulling her hair loose from its pins as she went. Was she going to swim in her shockingly expensive borrowed dress? With a nauseatingly expensive borrowed necklace around her throat? “RILEY!”

She stopped at the tide line, letting the washing surf wet the bottom of her dress. She was grinning hugely and struggling to open the bottle of Cristal. She got to the cork but couldn’t pop it. When he finally reached her, still in his fancy, painfully uncomfortable dress shoes, she held it out to him.

“I can’t get this out!”

Smiling, he took the bottle. He didn’t know if she’d ever been more beautiful, her golden hair loose and wild, blowing in the sea breeze, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight like the diamonds at her throat, her skin flushed and her chest heaving. And she looked so perfectly happy.

“Marry me, Riley Chase.”

She’d been playing a little in the water, taking little dance steps in the foamy surf. She stopped and looked up at him. Then she nodded. “Yep. Totally. I will totally marry you, Bart Elstad. And make little blonde babies.”

He popped the cork. They each took a drink, and then he kissed her, the champagne lingering in their mouths.

~oOo~

They sat on the rocks for a long time, drinking champagne and watching the tide come in. He understood why this place was her secret place. For all the glitter and clamor of Los Angeles, here one could imagine that there was nothing. Especially in the dark. The highway was at a distance behind them, and the traffic at that hour was almost nonexistent. When Bart looked back, he saw only black. He knew Joe was waiting for them, but the black limousine had faded into the dark.

Even the Pacific, from this sheltered little vantage, seemed utterly empty. He knew that if he swam out even ten feet, he’d see the lights and bustle of the civilized world. He could detect the faint glow of that world against the tall rocks at their side. But here, in this quiet, small space, he and Riley were the only people in the world. He was the only person in the world for her, and she was for him. They didn’t have to share each other,

their lives, with anyone else. No demands. No expectations. No disappointments. No pasts. No jealousies. They were alone, together.

She was reclining against his chest, nested between his legs, her dress draped over them like a coverlet. He'd given her his tuxedo jacket to shield her bare shoulders from the chill. He felt a peace deep in his bones. When he'd left Signal Bend, he'd thought never to know peace again.

He looked down at her. "Can this be our place now?" He asked quietly, knowing that she might think he was intruding on something that was only hers. So little of her life was only hers.

She tipped her head up on his chest and smiled at him. "It already is."

THE END

~oOo~

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