



# PANDE

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# MONNIUM

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# Pandemonium

Bella Jewel

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~\*Pandemonium\*~

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# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[This novel can be read as a standalone, however, if you're unfamiliar with the MC Sinners and are intrigued after reading this, you can buy all the books. The titles are as follows. | \[Hell's Knights – Book 1 \\(Cade and Addison's Story\\)\]\(#\).| \[Heaven's Sinners – Book 2 \\(Spike and Ciara's Story\\)\]\(#\).| \[Knights' Sinner – Book 3 \\(Jackson and Serenity's Story\\)\]\(#\).| \[Enjoy x\]\(#\)](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[CHAPTER 1 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 2 | \[PAST – LUCAS\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 3 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 4 | \[NOW - AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 5 | \[THEN – LUCAS\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 6 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 7 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 8 | \[LUCAS – THEN\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 9 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 10 | \[THEN – LUCAS\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 11 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 12 | \[NOW - AVA\]\(#\) | \[One week later\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 13 | \[THEN – LUCAS\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 14 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 15 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 16 | \[THEN – LUCAS\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 17 | \[NOW - AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 18 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 19 | \[THEN – LUCAS\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 20 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 21 | \[THEN – LUCAS\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 22 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 23 | \[THEN – LUCAS\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 24 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 25 | \[NOW – AVA\]\(#\)](#)

[CHAPTER 26 | THEN – LUCAS](#)  
[CHAPTER 27 | NOW – AVA](#)  
[CHAPTER 28 | NOW – AVA](#)  
[CHAPTER 29 | THEN – LUCAS](#)  
[CHAPTER 30 | NOW – AVA](#)  
[CHAPTER 31 | NOW – AVA](#)  
[CHAPTER 32 | NOW – AVA](#)  
[CHAPTER 33 | NOW- AVA](#)  
[CHAPTER 34 | NOW – AVA](#)  
[CHAPTER 35 | NOW – AVA](#)  
[CHAPTER 36 | NOW – AVA](#)  
[CHAPTER 37 | NOW – AVA](#)  
[CHAPTER 38 | NOW – AVA](#)  
[CHAPTER 39 | NOW – LUCAS](#)  
[CHAPTER 40 | NOW- AVA](#)  
[CHAPTER 41 | NOW – AVA](#)  
[EPILOGUE](#)

[If you're unfamiliar with the MC Sinners and are intrigued after reading this, you can buy all the books. The titles are as follows. | Hell's Knights – Book 1 \(Cade and Addison's Story\). | Heaven's Sinners – Book 2 \(Spike and Ciara's Story\). | Knights' Sinner – Book 3 \(Jackson and Serenity's Story\). | Enjoy\\_x](#)

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# **Hell's Knights – Book 1 (Cade and Addison's Story)**

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# Heaven's Sinners – Book 2 (Spike and Ciara's Story)

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# **Knights' Sinner – Book 3 (Jackson and Serenity's Story)**

**Enjoy x**

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# PROLOGUE

*Once upon a time . . .*

If only all stories began with such a joyful motto. If only dreams really did come true, as the books that brought that sentence to existence said they would. The stories that begin with ‘once upon a time’ are sure to make you happy, to promise that you’ll find your Prince Charming, to ensure that you’ll sail off into the sunset. Reality is different; the stories that come from real life, they don’t begin like that. No, they begin a little something like this . . .

\*\*\*

Tears dry on my face and the harsh scratching of my jeans against my cheek reminds me that I’m still on the ground, my head on my knees and my hair tumbling around me, soaking wet. My fingers are trembling, and it doesn’t matter how many times I sit on them, they won’t stop. My mother’s agonized cries echo through the bitter halls, and my father’s pained voice keeps ringing in my ears.

A painful reminder of what I’ve become.

“Not Ava. Not our Ava. She would have told me. She would have opened up to me. Not my baby. She’s been drowning, and I didn’t fuckin’ see.”

*His baby.*

I was that once. I’m not anymore.

They stopped knowing what kind of girl I was when that night changed everything. They stopped knowing but they didn’t stop *believing*. And there is a difference, you see. They *didn’t* see. And now they regret it.

That isn’t what I wanted for them, but I can’t stop the inevitable. I lost the power to stop that when my life was put into the hands of another person, and that person twisted it until it was ugly and broken.

But they still didn’t notice.

Now they’re crying and I can’t bear it. I can’t bear to hear them cry.

Because it means I failed.  
As a daughter.  
As a person.  
As me.

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# CHAPTER 1

## NOW – AVA

There is a comfort that one hundred rumbling Harley-Davidsons brings to your chest when the sound fills your ears. For me, it's protection, it's family, and it's *home*. I grew up in the loving and fierce arms of bikers. They were the air I lived and breathed. I was never scared, never alone, and never without someone to cover my back. I wouldn't have it any other way.

My dad, Jackson, president of the Hell's Knights Motorcycle Club, is my best friend, and the most amazing man I know. He created a world for me that I'd not change for a thing.

I lift my head, covering my eyes with my hand to shield them from the sun as the bikes near closer and closer. My smile grows the one I recognize so well comes to a stop in front of me.

My dad has been away for a month and now he's home.

My smile stretches so big my lips burn as I run towards him. He opens his arms, big and strong, and catches me when I launch myself into them. My dad smells like the road; it's a smell that's hard to explain. It's the leather jacket; it's the fresh air; it's the smoke and beer. It's my dad.

"How you doin' there, baby girl?" he asks into my hair.

"I'm good now. Missed you, old man."

He chuckles and pulls back, staring down at me. I look more like my dad than I do my mom. I'm grateful for that. My dad, even now he's getting older, is handsome as a devil. He's got long, dark hair that's tied in a braid down his back. That hair is now partially grey, but it doesn't take away from his striking good looks. He's got blue eyes and olive skin, and keeps himself in top shape.

He has to, I suppose.

"See you haven't lost your sass since I've been away." He grins.

"Where's your momma?"

"She's waiting for you at home."

His eyes flash.

My mom and dad have the kind of love people would search the entire world for. It's beautiful and intense, and all my life I've wished for something the same. Dad is older than Mom, and has a daughter, Addison, from a previous relationship—but it all works for them, and us. Addi is married to Dad's vice president, Cade, and they're equally as adorable together.

“Best be on my way then. Thanks for waitin' for me; I've missed you a fuckin' ton.”

He leans down and brushes his lips over my forehead, then he waves the guys on before climbing onto his bike. I happily raise my hand in greeting as they go past, feeling my chest swell with pride and happiness as they grin, wave or yell out at me.

Yep. Perfect.

~\*~\*~\*~

“Ava, baby, I'm so glad you're doing well!”

I look up into the eyes of my mother. Beautiful. She'll always be beautiful. Age does not seem to affect her—if anything it makes her more stunning. She might be tiny, but my mother has the dark-haired kind of beauty that stops men in their tracks. Mostly my father. *Always* my father.

“It's hard living on my own.” I laugh softly, tucking a strand of dark hair behind my ear. “But I'm managing.”

“You don't come and visit us enough. Your sister said just the other day that she hasn't been able to get hold of you in a week.”

Addison can be a pain in the ass. A pain in the ass I adore.

“I've been working,” I say, walking into the kitchen and taking a soda from the fridge. “I'll call her.”

“How is work?” Mom asks, sliding her backside onto a stool and smiling over at me.

I shrug. “Work is work.”

“You sound like your father.”

I grin. “Speaking of, where is he? I haven't seen him since he got back yesterday.”

She frowns. “He's at the clubhouse. You know how things have been lately.”

I nod. “Yeah, I know something is going down, but as always, Dad keeps us out of it.”

Mom sighs, but there is a flicker of worry behind her pretty eyes. There haven’t been many times in my life where the club has lived with looming danger. Most of it has been small and hasn’t touched anyone personally. Dad has always kept out of the shit. But recently, something has started, and things have become a little more frantic. Dad has upped security and is checking in a lot more than he used to.

“He does that to keep you safe.” She smiles.

“I know.” I beam, not wanting her to feel any more stress than she’s clearly already feeling.

“You should go visit him. Cade and Spike are visiting today; you know they’d love to see you. Besides, Danny called last night and asked after you.”

Danny is my best friend and the son of another club member, Spike. There are a few of us in the club that grew up together, and to this day they’re all my best friends and my confidants, but if I have to pick a bestie, it would be Danny. He’s cocky and charming, which he gets from his father, and he’d have my back in any situation.

“I’ll do that,” I say, popping the top on my soda. “I miss them all. Work has been crazy.”

“They always ask after you. We’re having a cookout on Saturday—make sure you come. All the kids will be there.”

“Mom,” I say, lifting a biscuit off her freshly baked tray. “We’re not kids. I’m twenty-three.”

She smiles, and little lines crinkle at her eyes. They only make her more beautiful. “You’ll always be my baby, Avie.”

I groan and stand. “I have to go to work, but I’m going to the compound first.”

I hug her and kiss her cheek before leaving their house, the one I grew up in.

Dad’s club is only just up the road, and when I was a child, I used to walk to it during the day just to see him. Mom hated it, but I loved being there. When I was that age, his protection and fierce loyalty was warm and comforting; when I got older, it became frustrating. Now, it’s somewhere in between. He’s always been wildly protective. He can’t help it. Being the president of an MC would make anyone turn out like that.

When I arrive at the club, I pull out my key and unlock the padlock securing the barbed-wire fencing that surrounds the lot. I shove it open and step inside. Dad's dogs, Boof and Crack, come running over. He got them when I was thirteen for protection. I squat down and open my arms to them, accepting their slobbery kisses. The guys tell me often that I'm far too affectionate with them, and that they'll forget they're guard dogs.

"Hello babies," I croon. "I missed you."

"What about me? Did you miss me?"

I lift my head to see Danny walking towards me. I grin and stand, lifting my fist and clocking him in the shoulder as soon as he stops. "I always miss you, D. What're you doing here?"

"Club meeting."

"You mean *clubs*." I laugh.

Danny's dad Spike used to be president of a different club, the Heaven's Sinners, but over the years the two clubs basically combined, even though Spike still protests that no one stripped him of his title and therefore he refuses to completely let go. It's very rare and unusual for two clubs to combine the way they did, but considering they all got along so well and were like brothers, it seemed like the smart thing to do.

"When I'm president and Jack steps down, I'm taking over these clubs and making them one—end this squabble."

I snort. "What will you call it then? The Heaven's Knights?"

Danny grunts. "Or the Hell's Sinners."

"Or that."

He grins. I study him. Danny is absolutely breathtaking. He's a perfect mix of his dad and mom. His dad, Spike, is ruggedly handsome, and Danny got his messy blond hair and stocky, muscled build. But he has his mom, Ciara's, yellow eyes. They're unlike anything I've ever seen, and are so piercing it's hard to stare at him and not get lost.

"You're being a creeper, Ant."

I jerk and stop staring at him, then I cross my arms. Danny has called me Ant since I was little. He says it's because I'm no bigger than an ant, which is probably true. I've got my mom's pixie build—probably the only thing I got from her. My dark hair, olive skin and blue eyes all come from Dad.

"I'm not being a creeper; I'm checking you out."

Danny grins, showing me his flawless dimples. "Oh yeah?"



“Don’t flatter yourself, D. You’re like my brother.”

His grin gets bigger. “Doesn’t mean I don’t like being told I’m good looking.”

I roll my eyes. “Dude, you know you’re good looking. Now, where’s my dad?”

“Shed. You coming to the cookout? We don’t see you these days.”

I shrug. “I’m a free woman now; I’m enjoying discovering who I am and what I want.”

Danny’s eyes darken. “That doesn’t include a man, does it?”

I huff. “Danny, you’re not my father, and yes, it does include a man . . . when I find one.”

“Not your father,” he says, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. “But I am your best friend. He has to come through me first, and let me assure you, Ant, it won’t be pretty.”

“Maybe you should focus your attention on Skye and we can all move on.”

Danny’s eyes flash, and he scowls at me. “Not sure what you’re talking about.”

But he knows. He knows he’s been into Skye, Cade and Addison’s daughter, since she turned eighteen. But there is one problem—that wouldn’t go down well with their fathers. Cade and Addison never had any other children, so Skye is all they have, and Cade is ridiculously protective of his little girl. Even though he loves Danny like a son, he doesn’t want this life for Skye and will do anything to keep her away from it.

Skye is my niece, which is a somewhat difficult situation to explain when people see us together and assume we’re best friends. She’s only a couple of years younger than me. My dad was with Addison’s mom when he was a lot younger, and therefore he had Addison early in life. Twenty years later, he met my mom and they had me. There’s quite an age gap between Addison and I, but it’s never bothered us.

I glance back at Danny and see he’s staring at me, slight longing in his eyes even though he’s trying hard to hide it.

“Oh, you know what I’m talking about.” I laugh, turning and walking off.

“Always good to chat, brat,” he calls after me.

“Love you, too, D!”

I walk past the old red-brick clubhouse that has seen better days and head down to the sheds that lie behind it, where the club members spend most of their time. I reach for the handle and swing it open, no hesitation. My eyes take a moment to adjust, and I hear Spike's booming voice echo through the room. "Now there's a pretty damn face I haven't seen in a while. How you doin' there, little Ava?"

My eyes adjust and I see Spike, Cade, Jackson and Muff all sitting around a giant round table like a bunch of kings. I grin at Spike and lift my hand in a wave. "Hey Spike, I'm good."

My dad stands up and with a huge smile, he walks over to me. The minute he gets to me, he wraps his big arms around me and pulls me up against his body. My dad's chest has always been my comfort, my happy place, so I close my eyes, wrap my arms around him and breathe him in. He has a unique smell that I hope I never get to lose.

"How you doin', baby girl?"

"Hey Daddy."

I pull back and look up at him, and the corners of his eyes crinkle with a smile. "Didn't know you were comin' in." He keeps his arms around me and turns me towards the group. "Would've changed my meeting."

"Mom told me to swing by, and I wanted to say hi before I went to work."

"My baby doesn't come and see me enough anymore."

I squeeze his waist. "Sorry."

"Hey princess," Cade says, standing and walking over. He leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead. "How you doin'?"

I smile up at him. Cade is even more ridiculously good looking than Dad. His hair has only a slight amount of grey, but he is aging like a boss. His eyes are incredibly green and his skin incredibly olive. He's built, he's tall, and he's masculine. No wonder my sister adores him.

"I'm good, bro," I tease. "How are you?"

His grin gets bigger, and I get a glimpse of the incredible dimples beneath his three-day growth. "I'm kicking on."

"You see my boy on the way out?" Spike asks, pulling out a cigarette and leaning against the table.

"Those'll kill you, Uncle Spike," I say, and he grins.

Yep, Danny is a mini Spike all the way, only Spike has brown eyes that are warm and a little mischievous.

“Something’s gotta.”

“Don’t say that; I’m not ready for you to die yet.”

He winks at me. I shake my head and wave to Muff, another club member, laughing at the conversation. Muff is the most uniquely beautiful kind of man. He’s oddly handsome for someone with red hair. He has two kids that I also grew up with, Max and Ebony. “Hey Muff.” I wave.

“Hey kid.” He nods.

I turn back to Dad and look up at him. “I have to go to work.”

His eyes scan over my face, and he cups my chin. “Don’t see you enough, Ava. It’s bad enough my other pain-in-the-ass daughter never comes and visits me, but my baby . . .”

I laugh. Addison will always remain sassy, it doesn’t matter how old she gets, and she drives our dad nuts. He loves her for it.

“Your baby is all grown up with an apartment and a job . . .” I remind him.

“Speaking of that new apartment, I’m sending my boys past a few times a day, make sure you’re safe.”

“Dad!” I groan. “Please don’t. I’m safe. I’m grown. I’ll be fine.”

His eyes flash. “You’ll be fine when I say you are.”

“Stubborn!”

He grins and kisses my head. “For my girls, there will never be enough.”

I huff dramatically and pull back. “Where’s Addi?” I ask Cade.

“Workin’.”

“Skye?”

“Workin’.”

I huff. “Well, then I guess I better get to work too.”

I hug Dad again and then wave to the guys.

“Comin’ to check out your place later, Ava,” Dad says, as I get to the door. “Make sure it’s secure.”

I sigh but smile at him.

“Love you, old man.”

He smiles back. “Love you too, kiddo.”

Bikers.

Yeesh.

~\*~\*~\*~

“Can you fill out these forms for me and get them back before the end of the day?” my boss, Michael, says, staring at my boobs instead of my eyes as he hands me a stack of papers.

I shiver. Gross. If it wasn't for the fact that I couldn't find any other job around here that paid enough for me to live on my own, I wouldn't put up with it. He's never actually done anything, but it's the very idea of him being so creepy that makes me uncomfortable. I try to ignore it where I can, because aside from the odd look here and there, I really don't have anything to go on. He's just one of those men.

“Yes,” I say, my voice sounding slightly disgusted. “Of course.”

He pauses and stares at me, making me even more uncomfortable. “I have a business dinner in the conference room on the weekend. I'd like you to join me and listen in; it'll be a good step in the right direction for you.”

“No problem,” I say, not making eye contact.

“Right, well, come into my office when you're done with these and I'll go over them before you head home.”

Wonderful.

“Okay.”

He reluctantly leaves, but not before his eyes sweep down to my legs and a small smirk appears on his face. When he's gone, I let out the breath I was holding. I put my head down and get the work done, because any extra time spent here means extra time with Michael, and I'm not okay with that.

I manage to get through the papers just before closing time and quickly gather them up, throwing my handbag over my shoulder and rushing down the hall towards Michael's office.

When I reach his door, I glance in to see him sitting at his computer, staring at the screen with an expression I desperately want to be reading wrong. He's got the kind of expression that men get when they're watching . . . porn. I should know. I've seen it; growing up in a motorcycle club didn't make innocence easy. I raise my hand to knock, but suddenly feel like I'm intruding, and I'm really not sure if I *want* to interrupt him right now.

I drop my hand back down and the movement catches his eye. He stares at me and closes his laptop. He doesn't get up from his seat, but instead gestures that I come in. I plaster a fake smile on my lips and walk inside, placing the papers on his desk. “I'm all done. If there's nothing else, I'll get going.”

“That’s all. As always, wonderful job.”

God, the way he’s looking at me really does make me uncomfortable.

“Well then,” I say, turning, “goodnight.”

A crash behind me causes me to spin back around. All Michael’s pens are on the ground. “Oh, silly me. Would you mind picking those up, Ava?”

My stomach turns and I very carefully try to pick up the pens without exposing anything to his prying eyes. It doesn’t stop me feeling like I’m naked on the floor with him watching me, and that feeling makes everything inside me want to shrivel up. I stand quickly and hand the pens to him, my fingers trembling. “Do you have your own car?” he asks, randomly.

I blink. “Pardon?”

“A car. Do you have one?”

“Yes, ah, yes.”

“So no boyfriend to come and collect you?”

That question makes me uneasy, and I want to try and avoid it, to lie, to tell him I have a boyfriend, but lying has never come easily to me, and I stumble. I open my mouth to answer, but nothing comes out except a pathetic stammer. He smiles.

“I should go,” I say.

“Of course. Goodnight, Ava.”

I turn and get out of there as fast as my legs will carry me.

## CHAPTER 2

### PAST – LUCAS

The smile on my face gets bigger and bigger as I watch my daughter, Shylie, running around, her dark hair flowing behind her as she throws her little body towards the swings. She curls her fingers around the chains and pulls her body on, then enthusiastically stretches her legs out, back and forth to get the swing moving. Laughing, I go over and take the chain, gently pushing her.

“Higher, Daddy!”

“No way, baby.” I chuckle. “You’ll go flying.”

“I want to fly!” she cries, her laughter filling the air.

“Maybe one day.”

“Hey there.”

I turn and see my wife standing beside me. I didn’t hear her approach. She looks up at me, her face alight with happiness. Jennifer isn’t the first person I’ve loved. My first wife and Shylie’s mother, Rachel, died giving birth to her. I quickly became a single dad and struggled for the first two years. When I met Jennifer, she fell in love with me and Shylie, and quickly filled the empty role. She’s been a great step-mother and loves Shylie like she’s her own.

“Hey gorgeous.” I smile, leaning down and kissing her softly, while my hand stays out to push Shylie when she comes swinging back towards me.

“I got everything I need for supper. Are you coming home?”

“I’m going to push Shy a bit longer, but I’ll be back soon.”

“All right, darling.” She grins, waving to Shylie as she crosses the road to our little apartment.

I work hard in the force, having become detective just after Shylie was born. It was hard as a single father and a cop, but I managed to do it with the help of my family, Rachel’s family, and then Jennifer, when I met her. I do my best to give my little girl the life she deserves, but it isn’t always

easy. Even now both Jennifer and I work to keep the rent paid, but each week gets a little easier.

“Come on, baby,” I say, scooping my daughter into my arms and bouncing her as we walk towards the apartment. “It’s time for dinner.”

“Yippee!” she cries.

Yes, the light of my life.

~\*~\*~\*~

“So how was work today?” Jen asks later that night as we lie in bed.

“It was good. Same shit, different day.”

She laughs softly. “Such a masculine answer.”

I grin and flip her over so my body is covering hers. Jennifer is a beautiful woman, with long blond hair and blue eyes, and she’s tall as hell, with legs to no end. She didn’t have a good life, and struggled with drinking at a younger age. She pulled through and has been solid in the few years we’ve been together.

“Did you expect anything less?” I ask, nuzzling her neck.

“No, I really didn’t.”

“How was work for you?”

She hooks an arm around my neck. “It was pretty good—better now I’m at home.”

I trail my lips over her shoulder. “Always is.”

“Hmmm, are we still going to my parents for the weekend tomorrow?”

I grunt. “If we have to.”

She giggles. “Come on, they’re not so bad, and they adore Shy.”

“Still, they drive me batshit fucking crazy.”

“I’ll be with you, and just think—we can swim all weekend. You know how much Shy loves to swim.”

I smile at the thought of my little girl swimming. She adores the water. She might only be four but she would spend all her time in the water if I let her. I promised her that she could start swimming lessons in the new year, and no doubt she’ll make sure I don’t forget.

“Swimming is good, if we get some time together to do it alone,” I murmur, nipping Jenn’s neck.

“You’re such an animal,” she scoffs.

Jenn doesn't have the kind of sex drive I do, but we make it work. She's never been an overly sexual woman, but she's loving and she's kind, and I couldn't ask for anything more.

"You wouldn't have me any other way."

She laughs. "No, I wouldn't, even though you drive me crazy with your need."

"Mmmm," I say, pecking her lips.

"Mmmm yourself," she whispers, rolling us over.

Life is damned good.

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## CHAPTER 3

### NOW – AVA

“So your boss is still a creeper?” Skye asks, throwing herself down onto my cheap couch that has seen better days.

“Yep,” I answer, popping a grape into my mouth. “Total creeper.”

“What’re you going to do about it?”

I shrug. “What can I do? My options are go and work as a waitress or keep my job and put up with him. I’m gaining so much experience in law working there.”

“That is a problem,” she says, crossing her legs and studying me.

“Maybe he’s just one of those creepy guys, and you have nothing to worry about. All talk, no action kind of thing . . .”

I nod. “Yeah, I think you’re right. I’ve been there six months and he hasn’t done anything.”

“So, are the rest of the crew coming tonight?”

I wiggle my brows. “Yes, and really, you’re asking if Danny is coming.”

She snorts. “I didn’t say that.”

“Mmmhmmm.”

She throws a grape in my general direction. I laugh just as the doorbell rings. I don’t even get the chance to answer before it swings open and the crew comes piling in. Danny has his arm around Mercedes, his younger sister who has just turned twenty. Max is rolling his eyes, carrying an arm full of beer.

“Beer, Max?” I ask, getting up to help him. “You pay the price if Spike finds out you’re giving Mercedes beer.”

“Mercy ain’t getting beer.” He grins, patting my head and flashing a grin at Mercedes. “It’s all for me.”

I laugh and spin to Danny and Mercy. “Hey you two, how’s it hanging?”

“Little to the left,” Danny says, thumping my arm before walking past me, shouting, “Yo, Max, throw me one.”

My eyes roll back to Mercy. “How’s it going, Merc?”

She smiles; god, she’s beautiful. She looks like Spike—blond hair, big brown eyes . . . stunning. “It’s good, how are you, Ava?”

“You know,” I say, shrugging. “Kicking on.”

“Yo, kiddo,” Skye calls. “Come sit by me and tell me where you got that adorable dress.”

Mercy goes over and plonks down next to Skye, and the two of them start chatting. Skye’s green eyes light up, and she starts waving her hands around animatedly during the conversation. I laugh, walking into the kitchen, and snatch a beer from Max’s hand just after he’s opened it. He frowns, but his eyes are alight with humor.

“How’s it going, boys?”

“Kicking,” Max answers. “You’re looking good, Ava. You been working out?”

I snort. “If you call the act of eating cheeseburgers working out.”

Danny chuckles. “It’ll catch up to you one day, Ant.”

I take a drink of my beer and scrunch my nose up at him. “You’ll still be my friend.”

“Probably, but I’ll have to come up with a new nickname for you. Ant just won’t cut it.”

I laugh.

“How’s the job?” Max asks, following me as I turn to head back out into the living room.

“It’s good,” I semi-lie.

“Awesome.”

We all sit in the lounge room and spend the next four hours chatting and laughing. I honestly don’t know where I’d be without these guys.

~\*~\*~\*~

“Lots of break-ins around that area,” Dad says down the phone later that night after everyone is gone and I’m getting ready for bed. He calls every night; he always has. If he was away, he’d call; the moment I moved out, he calls.

“Dad,” I say, fighting a yawn. “It’s fine.”

He scoffs. “What’re you goin’ to do if someone breaks in?”

“Shoot them.”

He chuckles.

“You taught me well, old man. Now will you stop worrying?”

He grunts. “I’ll never stop worrying about you, baby girl. If something ever happened to you . . .”

I smile, and my chest warms. “I know, and that’s awesome, but I’m perfectly safe.”

He sighs. “Fine, but I’m still sendin’ a guy past if they’re in that area.”

Compromise. I can work with it. “I can live with that.”

“How’s work?” he asks, finally changing the subject.

“You already asked me that today . . .”

“Good point. Did you have a good day, though?”

“Yeah. Max, Mercy, Skye and Danny came by tonight.”

He groans dramatically. “Trouble wrapped in one pretty bow.”

I laugh. “I’m sure we take after our parents.”

“Can’t deny that.”

“I can only imagine the trouble you guys got up to when you were younger. It’d probably be too hard for you now, though, Granddad.”

He grunts. “Not ready to be a granddad again, kid. Skye is enough for any one man. Give me a few more years, yeah?”

“Does going from old to ancient upset you?”

He laughs. “My girl has a sense of humor tonight.”

I smile. “Always.”

“Right, go to bed. I was just callin’ to check in.”

“And making sure I’m still alive.”

“Got your back forever, kid. You know that.”

“I know,” I whisper. “Love you, old man.”

“Love you too, baby. Night.”

“Night Daddy.”

I hang up and smile at the phone before placing it on my bedside table. Yes, where would I be without them indeed.

## CHAPTER 4

### NOW - AVA

Work is slow on Saturday night, but I push through the conference and Michael's creepy advances and then head out to my car. I'm supposed to head straight over to the cookout at the club, but I don't even know if it's still happening. Mom called earlier telling me Dad had to go and deal with business, and she wasn't sure if he'd be back. He's been doing that a lot lately.

Whatever is bothering the club, it's kept my dad on his toes. He's been there a lot, and the guys have been going on a lot of rides, which usually means they're trying to deal with something. It makes me uneasy when he does this, but there's nothing I can do about it. I've learned to push past the worry and accept that it's just his life and it always will be.

I reach my car, and it's darker down here than usual. I look up to see the lights are dimmed—one of them has blown. Great. I plonk my handbag on the hood of my vehicle and start digging around, trying to find the keys. I come across everything *but* them. God, I hope I didn't leave them in the building, because I'd really rather not go back in and talk to Michael again.

Why do us women keep so much shit in our handbags?

I fiddle until I finally hear them jingle. I move my hands a little more and eventually grasp them. I lower my hand and go to step to the driver's door when I feel a sudden sharp jab in my neck. My hand shoots up and I gasp, but whatever hit me is moving like fire in my system. I'm swaying on my feet in seconds. Everything in my vision begins getting blurrier and blurrier, and I begin to panic. I try to see where the sting came from, but I'm too unsteady to even move. Out of the blue, a hard hand goes over my mouth and another around my waist and I'm being hauled back.

Michael? Is it Michael?

My mind goes fuzzy and I numbly try to kick my legs, but that's quickly taken from me when my world goes black.

~\*~\*~\*~

I'm cold.

The stone pressed against my back and the harsh concrete against my bottom are stark reminders that I'm somewhere I shouldn't be. I'm surrounded by darkness, but it isn't silent. I can hear another ragged breath beside me. I'm too afraid to speak, to ask him or her why we're here, because that might mean facing the situation.

I've been taken.

I don't know by who, but someone drugged me and took me from my work parking lot. It happened so fast, almost unrealistically so, and I don't remember a single thing after my world went blank. All I know is that I'm here, and I'm scared, and I have no idea how the hell I'm going to get out of this. I don't even understand why I was taken.

"Are you awake?" a quiet, young voice rasps.

I blink. A girl. There is a girl in here with me. That makes my brain go into overdrive as I wonder why the hell there is another girl in here, and what the hell whoever took us wants. I've never heard her voice before, I'm sure of it, so there's no way our kidnapping could be related, right?

"Y-y-yes," I whisper. "Where are we?"

"I don't know," she cries. "I don't understand. I was just waiting for a cab and . . ."

Before she can finish and I can ask her who she is, what her name is, and if she knows why we're here, the door swings open and a blinding light hits my eyes. I gasp and try to move my hands, but they're shackled. I squirm and blink, desperate to see what has entered the small, terrifying space. The girl beside me starts to cry and plead.

I'll never plead.

I was raised with bikers, my dad being president of the biggest club in the state.

No, I won't plead. I will analyze; I will fight; I *will* figure this out.

They'll know I'm missing—they'll try and call and they'll know. They will find me.

*Right?*

"Ah, you're both awake I see."

I don't recognize the voice, but it's husky and scary. My vision slowly clears and I see a massive man standing at the door, two others squished in

beside him. He's huge, with black eyes and scars on his face. He isn't that old, definitely younger than my dad, but he's got a coldness in his eyes that makes my blood run cold. I've seen many men, seen many monsters, but never one like this. Never one so empty.

"Let me go," the girl beside me sobs.

I turn and glance at her. She's small, blond, possibly my age. I've never seen her, that's for certain. My stomach lurches. Why have they kidnapped two girls—two *pretty*, young girls? Are they going to sell us? Are they part of a sex trade? Or perhaps they want us for themselves.

Keep calm.

Keep. *Calm*.

I take a shaky breath, fight down the bile and unrestricted fear rising up in my throat, and glance back at the man who is looking at me. I shiver when his eyes connect with mine. It's as if he can read my mind, see into my very soul. It's unnerving, and I look away quickly.

"You're just like him, aren't you, Ava?"

He knows my name.

*That's not good.*

"Like who?" I croak, my throat a dry, scratchy mess.

"Like Jackson."

My dad?

God.

This isn't about a sex ring, or a sick need to capture pretty young girls, it's about my dad and, obviously, the club. It's why he's wanted extra security lately. It's why he's been calling me more than usual. It's why my mom has had that look in her eyes, that worry. Something is going down and that something has just caught up with me.

That doesn't explain girl beside me. It doesn't explain why there are two of us.

"What do you want from me?" I whisper.

"I want to send a message."

I shiver.

"What about me?" the blond girl beside me cries, shaking. "I've done nothing. I don't even know who you are!"

He turns angry eyes to her, and she instantly clamps her lips together, but her sobs still bubble up and explode from her mouth. "Shut up. I'll speak to you when I need to fucking speak to you."

She cries harder.

I swallow down the vomit.

“If you think I know something, I don’t,” I croak.

“Oh,” he says, stepping in, smirking. “I know you don’t know anything; that’s not why you’re here. Let me explain.”

I start to shake.

“You see, both your fathers”—he points to the girl, then to me—“have been conspiring against me. They want me gone. They want me dead. They don’t like what I’m bringing to the table. I don’t like what they’re planning, so I’m sending a message. What better”—he laughs—“than their little girls?”

I’m going to be sick.

I feel the fear right down to my bones.

“Please,” the other girl shrieks. “Please, let me go!”

I wish she’d stop crying. Crying won’t stop this kind of man. I have to think; I have to breathe. There has to be a way out. Dad will come. He will. He always does. He’s never let anyone touch me. *Never.*

The girl gives another wail and the man spins to her. “Shut up,” he roars, and then clicks his fingers and one of his men steps forward, shooting his foot out and hitting her in the jaw. Her head swings to the side and I gasp, tears burning under my eyelids as her head jerks back against the wall and her screams become muffled in her severe pain. *Monster.*

“Stop it,” I scream. “You monster. Leave her alone. Leave her! I’ll fucking kill you.”

He throws his head back and laughs before clicking his fingers once again. His assistant kicks out again, connecting with my cheekbone this time. Pain rips through face, and my skull pounds. I gasp and try desperately to breathe. So much pain. I’ve never felt anything so painful in my life. “I see you’ve got your father’s backbone.” He laughs.

“Just tell us what you want,” I whisper.

He smiles, and it terrifies me to my very core. “As I said, I need to make a statement. I’m not a nice man, Ava. Your life means nothing to me, and neither does hers.” He jerks one finger at the gasping girl. “So today, one of you will die, and one of you will live. And the great news is, for being so brave, you get to decide which one of you walks out of here to deliver my message.”

That’s when my world goes black once again.

~\*~\*~\*~

*Hours later*

The cold gun presses against my temple and I'm screaming, I'm fighting, I'm doing everything I can to get out of the strong, hard grip of a man who has his hand curled into my ponytail and his gun shoved into the side of my head. I waited. I prayed. I begged. I made promises I couldn't keep, but the cold, hard truth is that one of us is going to die now.

And there is nothing I can do about it.

My eyes meet hers. I still don't know her name. She's still screaming. Still begging. Still sobbing. She's yelling that it should be me. That I should die. That she has more of a life. More of a chance. How do you choose whose life is worth more? How do you decide that you're worth more, or she's worth less? Everyone wants their own lives to be long and fulfilling, no one wants it to end, but how many of us are heroes?

How many of us would lay down our chance to give someone else theirs?

She doesn't deserve to die.

*But neither do I.*

So I'm fighting; it's all I've got left. It's pitiful and pointless. There is no escape. They are going to carry out their plan, because men like these don't get found, we don't get rescued, and there is no happy ending. I've been hit and beaten, but not by the man who captured us—no, he's smart and has ordered other people to do his dirty work. He's smart. Cunning. Leaving no trace of him behind.

Today, someone will die.

And I'm going to be the one who decides who that is.

I can't do that. *I can't.*

"Let me go!" I scream, angrily. "I'll give whatever message you want, anything you want—just let her and I go."

The man laughs, completely amused by my pathetic begging. "That's not going to happen, Ava. Your fathers are messing with my plans, and I don't like it. If I let you both go, what kind of message have I sent? None. So, you have five seconds to make a choice, or I pick one and make it slow and torturous. You don't want that, do you? Because I can assure you, it'll be ugly and I do like to make a mess."



God no. I don't want to die. I don't want her to die either. I certainly don't want to see anyone get tortured.

Her screaming gets louder.

"Please, I'll do anything else," I plead, my voice breaking. "Anything."

His eyes harden and he grins. "I need him to see the fear, the pain, the way I've broken you. I need them to be shaken and terrified of what I'm going to do next. To do that, I need one of you alive to send back, but if you don't make a choice, it'll turn ugly, fast. You don't want that, do you Ava?"

"No," I cry, fighting back the tears. I don't want to cry; I don't want to show weakness, but I'm scared. I'm so scared. "I don't want to die; I don't want her to die either. There has to be another way. Another message."

"I could cut your arms and legs off, send you back like that." He laughs, and his assistant slams the gun into my temple. I yelp loudly, and I can't fight the tears any longer. "But that would be no fun. I'd like to watch you suffer, watch you choose between your life and hers—watch Jackson's little girl *break*."

"Don't you have children?" I screech. "What would you do if this was them?"

He leans in closer. "I'm not that stupid," he hisses. "Now make a choice."

She starts screaming.

I start crying harder.

"Make a choice," he bellows into my ear.

"Please," she screams. "Please. I'm just a girl. I have a life. A boyfriend. A family. Please. I didn't do anything wrong."

She didn't do anything.

She has a boyfriend.

A life.

A family.

Just like me.

"Make a choice!" he bellows, and his assistant cocks the gun, letting me know he'll pull the trigger. Somehow he's managing to hold me and the gun, or maybe I'm just too weak to keep fighting.

Fear courses down my spine and I start to fight again, harder and harder, begging and pleading. I want to wake up from this nightmare. I want my dad to bust in and save me. I want this all to be a bad dream. I don't want this. *I never wanted this.*

“Don’t kill me,” she screams, the nameless girl, the girl who is just like me. “Kill her. I’ll make the choice. Kill her. I don’t care. I don’t care. I want to live. Please. Let me live.”

“But the choice isn’t yours, is it?” the man roars. “Now make a fucking choice!”

“No,” I cry. “No. I can’t. I won’t.”

He clicks his fingers and his assistant moves the gun quickly and shoots it, hitting the girl in the leg, scaring me so badly I wet my pants. She drops down and starts screaming in agony. I start screaming now too, my knees buckling, fear making me vomit.

“He’ll shoot a bit of her every single time you hesitate.”

So much blood. Her terrified eyes. She’s clutching her leg, bellowing, so afraid.

“A choice,” he roars. “You or her.”

“Please,” I wail.

His assistant shoots again, hitting her other leg. More screaming. More terrified pants. I need to find another way. There has to be another way. I try once more to fight, claw, squirm, kick, anything to get out of his hold, but it’s no use. He’s massive and I’m just too broken.

“A choice!”

I shake my head frantically. “No, please. I’ll do anything else. Anything.”

“A choice!”

Her screaming. My screaming. The gun. The fear.

“A choice!” he roars so loudly, the gun is slammed into my temple once more. My world starts spinning, and fear is gripping me so tightly I vomit on myself and the man holding me.

He’s going to do it. He’s going to kill me.

I don’t want to die. Daddy. Please. No. I don’t want to go. I’m not ready. I’m not ready. Please.

“One.”

“No,” I wail. “No.”

I see my dad, smiling. I see my sister and my mother. I see Danny and Skye, Mercy and Max. I see them laughing.

God, I haven’t even had someone make love to me. I haven’t lived. I haven’t had a boyfriend like the other girl. I’ve barely had the chance to venture out on my own. I’m not ready.

“Two.”

“Please, I can’t. I don’t want to. I don’t.”

My dad’s face, his eyes firm. *“Always be brave, Ava. No matter what life throws at you. Don’t be a hero. Just be brave. Fight. Do whatever you have to. Remember what I taught you.”*

Daddy. *No.*

“Three! MAKE A FUCKING CHOICE OR I’LL BLOW YOUR FUCKING BRAINS OUT,” he roars loudly.

Fear destroys me. It takes over. And for a split second, I don’t think. I’m so afraid. There’s so much noise. Everything is clouding my senses, and all I can think about are the looks on my parents’ faces when they hear the news . . .

“Her!” I bellow. The second it leaves my lips, I start fighting, regretting my words instantly. “No! Me! Me! Please, not her . . . I didn’t mean . . . not . . .”

His assistant fires.

The bullet goes right between her eyes, splattering her in ways I’ll never forget.

“No,” I scream, crumpling to the ground as the man lets me go. “NO! I said me . . . I said . . .”

“Oh well,” he mutters, glancing at the girl’s body as he walks past, stepping over it. “I guess you weren’t quick enough to change your mind.”

“Me,” I croak.

*I said me.*

Darkness takes over.

# CHAPTER 5

## THEN – LUCAS

There is nothing in the world like the panic that crushes your chest when you can't find your child. Sure, there are mornings you wake and they aren't there, and slight panic hits before you find them doing something innocent like eating breakfast in front of the television.

It's when you can't find them that the real terror sets in. When you search in cupboards and under beds, praying it's just a game, but every empty space you turn over that they aren't in, reality hits. Something is wrong. Have they gone down the road? Did a stranger come to the door? How could something so small just disappear?

I woke that way this morning. I knew the second I opened my eyes that something was wrong. Shylie wasn't in her bed and she's *always* in her bed. She wakes me with a smile and a giggle. Not this morning. I know even before I start to search that something is off.

"Where is she?" I bark, rushing down the hall looking for my daughter.

Jennifer is rushing down the halls behind me, calling for Shylie, both of us feeling the gripping terror that's holding our chests hostage. Maybe Jenn's parents took her to breakfast and there will be a note on the table explaining all this away.

But something deep in my belly doesn't feel right.

"What's going on?"

When Jenn's mom steps out of her room, followed by her dad, the panic gets real.

"I can't find Shylie!"

"Maybe she's watching television downstairs?"

"She's not," Jennifer pants, "She's not in the house; we've searched everywhere."

"Calm down," Dad says, tying his robe. "She may be playing outside."

And just like that, with one word, I know exactly where my baby girl is. My daughter who loves to swim. My daughter who loves water. My daughter who would do anything to get into it.

I turn and run as hard and fast as I can, stumbling down the stairs, my heart lurching into my throat. I reach the back door and fumble to open it but it's already open. I slide it across, my eyes going to the pool gate.

A chair lies on its side next to it, and it's open.

My entire body feels like it's been lit on fire. A raging, burning pain travels from my toes right to my head. I run towards the gate, praying, begging, pleading that nothing has happened to my baby girl. I slip on the water surrounding the pool, landing on my hands and knees, and I see her.

I see her there, floating, her tiny body floating.

An agonized bellow is ripped from my throat, and I launch myself into the pool, taking her blue, cold body in my arms. I swim frantically to the side, laying her down, and instantly beginning CPR.

"Oh god," I hear Jennifer scream. "Call nine one one!"

I pump and breathe, pump and breathe, getting some life into my baby. Her cheeks pinken slightly, and I can feel a faint pulse. She's still alive. God, she's still alive. I pray as tears run down my cheeks, pray that she'll make it, pray that the one thing she loved won't be the thing that takes her from me.

*God dammit, please.*

~\*~\*~\*~

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Black, we did everything we could, but I'm afraid Shylie has passed away."

The words come at me, but they don't penetrate. I stare at the grey, balding doctor in front of me who's telling me he did the best he could. How do I know he did? How do I know he fought hard enough? Maybe he didn't try long enough—maybe I didn't try long enough. Jennifer's screams fill the halls, but I'm just standing there, numb.

It can't be true.

"But she was alive when the ambulance took her," my mother sobs. "She was alive!"

"I'm sorry, madam. There was too much damage. She didn't make it." Didn't make it.

My baby. My innocent, sweet, little girl.

“It’s all my fault,” Jenn’s father cries, his voice pained. “I should never have gotten that pool.”

Isn’t it strange how we do that? When something awful happens, we regret decisions made earlier. If only we’d thought of everything before, maybe we could have prevented all death and accidents.

“Lucas?” Jennifer sobs. “Luke?”

I can’t feel anything.

I can’t see.

It’s a dream—it has to be.

There is no way the only thing in my life I love with every beating part of me is gone.

No way.

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## CHAPTER 6

### NOW – AVA

I stumble down the sidewalk, blood running down my face, dried pieces of god knows what on my clothes. I don't know where I'm going—I just know I'm moving. Quickly. Brokenly.

They let me go. I woke from my nightmare, and I was alone in a dark alley. Her body was gone. They were gone. I was just . . . left broken. I got up. I ran. I don't know where I'm running to.

*I let her life be taken.*

*They shot her because of me.*

I allowed a second of weakness to enter my heart; I allowed her life to be worth less than mine for long enough for him to decide just that. I would have given my life. I would have, but in a moment of pure, blinding fear and weakness, I made the wrong choice—I said something I didn't mean. Now she's dead. A girl my own age. A girl with a future. Dead because of me.

*Monster.*

I trip and fall, my hands scraping across the cold, concrete pathway. A wail leaves my throat, and I drop my head to the sidewalk, sobbing hysterically. Rain begins to fall softly, soaking my numb, cold body. I don't hear anything but my broken cries. I claw at the ground, trying to get the images from my mind. I don't want to see her face for the rest of my life, but I will. I know it.

“Hey.”

I flinch and lift my head, blinking through the haze and the rain to see a man in running clothes squatting down. He's huge, bigger than even my dad, and it's so dark I can't see much of his face, but I can see he's handsome. He reaches out, touching my face with his thumb, then he rubs it between his thumb and forefinger.

“You're bleeding.”

I don't say anything. I don't move. I just stare.

"What's your name?"

"A-a-a-ava," I whisper.

"Ava, are you hurt?"

Yes, so much yes.

"Y-y-yes."

"All right," he says, reaching for me carefully. "My name is Detective Lucas Black. I'm goin' to get you off this street—yeah?"

He could be a murderer, and right now I wouldn't even care. I let him reach for me and lift me into his arms. He's wearing a running tank, and his skin is hot. I can smell him, and he reminds me of my dad, of comfort, so I turn my face into his chest as he starts jogging. He takes me to a nearby police station, probably the one he works at, and as soon as we enter, I lift my head from the comfort of his shirt and see a small woman rushing towards us.

"Lucas?" she asks.

I guess he does work here.

"Unlock my office for me, will you, Amelia? I found her on the street like this when I was out running."

"Of course. Do you want me to call anyone?"

"Not yet. I just need to check her out."

Amelia nods and rushes off, and I tilt my head back to see Lucas staring down at me. He has brown eyes, so brown they might as well be black. His hair is long and messy, but right now it's plastered to his forehead, giving him a dangerous look. He isn't someone I'd cross.

"How old are you, kid?" he asks, studying my face.

"Nearly t-t-t-twenty-four."

He looks shocked.

"I'm going to take you to my office and you can tell me what went down, okay?"

I can't tell him what went down for more than one reason. The first is that if I tell him a girl died at my hand, I'll go away forever and I can't . . . I can't do that. The second is club rules. My dad would be truly wild if I told a cop what happened instead of him. Hell, he probably doesn't even know I'm still alive. I'll have to lie my way out of this one. "Okay," I say.

Lucas turns and walks down the hall, leading me to a large office. Amelia places a towel down on the sofa, and Lucas carefully helps me sit



down. I cry out in pain as my bottom hits the chair, and a sharp pain shoots through my body and up into my spine. I've been kicked, abused and hit—every part of me hurts.

“Easy now,” Lucas says, kneeling in front of me. “I’m going to get some clothes for you, do a couple of scrapings of your nails and skin for DNA purposes, and then there is a shower just down the hall. When you’re cleaned up, I’m going to ask you what happened. Are you okay with that?”

I nod.

“All right, kid. Just sit tight.”

Kid.

If only I had the innocence of a kid.

He stands, and my head drops, my eyes falling on the grey, well-worn carpet. It remains like that until he comes back, kneeling in front of me again. I sit numbly as he scrapes under my fingernails; he also takes samples of the blood on my skin and clothes. Then he hands me a shirt and some sweats, as well as a towel. I wonder if these clothes are from other victims. Do they wash the clothes left behind to pass on to another person that comes in?

“Just before you shower, I need to ask a personal question.”

I meet his eyes.

“Ava, were you . . . sexually assaulted?” His face is tight, as if the very idea of saying those words hurts.

I shake my head. “No.”

Relief flickers across his face. “You’re sure?”

“Yes, I’m very sure,” I whisper.

“All right. Do you want to call anyone?”

Not right now. I’m not ready to try and explain this.

“I will soon,” I whisper.

“All right. Do you need help getting up?”

I nod, and he helps me up with a hand in mine and another gently on my back. When I’m on my feet, he walks me out and down the hall to a big room that holds some showers.

“You can shower in here; nobody will come in.”

I say nothing; I just keep my eyes to the floor. Lucas waits a few moments before quietly slipping out. I put the clean clothes down and step in, turning the shower on and slowly remove my battered clothes. As they drop to the ground, I see light bruises on my body. My throat gets tight, and

when the water hits my body, it begins turning red as it washes down the drain. I slowly lower to the ground and sob some more.

It's not just my blood disappearing down the drain. It's hers. The girl that got killed because I let her down. I clench my eyes shut and try to fight the images that are insistent on lodging themselves into my mind. I wrap my arms around myself and rock, hearing her pleading voice repeating over and over in my head.

I don't know how long I sit like that, but eventually a light knock sounds outside. "You okay, Ava?"

"Y-y-y-y-yes," I croak.

"Okay. I'll be right here when you're done."

Lucas is nice. So nice. Are they all this nice to women that come in bleeding and broken? I push off the shower floor and turn the taps off, wrapping myself in a towel. Everything hurts, but nothing comes close to the emptiness in my heart. I pull on the new clothes, and then walk straight towards the door.

I don't look in the mirror.

I don't want to see what I've become.

I open the door and Lucas is standing, waiting. I drop my eyes to the floor and whisper, "Thank you. I'm finished now."

"Come on, you need to sit down. Do you want some water?"

I nod.

He leads me back to his office, and I sit down while he gets me some water. When I've taken a few sips, he takes a chair and brings it over, sitting in front of me. "Are you ready to tell me what happened, Ava?"

"I . . ." I look up at him, focusing on the scar on his lip. Did someone hurt Lucas once, too? "Will you report this?"

"It'll depend on what you tell me."

We sit in silence for a while before I start speaking. I have to lie. If I tell him I was taken because of who I am, he'll go after my father; if I tell him it was a random attack, perhaps he won't force me to take it any further. It's worth a shot.

"I finished work on Saturday night," I croak. "I was walking to my car when someone attacked me."

My voice cracks, and my body starts shaking.

"Take your time, Ava. There is no hurry. None at all."

“I didn’t . . . I didn’t see anything. He took me. Plunged a needle into my neck. I woke in a dark room. I couldn’t see. Didn’t know what was happening. I know I tried to get away, and he hit me so hard I got knocked out. I m-m-m-managed to get away through a broken window and got back into town, that’s when you found me.”

A completely unbelievable lie. I know it. He probably knows it.

“You didn’t see who took you?”

“No.”

“Do you have any idea why they took you?”

“No, I didn’t hear anything. I just know they took me, and I got away before they managed to carry out whatever plan they had.”

“Ava, I’m going to ask you a serious question.”

I bite my lip.

“Was there someone else in there with you? I ask because it seems like the blood on you wasn’t just yours, the reason being your wounds aren’t enough to justify the amount of blood. We’ll know more when DNA is confirmed, of course.”

I start to panic. My heart begins to pound in my ears. I gasp and drop my head. One way or another, he’s going to find out there was a girl there with me, I can only hope he won’t make the connection. I have to keep acting as though it was a random attack. I have to protect my father.

Lucas puts a hand on mine, giving me time.

“I don’t know who it was. It was dark. I couldn’t see anything. There was another person there, I don’t know who. T-t-they killed them for trying to escape. That’s all I know.”

Lucas narrows his eyes but doesn’t push. “Okay, thank you, Ava. If you don’t mind, I’d like to take a full statement, and then you’re free to go but we’ll need to talk again.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

“You stay right here, rest, lie down—whatever you need. I’m going to make some calls, and then we’re going to take you to the hospital to make sure none of your injuries are dangerous. We’ll decide what to do after that, okay?”

“Okay.”

He stands and looks down at me. “You did the right thing, telling me what happened. Rest, Ava. I’ll take care of this.”

*Yes, but who will take care of me?*

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## CHAPTER 7

### NOW – AVA

“And you don’t remember any penetration or any kind of assault?” The doctor asks, two hours later as I sit in his office.

“No,” I whisper.

“Okay, Ava. I’m going to just check you out, look at these wounds, make sure you’re okay. If at any stage you need me to stop, or you feel any pain, I want you to say so.”

He’s got kind eyes, the doctor. It’s something I never noticed in a person before, but after being held by a monster that had cold eyes, I can suddenly see so much behind a person’s gaze. I wonder if my eyes have changed. Can people look into them and know what I’ve done?

“Just lie down. I’ll make this as quick as possible.”

I lie back and take myself somewhere else. Somewhere nice. I think of my family and of happy memories. Memories I wonder if I’ll ever have again. How am I to come back from this? How will I ever feel normal again? Will the empty pit in my stomach heal? Will my heart fuse back together? Will this be how I feel for the rest of my life? Broken, cold and alone?

“Okay Ava, we’re all done, you can sit up now.”

I sit up, my body stiff and sore, and I watch as he gathers his things and assures me he will be back soon. I sit quietly in my own thoughts, waiting for him to return. He does, with Lucas in tow. He closes the door softly and then turns to us. “I have done a full examination. She has a mild concussion and will need monitoring. I’ll need to stitch a wound on her cheek, and I’ll give her some antibiotics to prevent infection. Aside from that, everything looks okay. The bruises will fade with time.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Please send the full report to the station as soon as you can,” Lucas says.

“I will, thank you, Detective.”

Detective. Lucas is a detective. Did he already tell me that?

Taking my arm, Lucas leads us from the hospital. When we arrive back at the station, I give a full statement, my voice monotone as I relive my lie. Lucas records and asks the questions but another officer is present in the room also. They then tell me all my rights and give me options on which way I can take this. I just tell them to do what they have to, hoping they'll find nothing. As soon as we're finished, I'm escorted back to Lucas's office.

"Can I call anyone? Someone to take you home?" he asks, studying my face.

"No," I whisper. "I'll make my way home."

"I can't let you do that, but I'll take you. You need to fill the script the doctor gave you, also. To prevent infection."

I nod, staring at my hands.

Lucas is quiet for a second before he squats down in front of me and takes hold of my hands. "Give me your eyes, Ava."

I lift my eyes and stare into his, so dark. Seemingly empty, yet he's given me nothing but kindness. He has a rugged, dangerous face, but he has managed to make me feel nothing but comfort in his presence. This is the kind of man my father and his club run from, the kind of man they despise, yet he's walked me through my darkest hour.

Lucas is dangerous, a dangerous hero.

"You're going to get through this. I know you don't feel like it right now, but I promise you one day, the light is going to shine again. You have to be strong—will you promise me you'll be strong?"

I stare into his eyes. "He took an innocence from me that I don't think I can ever get back."

"He did take it, but you know what he didn't take? What no one can take without your permission?"

I shake my head.

He puts a hand against his chest. "Your heart. That's yours to give. It's also yours to destroy. Don't destroy it, Ava. Fight through this, come out the other side, turn to someone, lean on people—get through. Don't let this take away who you are."

My lip trembles, but no tears come out. There are simply no more to give. "I don't know how to do that. I don't even know where to start."

“You find a way to feel better and slowly, you start crawling out of the darkness.”

“Is there ever really an end to the darkness?”

His eyes flash with a pain that’s so familiar right now. Yesterday, I would have never noticed a pain like that, but today, today I can see it because the same pain is in my own eyes.

“I don’t honestly know, Ava, but what I do know is that the sun will always come up tomorrow. You just have to learn to embrace it.”

I nod shakily.

“Promise me you’ll try?”

“I promise, Lucas. I’ll try.”

But promises were made to be broken.

~\*~\*~\*~

Lucas drops me home and promises me that he’ll call with any further updates. I stare into his brown eyes for the longest moment before he reaches over, squeezes my hand and then leaves me there, alone. I turn and stare at my apartment for what seems like hours, just staring at the dark space that I’m not entirely sure will bring me any comfort right now.

I take one step, then another, and force myself closer to the darkness. My fingers curl around the doorknob and I’ve only half twisted it when I hear the low rumble of Harley-Davidsons coming closer. My heart starts pounding. They’re coming past, probably looking for me, probably hoping I’m here, I’m safe. Dad won’t just lie down and take me disappearing without a trace. He’ll want a story, and I’m just so afraid that if he sees how broken I am, he’ll hate himself for the rest of his life.

I hurry as fast as my body will allow inside the house and walk towards the mirror hanging in my hall. I step in front of it and gasp at the girl standing there, staring back at me. That girl isn’t me. I don’t know who she is, but she isn’t me. Her face is bruised and battered, her eyes are broken and empty, and her face is a face I’ve never seen in my life before.

I step away, clutching my chest.

The Harley-Davidson stops outside.

Heavy boots stomp their way up to my front door.

*Bang bang bang.*

“Ava? You in there? Please tell me you’re in there.”

*Dad.* I hug myself, winding my arms tighter and tighter around myself until I feel like I can't breathe.

"Ava? If you're in there, open up."

I start to cry.

"Baby?"

I slide down the wall, tucking my knees to my chest. The door jingles, then there are more voices, god, there are more people.

"I've got a key, Jacks."

Danny.

No.

"How'd you get a key?"

Spike.

I start crying harder.

I don't want them to see me like this. I'm not ready to explain, to tell a story that I'm so scared to share. So scared of the reality that it makes me a monster. I wasn't strong like he taught me to be. I didn't fight. That man wanted to send me back to Dad broken; he wanted to destroy him through me. I can't do that to him, but how the hell am I going to be normal again?

"She gave me one. We're best friends, old man. Remember?"

"You two shut the fuck up. Give me the key, boy," Dad barks.

"Keep your shirt on, boss," Danny grunts. "She'll be here."

I gasp and drop my head to my knees and just wait. I don't have the energy to run, even if I want to. The door opens, the lights flick on, and then I hear it—a sound I never wanted to hear escape my father's lips. That pained, broken, ragged sound a man gets when he sees his daughter, his baby girl on the floor, sobbing, broken.

He doesn't need to see my eyes to know I'm gone.

He just knows.

"Shit," Spike says, his voice low.

"Ava?" Danny whispers.

A warm hand hits my cheek, soft and gentle. I turn my face into it, because I need him. I need my dad. I need him to make it go away. I need this pain to leave my chest. I want him to tell me it's all just a dream, and that everything will be okay.

"Baby, look at me."

I lift my head, and my eyes hit his. I don't miss it—the moment he sees my face. His eyes scan mine, and they turn to ice. I've only ever seen that



look in my dad's eyes a few times over the years. His big hand slides up and runs over my puffy cheek.

"Who. Did. This? Who hurt you?"

I've never heard his voice like that. For a second I don't recognize it, and I shrink into myself. Spike kneels down in front of me now, too. His brown eyes scour my face, moving over my body, looking for an answer. Danny just stands there, staring at me, looking like someone has just killed his best friend.

"I . . ." I try to speak, but my voice is pathetic and weak.

"Ava, who the fuck did this?"

"Jacks," Spike says, calmly. "Don't yell. Look at her—really fuckin' look. Something has gone down; she's been missing nearly two days. You need to breathe."

Dad stops and his face softens. "Baby," he says, pained, hurt. "What happened?"

"I . . . I didn't . . . I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I . . . I was just going to my car after work," I choke out. "I didn't . . . I didn't see him . . ."

Dad's face hardens, and he cups my cheek so gently, even though he looks as though he is going to explode at any second. "Him?" he rasps out.

"Jacks, stand up, walk outside, take a breath. Let me talk to her."

"My girl is hurt," Dad barks. "I'm not leaving her. Someone took her and fucking hurt her."

"Jacks," Spike growls. "Now."

They stare at each other, poison in their eyes, but Dad stands and he storms outside. I hear something slam. Something breaks.

Danny hasn't moved.

"Tell me what you saw, princess?" Spike says, curling his hand around the back of my neck, gently, kindly. I've seen him do this to Ciara and to Mercy. Comfort.

"I didn't see anything at the time," I whisper. "I was just walking and then . . ."

"Then what, precious?"

"Then I woke somewhere dark. I don't know who had me—he never told me his name. There was another girl. I don't know who. They were saying things about Dad and . . . God . . ."

“Did they . . .?” *Rape*. Did they rape me? That’s what he wants to ask. The question they all fear.

“No,” I croak.

“Do you have any idea who it was?”

Dad will find out who it was, because soon the man he was working with is going to get the call that his daughter is dead. I can’t lie about that, but what I can do is lie about what it did to me. I can lie and tell them that I had no choice, when I did. I could have done more. I could have put myself forward. I let her get killed. I made the choice.

“It was a m-m-m-man that said he wanted to get back at Dad and another man . . .”

“You didn’t see him?”

“No.”

Lie.

“Hear any names?”

“No.”

Lie.

“Where did this happen?”

“I was taken from work but . . . I don’t know where they took me.”

“And they just let you go?”

“Spike,” I sob, my voice broken. “*No.*”

He goes quiet. “Baby girl, tell me what happened.”

I start crying so hard I can’t breathe. I don’t want to say the words. I don’t want them to know what it’s doing to me. This is what that man wanted. This is what he knew would hurt my dad. He knew it would break him. He knew seeing me sink would be his undoing.

“Share with me,” Spike says softly.

“The man said Dad was working with the other man,” I sob. “He said he needed to send a message. He took his daughter, too.”

“And what happened?”

I tremble.

“Dad, stop. She’s breaking. Get Jacks.”

Spike stands, nodding. The minute he’s gone, Danny drops down to his knees in front of me, scooping me into his arms. I clutch his shirt, pressing my face into his chest.

“You’re going to be okay. I’m here. I’ve got you covered.”

I cry harder.

“Give me my daughter.”

*Dad.* I lift my head and see him walking towards Danny and I, his eyes softer now. He’s trying desperately to stop the pain from showing in his face. Danny moves aside and Dad comes in, leaning down and scooping me into his arms. He carries me over to the couch and places me down, holding me to his chest, letting me breathe him in.

“I need you to tell me what happened, baby girl. I need that so I can protect you.”

“I don’t know who he was. He just said he took us to send a message because you were working with someone against him. I . . . he . . . Daddy, he killed her and then let me go.”

*Silence.*

“Baby,” Dad rasps. “My baby. I’m so sorry.”

“I . . . I . . .”

I can’t tell him what it did to me. I can’t tell him it was on me.

“I didn’t see it,” I lie. “I just know he did it, then he sent me back and said I was the message.”

“Motherfucker,” Spike barks.

“Easy Spike,” Dad says. “Not now. Danny, call Addison and Serenity. Now.”

“Daddy,” I croak into his chest.

“Got you, darlin’. it’s going to be okay, you hear me?”

“I’m sorry,” I rasp.

“Never be sorry. Never be fuckin’ sorry, baby.”

He holds me close for a long, long time. It’s only when the front door opens, and I hear my mother’s pained cry and my sister’s sharp gasp that I know we’re no longer alone. Dad lets me go, and I’m instantly in my mom’s arms, and she’s crying and hanging onto me tightly.

“Dad,” Addi whispers. “What happened?”

“She’s okay,” Dad says. “Just shaken up.”

“What happened?” Addi asks again.

“Nothin’ for you to worry about.”

“Dad . . .”

“Addison, I said no.” His voice allows no more argument.

“Baby,” Mom whispers. “Are you okay?”

This is what he wanted; he wanted them to see me like this, broken. I take a deep breath and lift my head, wiping away my tears. “I was just

scared, but I'm going to be okay."

Mom gives me a weak smile and sits beside us, pulling me into her arms. I force a hug back.

I'm fairly sure we both know that's a damned lie.

~\*~\*~\*~

*Two days later*

The knock sounds at my door late in the afternoon. I've barely moved from the sofa since the night I came home. Dad and Mom have come past three times a day, but I've put on my brave face and pushed them out because right now I can't seem to cope with anything or anyone. But the longer I lie on the old couch, the harder I fight to get out of this dark hole I'm drowning in.

The knock goes off again and again.

Dad has people coming past the house every few hours and he installed an expensive alarm system, making me promise to turn it on at all times and if I go out, to let him know where I'm going so he'll know if I'm not back on time.

I push to my feet and walk slowly towards the door. I reach out for the handle and pull it open, stopping dead when I see Detective Lucas standing at my door, arms crossed, leaning against the large wooden pole that makes up my small balcony.

The moment he sees me, he straightens.

I stare.

The night it all happened, I didn't truly take in the man who was so kind to me. I missed how utterly beautiful he is. He isn't beautiful in the cover model kind of way, but instead in the dangerous, deadly kind of way. His brown eyes hold an edge I didn't notice and his hair, which I assumed was just messy, seems more unruly and wild today. He has a three-day growth on his jaw. Has he slept since I came in, or like me, have the thoughts of that night run rampant in his head?

"Ava," he says, his voice huskier than I remember.

I don't recall much about that night, except for feeling utterly ripped to pieces. Still, seeing him standing here, I can't help but think he's not the same person who encouraged me to keep breathing, to keep fighting. This man seems dangerous, a little scary and completely broken.

He's the kind of broken that runs deep. I can tell that just by looking into his eyes. Did he just have a mask on for me that night? Was he being kind because I was so damaged? Now the mask is down, I can see the hardness that lies deep within his heart, and the pain that shields itself behind his eyes. I think it's highly possible that Lucas is the most broken person I've ever met in my life. And I don't even know him.

"W-w-w-what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to check in, talk to you, let you know what's happenin'."

I study him again. He's tall, really tall, and he has tattoos peeking out from his rolled up white button-up. Is his whole body like that? Does he have a picture of a woman or a baby or maybe a brother or sister etched into his skin that would explain the damage written all over his face?

"I . . . okay," I say quietly. "Come in."

I push the door open, and he goes to step inside when a booming voice stops him.

"What the fuck are you doin' here?"

Lucas stiffens and turns slowly. Dad, Cade and Muff are all walking up the front steps followed by the prospect who was watching my house earlier. I didn't hear them arrive because they came in Muff's truck. No warning. Probably a sneaky drive by or maybe they got a call and were in the area. Dad stops in front of Lucas and his big arms cross over his chest, angrily, like he knows him.

Does he know him?

"Jacks, it's been a long time," Lucas says, his voice hard and unlike any voice I've heard him use.

"What the fuck are you doin' on my little girl's front porch, Shadow?"

Lucas turns and glances at me, shock in the brown depths of his eyes. Who the hell is Shadow?

"I'm—" Lucas begins, but I cut him off.

"He's a cop. He found me on the street after I was kidnapped," I say, my voice so pathetic I barely recognize it.

Dad looks to me, his blue eyes icy—I know he's wondering what I've told Lucas. Then they flicker back to Lucas. "You helped her?"

"I found her. She told me what happened, and I made sure she was okay," Lucas says, his voice tight.

"And what exactly did she tell you?"

I flinch.

Lucas narrows his eyes. "I'm sure she told you what happened, Jackson. It's not my place to share. Why, do you have information on who took her? Seems pretty suspicious. I wonder if you know why something like this would happen."

Something flickers in Dad's eyes, and I know he knows that I haven't told Lucas, because if I did, Lucas wouldn't be questioning Dad to see if he had something to do with it.

"No fuckin' idea who took her. I just know whoever it is will fucking pay when I figure it out."

"You and me both," Lucas mutters. "And believe me, I'll figure it out. I *always fuckin' do.*"

The two glare at each other, a deep, scary challenge. "I don't know what you think you know, *Detective*, but I can assure you, it's all wrong. My club had nothing to do with this. You're just clutchin' at straws because you've been wantin' to get something on me for years, and we both know why."

Lucas leans forward. "What I know, Jackson, is that your fucking boys know more than they're saying, and I won't rest until I find out what happened to *her*. You can play your high-and-mighty bullshit to the rest of the world, but I know what you are, and I know what you're capable of."

Why do I get the feeling the *her* he's referring to isn't me? In fact, it seems these two know each other, and whatever story pulled them together isn't pretty.

Dad steps forward, his fists clenched, but Cade wraps a hand around his arm, jerking him back. "Not now, Prez. Not now."

"Dad?" I whisper.

He turns to me, his eyes softening. "I'm sorry, baby. How're you feeling?"

I shrug lightly. "If you don't mind, I want to hear what Lucas has to say to me."

"You want me to stay?"

I shake my head.

"Fine, but I'm waitin' out here."

"Dad . . ."

His eyes flash. "I'm waitin', kid."

I sigh and glance at Lucas. "We can talk inside."

He nods and glares at Dad, whose jaw tics, before stepping inside my house. I close the door softly behind him and when it's locked, Lucas turns

to me. “I didn’t know your dad was a biker.”

“Do you want a drink or something?” I say, trying to avoid his statement.

“No, thanks.”

I nod and gesture to the table, where we both sit.

“Just so you know, kid, your dad bein’ who he is changes this whole investigation.”

“He had nothing to do with it!” I snap.

The last thing I need is a detective sniffing around the club. It never ends well. My dad might be a good man, but he still belongs to a motorcycle club, and that means he does things he shouldn’t.

“You got taken and beaten—seemed like someone was trying to send a message. It makes sense.”

“He didn’t do anything, Lucas,” I whisper.

He narrows his eyes, but doesn’t push. “How you feelin’?”

“I’m fine.”

“Do you lie to everyone who tries to help you?” His voice is calm, unwavering.

*Intense.*

I flinch. “I’m not lying; I’m coping.”

“Something happened in there—something that has your eyes looking so fuckin’ haunted it hurts me to even look at you. You can tell me or you can’t, but either way I’m going to find out, Ava.”

“I didn’t ask for your help, Detective,” I say, my voice scratchy. “You just happened to find me, and I told you what I knew.”

“It’s my job to find out, and I *will*.”

I say nothing. I just stare at him.

He’s so dangerous and dark, like a shadow.

Shadow.

“My dad called you Shadow.”

His eyes flash to me—pain, raw, unadulterated pain. God, now that hurts to look at. “Yeah.”

“Is that your nickname?”

“It was.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m just Lucas.”

I think he’s wrong.

I think he's much more than that.

I say nothing.

"I came by to tell you what we've discovered. We've gotten the DNA results back from the scrapings under your nails, but we're still waiting on the results of the blood. We traced some details we uncovered but unfortunately we have only come to a dead man. It would seem that dead man matched some of the DNA on your skin, so we can assume whoever had you is now dead. We are still looking for information on the other person there with you."

It wouldn't have been the man that took me that they found dead. He was too smart. He set this up so that anything that could lead back to him was erased. The dead man they found must have been the man he had do all his dirty work, and I have no doubt he organized for him to be killed soon after they dumped me. Such a clever, clever man.

"So he's dead," I croak, playing along.

"Seems like it, but we're still investigating further." His eyes flicker to the front door, and I know he's thinking of my dad.

"He wasn't part of this," I whisper again.

"It's my job to worry about that," he says, turning back to me. "It's your job to get better."

I nod.

He holds my eyes.

We both know that isn't happening.



# CHAPTER 8

## LUCAS – THEN

Rain pours down, heavy and chilling, as I watch the tiny coffin being lowered into the ground. I've cried, I've screamed, I've shut down—now I'm just numb. Jennifer is clutching my arm, sobbing hysterically. I want to comfort her, want to hold her, but my arms are stuck hanging limp by my side as I watch my baby girl, my light, my air, being lowered into the ground.

Agonizing pain rips up my throat, and I want to roar. I want to scream. I want to make it all go away. It shouldn't have been her; she wasn't meant to go before me. She wasn't meant to suffer. I am her father, and I let her down. I didn't hear her wake. I knew she loved the pool, and I didn't take extra precautions to stop her dragging that damned chair over and opening the fence.

I let her down.

My mother starts crying uncontrollably as she lays down a rose. It floats to the bottom of the giant, dark hole, and her crying gets harder. Jennifer's nails claw at my arm, and I want to flick her off. I just want it all to stop. I can't go on like this. I can't live without Shylie. I can't possibly move on with my life.

A pained moan leaves my throat. I can't stop it, no matter how hard I try. A silent tear tumbles down my cheek.

I'm so sorry, my angel.

*Daddy is so sorry.*

~\*~\*~\*~

*One month later*

"You can't keep ignoring me!" Jennifer screams, her hands curling into fists as she pounds at my chest over and over.

“I’m not ignoring you,” I say, my voice dead, empty.

“You are. I know you’re hurting; I know because I’m hurting too . . .”

“You don’t know!” I bellow. “Nobody knows. She was my daughter, my baby . . .”

“She was mine too,” she screams, hitting me again. “Mine too!”

“Stop hitting me,” I bark, grabbing her wrists and flicking her off. “You don’t hit me!”

“We have to get through this, Luke,” she sobs, dropping to the ground. “We have to get through this for her.”

My heart burns, and I lower myself to the ground, taking her into my arms, feeling nothing but knowing she’s right—we have to get through this. We have to honor my baby girl’s memory by coping. She wouldn’t want us to live in agony, but the very thought of not thinking about her every second of every day makes me want to fucking die.

“I’m not ready to move on,” I rasp.

“I’m your wife,” she sobs. “I’m hurting too.”

“I know,” I grate out.

“I lost her too.”

“I know.”

She pauses. “We can’t keep going on like this.”

“It’s been a fucking month,” I say, flinging her off. I’m tired of hearing *it’s time to start healing*—it’ll never be time to heal. She was my daughter, for heaven’s sake. I’ll never move on.

“I know,” she sobs. “But you’re shutting down. Each day is getting worse . . . Lucas, I don’t want to lose you too.”

“Then stop,” I growl, leaning in close, “asking me to forget the only thing I was living for.”

Her face breaks, and she forces herself to her feet. “If that’s how you feel,” she whispers, turning and rushing out.

“Jenn,” I croak, my voice broken.

She doesn’t hear it.

I don’t even know if I wanted her to.

## CHAPTER 9

### NOW – AVA

When Lucas is done informing me of all the new updates, I walk him to the door. As soon as I open it, Dad is standing outside with Cade and now Danny. Muff is gone. My eyes flick to Danny, who is glaring at Lucas. Am I missing something?

Dad steps forward, his hand coming out and curling around my arm, pulling me to his side. I flinch. He doesn't notice. None of them do, except Lucas. His eyes zone in on me, and he can see it.

My insides slowly breaking.

"You done here?" Dad asks.

Lucas moves his eyes to him. "Yeah, I'm done."

"She goin' to be safe?"

*Silence.*

"I can't give that information."

Dad steps forward. "She's my daughter, so tell me, Shadow—is she fuckin' safe?"

Lucas leans forward, and in a ragged voice, he hisses, "No she's not safe on the fucking streets alone. But right here, right now, she's safe. If she was my daughter, Jackson, I'd keep a watch."

My eyes widen. I was right; Lucas is scary.

"Get outta my face," Dad hisses.

"Please stop," I whisper.

"Yeah, Prez, slow it down," Cade says, his eyes on me.

"It's time for you to leave," Dad says to Lucas.

"Was on my way," he grunts, then turns to me. "You need anything, you call, yeah?"

"She won't need anything," Dad barks.

My chest constricts. Lucas keeps his eyes on me. I mouth *yeah*. He understands.

He understands something nobody else does.  
I just don't know what it is.

~\*~\*~\*~

"You okay, baby?" Dad asks as soon as Lucas is gone.

"Yeah," I say, avoiding Danny's gaze which is firmly pinned to me.

"I'm just going to get some sleep. I'm feeling a bit off."

"All right, but I'm going to keep a watch here anyway," Dad says pressing his lips to my head. "In case you need someone."

"Thanks Dad," I whisper, pressing my cheek to his chest.

"Your momma is coming past later; make sure you let her in, yeah?"

I smile weakly. "I will."

"She worries, but she cares, Ava. Remember that."

"I know, Dad."

He hugs me tight and steps back. Cade studies my face and then steps in, curling his hand around the back of my neck and kissing my forehead.

"Stay strong, princess."

"I will, thanks, Cade."

"Call Skye. She's been worried."

"I will," I say again.

"All right, boy," Dad says to Danny. "Let's ride. We got shit to do."

"Actually, I'm just going to hang about with Ava," Danny says, not moving his eyes from mine for even a second.

Dad stares at me, then at Danny. "She said she wants to rest."

"And I'll make sure she does. I'll sit and be her watch while you sort your business."

Dad smiles. He trusts Danny, and it makes it easy for him knowing he's here. Danny knows that, and it's exactly why he agreed to stay.

"All right, call me later, baby," Dad says to me, before ushering Cade out.

When they're gone, Danny turns to me with his arms crossed.

"Why did you do that?" I ask gently.

"Because I'm your friend, your best friend, for that matter, and there is something in your eyes I do not fucking like. So I'm stayin' until I know you're okay."

That'll be never.

But I don't argue. I'm tired of arguing.

"Okay," I say, as I disappear into my room.

I sleep for god only knows how many hours, but I'm woken to the shrieking sounds of a girl. I jerk upright, sweating, panting, my heart racing, and I glance around. It takes me a few minutes to realize the screaming didn't come from anyone but instead the agony inside my heart. I press my hand over my chest and steady my breathing. Did I scream? Will Danny know? I wipe the lone tear the slides down my cheek and throw myself out of bed.

I need a distraction. I put on my brave face and walk downstairs. The only way I'm going to protect my dad from the pain intended for him is to act like I'm myself again.

It'll be the hardest thing I've ever done, but I'll do it for him.

I get downstairs and the lights are low, dimmed for comfort. Danny is standing in my kitchen, a bottle of whiskey in his hand, two glasses in the other. He holds them up. "Heard you wake up. Figured you might need this."

Did I scream? If I did, he's not saying anything. I'm grateful for that.

"What time is it?"

"Midnight."

My eyes widen. "And you're still here?"

"I'll always be here."

My heart aches at that.

I step forward, and he pours a glass of whiskey. I take it, shoot it down, and he fills it again. Then we find a spot on the floor and sit, quietly. Neither of us say anything for a long, long time.

"How are you really doing?" he finally asks.

"I feel like I'm dying," I whisper.

"Ava, you need to talk, to let us in."

"What for, D?" I ask, glancing at him. "What's it going to do? It's isn't going to change anything. The only thing that'll make it easier is time, and that seems so far away."

"You can talk to me, vent, get it off your chest."

"I was hurt. It was . . ." I choke on my words, "awful. More than you could ever imagine."

Danny pours us a shot. He knows me. He knows there is nothing he can say that'll make it better, but him being here, supporting me, drinking with

me, that's enough.

"Well, I'm here. You know that."

I know that.

We clink glasses and drink some more.

*It numbs the pain.*

After six shots, it's gone. The pain in my heart, the pain that's lingered in my belly for days has eased and I feel free, like I can breathe again. I laugh, I giggle, I talk without inhibition. It feels as though nothing happened. Maybe it was all just a bad dream. So I drink some more, and I keep doing it until every single part of me is numb, and the only thing I can feel is the shaking of laughter in my chest as Danny and I lie beside each other.

"Remember when Skye went ass up in front of that guy at school she was trying to ask out?"

I laugh loudly. "God, the poor girl—she just tripped and fell right in front of him."

"Landing on her face."

We both laugh.

"But she was so damned beautiful he asked her out anyway." I snort.

"She is so damned beautiful, it wouldn't matter what happened—she'd always be worth asking out."

"So why haven't you done it?" I prod.

"You know exactly why. Cade would lose his shit. Addi would gut me."

"I think you're overreacting."

He snorts. "You know I'm not."

"Okay, you're not."

"So I just have to watch from afar as she gets married and has cute kids."

I scoff. "That's taking it a little far. She's still young and having fun."

He gets a faraway look in his eyes that tells me he wishes it was him she was having fun with.

I don't blame him.

We talk well into the morning, and I drift off to sleep with him beside me on the bed, and it's completely dream-free and I sleep like the dead.

Until the morning.

When it all comes flooding back.

And I start searching for that relief again.

And my life spirals out of control.

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# CHAPTER 10

## THEN – LUCAS

“Where’s Jennifer?” Her mom asks, walking through my house three months after my daughter passed. I know what she sees—a stinking, awful mess. I haven’t bothered to do much but force myself to eat, sleep and wash occasionally. Everything else is as it was, including her room. I haven’t been in there since I lost her. I haven’t . . . I can’t.

“Don’t know,” I mutter, staring blankly out the window. “Probably getting drunk.”

“Lucas,” she says softly, looking to me. “She’s drinking because she’s hurting.”

“She’s hurting?” I laugh bitterly. “And I’m not?”

“Honey, you can’t keep doing this. You can’t keep drowning. You have a job and a wife . . .”

“And no daughter,” I hiss.

“This isn’t what she’d want for you.”

I glare at her. “Don’t tell me what she’d want.”

“Lucas, honey, you’re both suffering, hell, we all are, but we need to support each other. It was an accident. She’s gone—let us mourn her and try to fix what’s been broken.”

“Could you just get over Jenn if she died?” I bark, and she flinches, her eyes, pale and broken, sinking even more.

“Lucas,” she whispers.

“Well, could you?”

“Of course not . . .”

“Then don’t you sit here and tell me how to deal with this. She was my daughter. The only thing I loved more than my own life. She’s gone. She’s gone because I didn’t protect her when I should have; she’s gone because you insisted on getting that stupid fucking pool!”



I know the words are wrong the second they leave my lips, but I can't take them back. The emptiness in my chest has grown to a gaping fucking hole, and any emotion in my body has gone. Her mom stumbles back, her hand clutching her chest. "You don't . . . you don't . . ."

"Just leave," I say, my voice cracking. "Just leave."

She turns, rushing out with a sob.

I turn back and stare at the wall without feeling a damned thing.

~\*~\*~\*~

"Don't judge me!" Jennifer bellows, throwing her hands in the air. "You're allowed to sit here and suffer, but you won't let me deal with this in my own way."

"Drinking is not dealing. I might be suffering, but I'm not drowning it," I mutter.

She snarls. "I'm just trying to cope, like you."

I shrug. "Whatever."

"God dammit!" she screams. "I'm your fucking wife. When is this going to end?"

I look up at her; I really take her in. She's gotten skinnier, her face gaunt, her body frail. She's been doing more than drinking—it's clear now. She always had a problem with alcohol, but I never expected her to turn to drugs.

"When did you start taking drugs?"

She flinches. "I don't know what you're fucking talking about."

"Don't you?" I laugh bitterly. "Because you do remember, I'm a cop, and I've seen a lot of junkies."

"You're not a fucking cop. Right now you're a pathetic shell of a man. Can you imagine what she'd think of you right now? Her daddy, sinking himself, killing himself instead of healing."

Rage flashes across my vision. "Healing?" I bark. "What are you doing then, Jennifer? Are the drugs your way of fucking healing?"

"Yes," she screams.

"Bullshit," I bellow. "Bullshit!"

"You know nothing."

"I know you're smothering your pain. At least I'm facing mine."

“Facing it.” She laughs bitterly. “By sitting here, letting yourself sink. It’s time to get over it, Lucas. It’s time to attempt to move on. I can’t take it anymore, I won’t! If you don’t pull yourself out of this, I’ll leave.”

I look her dead in the eye. “No one is stopping you.”

And just like that, I continue to break everything that matters to me.

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# CHAPTER 11

## NOW – AVA

“And you’re doing okay?” Mom asks, rushing around my house, picking things up.

I stare at her from my spot on the couch, a spot that I’m spending more and more time sitting at. I am barely making it through each day, and trying to keep a brave face is proving to be harder and harder.

“I’m getting there.” I smile weakly. It’s a lie.

She frowns and comes over, sitting beside me, taking my hand. “You know I’m here for you, Avie. Every second of every day. You don’t have to do this alone.”

“I know.” I squeeze her hand. “It’s just going to take time.”

“And let it. Time is good, time heals, but don’t heal alone. I’m so worried about you.”

I smile. It’s broken. She knows it, and I know it.

Mom pulls me into her arms and holds me, like she’s done so many times over the last week. She just holds me, because she knows it’s what I need. She knows that deep down in my soul, it brings me comfort. She and Addi have been great, stopping by every day, helping me out. I’m going back to work tomorrow, and I’m grateful for the distraction. Maybe doing something normal will help quiet the voices in my head.

“Are you excited to go back to work?” she asks, pulling away.

“Excited and nervous,” I admit. “I hope the hours work for me.”

My boss gave me new hours after he changed the structure of the company. I’m now working from twelve p.m. until six p.m. daily. I’m okay with that, because it allows me the mornings to recover from the night before. I dream of her face every time I close my eyes, and therefore sleep is getting scarcer with each passing day.

“I think they’ll be great; it’ll give you the morning to do whatever you want.”

I nod. “That’s true.”

“I’m going to finish cleaning, and then we’re going to go out to lunch, okay?”

I force a smile and nod.

I’ll do whatever it takes to shield them from the raging river inside me.

~\*~\*~\*~

“Ava,” Michael snaps. “You did these reports all wrong.”

I swivel in my chair, flustered. I barely slept last night. Having a few drinks before I went to bed helped, but as soon as the alcohol wore off, I was awake.

It’s only my third day back at work and I’m barely able to get out of bed most mornings. I cry more than I smile. I barely eat, and I’m drinking way more than I should to try and numb the pain.

That means my work is suffering.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I . . . I thought I checked over them.”

“Well, you didn’t. You need to get these done before you go home today,” he barks.

I nod, exhausted.

Michael slams the papers down onto my desk and storms out. I glance at them. Nothing I’m doing is right. I’m running and running, but there seems to be no end. I put my head in my hands and fight back the fear, pain and depression. Doing this each day is getting harder and harder. I don’t honestly know if I can cope anymore.

Where will I go from here, if there is no longer any strength left in my body to fight?

I finish the papers, my mind a blur. When I’m done, I put them on Michael’s desk and leave. I walk out to the front of the building where my car sits—I no longer park underground. The street is busy, and cabs honk as they try to swerve through the compacted traffic. I walk towards my car but stop when I see Lucas leaning against it.

I haven’t seen him since the day he left my house.

“Ava,” he says as I near, his eyes scanning me, narrowing when it becomes clear he doesn’t like what he sees.

“What can I do for you, Detective?” I ask, my voice tired.

He studies me, really looking into my eyes. “I wanted to see how you’re doin’.”

“Do you check in on all your cases?” I ask, meeting his eyes.

He blinks, then says calmly, “Only the ones I worry about.”

“Why would you worry about me?” I say, adjusting my handbag on my shoulder. “I’m fine.”

“I see you haven’t gotten better at lying.”

I flinch. He pushes off the car, his black tee stretching over his chest as he moves in front of me. He’s so tall, so big, so muscled. He’s an intimidating man. He looks down at me, his brown eyes full of concern, his dark hair falling over his forehead. He’s such a beautiful broken man.

“I’m getting through each day,” I manage.

“Is that enough?”

“It really isn’t your problem.”

He crosses his arms. “I’m making it my problem.”

“Why?” I whisper. “Why are you so concerned about how things are going for me? I can only think of one reason you’d want to be here, and it has nothing to do with me, but instead my father and his club.”

Lucas flinches, and his face tightens. He leans down, bringing his face so close to mine. “If that’s the kind of man you think I am, kid, then you’re very fucking wrong. I found a girl on the streets two weeks ago, broken and scared. I see that same girl now—nothing has changed. I care about that.”

“It’s not your duty to care about that. You did your job,” I say, my voice but a breath.

“My job is whatever I make it.”

“Then make it to go away from me,” I say, looking away because I can’t meet his eyes.

“I’m seein’ if you’re okay. It’s not a fucking crime, Ava.”

“I’m okay,” I lie. “Now I have to get home.”

I step past him and climb into my car. Before I can shut the door, his hand lashes out and stops it. “Don’t drown, kid.”

I jerk the door, and he lets it go. “Too late. I already have.”

With that, I slam it and leave.

# CHAPTER 12

## NOW - AVA

### One week later

I place my shot down on the bar and demand another. It's my fifth night in a row at this place, the one place my dad's club doesn't frequent. Nobody knows I come here. Nobody knows I'm sinking further and further with every shot I take. They know I'm still struggling. They hug me when I'm having a bad day and they watch over me. They're not stupid but they're not clued in, either. I'm hiding my problem well because it's the only way I can keep things simple, to take away some of my father's guilt.

These days, I have a routine. It took a few weeks after seeing Lucas again to find it, but I did. I go out, I drink until I pass out, as this helps ease the nightmares and the horrifying sounds of her screaming, then I wake in the middle of the day. I put on my happy face and makeup. My work hours changed, now I work from lunchtime until six p.m. and then I do it all again. It works perfectly for me now, because they let me have the mornings to sleep away the horror I've created the night before.

And I'm succeeding.

"You're here again," the bartender, Scott, says, as he pours me a whiskey shot.

"I don't think it's your business how often I'm here," I mutter, shooting the burning liquid down. The liquid that's become my *only* way of coping.

"No, but I don't have to serve you. I'm startin' to wonder why a pretty, sweet young thing like you is in here every night, drinking until she can't walk."

"That would also *not* be your business."

He frowns, but keeps pouring. I'm one of the only customers tonight, aside from three old men at the other end of the bar. If he turns me down, he

loses the shots I'm knocking back, and we both know he needs me to buy them as much as I want to buy them.

"How do you even afford this?"

"I have a job," I grumble.

"I doubt that. You'd be hungover until midday at least."

"I work half-days."

He snorts and goes to serve the other men. I sit and drink until the warmth floods my body and the heaviness on my chest leaves. It feels good. So good. A fight breaks out at the end of the bar between the three men, and I decide that's my cue to leave. I slap a few notes down on the bar and slide off my seat, walking out into the cold, clear night.

I stroll towards the next lot of buildings that lead down an alley to my house. Stopping for a second to feel the fresh breeze against my face, I lean against a cold brick wall as I take it all in. I'm swaying on my feet, and it feels incredible. I'm laughing to myself when a couple rounds the corner and starts towards the restaurants over the other side of the road. I don't pay much attention to them until the man says, "Ava?"

I flinch.

My eyes swing in their direction, and I see Lucas with a pretty blond woman. God, I forgot how utterly breathtaking he is.

"Detective," I slur, saluting him.

His eyes narrow, and he removes his arm from the blonde, stepping away from her. She studies me, her lips pursed. She's looking at me with disgust. Yeah, well, join the club, lady.

"You're drunk."

It's not a question.

"I'm not hurting anyone," I point out with a giggle. "So you can't arrest me."

Lucas stops in front of me, his big arms crossed over his chest. He's wearing a black button-up shirt that's rolled up to his elbows, the top two buttons undone, exposing a beautiful, hard, bronze chest. His hair is slightly neater than usual, and he's shaved, but his face is still rugged and dangerous. He's got on black jeans and heavy black boots, making him look more like he belongs in my dad's club than in a police station. His jaw, his beautiful jaw, is curved and tense as he looks down at me.

"You're beautiful." I giggle, looking at him. "You're also broken, just like me. All fucked up on the inside."

His eyes flash. "I'm taking you home."

"Don't need you to take me home, Officer," I say, waving an arm. "I can get there all on my own. I do it every night."

He makes a pained sound deep in his throat, and in a low voice, he says, "You do this every night?"

"Yes, sir."

"You sunk. You promised me you wouldn't sink."

I lean in close to him, and god, he smells good. Like mint and beer and Lucas. "I lied," I whisper.

"This is dangerous, you standing out here alone."

"What's the worst that can happen? I'm sure I've already experienced it."

"Ava," he warns, his eyes flashing. "You need to stop."

I wave a hand again.

"Luke, are we going?" the blonde asks.

"Luke," I mimic, laughing. "It doesn't suit you."

Lucas glares at me, and something painful flashes across his face. I shut up.

"I'm sorry, Sheila, but I need to get Ava home."

Sheila. Her name is Sheila. I snort and start laughing again. Lucas grabs my arm and squeezes lightly, in warning no doubt.

"But we have a date?"

I don't think they have a date; I think he's just being nice before he gives her the nasty.

"I'll reschedule," he mutters. "Sorry."

"But . . . you're going to blow us off for her? Who is she, anyway?"

"Don't question me," Lucas says, his voice as smooth as ice, holding the same cool sting. "I'll call you a cab."

"Don't bother," she snaps, storming over the road and into a restaurant.

"Sheila isn't getting lucky tonight." I laugh.

Lucas flinches and turns back to me, his eyes flooded with something I can't read. "Walk."

He takes hold of my arm and pulls me around the corner and to a massive black truck that is so damned big, I have to jump three times before I can get in when he opens the door. He buckles my belt with a grunt and walks around, sliding in the driver's seat.

"Detective drives a big truck."



“Be quiet, Ava.”

“I will *not*.”

He sighs.

“What the fuck possessed you to come out here on your own to get drunk?”

“I told you, I do it every night. Makes me feel better.”

“And nobody has noticed?”

My chest clenches at that. I think they’re suspicious, but most of them have their own lives and on the occasion they have caught me drinking I just blow it off to being young and having fun. They all do it so it seems normal to them. It hurts that they haven’t assumed it’s more than that.

*Really hurts.*

“No,” I mutter.

His eyes flash. “It isn’t a way of coping, Ava. It’s just a mask.”

“A mask I wear daily. A mask that works,” I point out.

His fingers tighten around the wheel. “Until it *doesn’t*.”

“What would you know?” I snap, staring out the window.

“More than you think, kid.”

“Don’t call me kid. I’m not that much younger than you.”

“Nearly seven years is *that much* . . .”

I blink. “You’re thirty?”

He nods.

“So?”

He blinks. “So?” he repeats, clearly startled by my lack of concern.

“Yeah, so? I’m not a child, Lucas. Please don’t treat me like one.”

“You have years to learn what I know.”

“I’m fairly certain I’ve learned life’s lessons the hard way.”

He flinches. “You need to get help, Ava.”

“I don’t *want* help, Lucas.”

“So you’re going to drown yourself until you can’t function?”

I go quiet, and after a moment, I whisper, “I can’t function if I *don’t* drown myself. How do you suppose I turn it the other way?”

He goes quiet.

There really isn’t anything else to say.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

“How’s the job going, princess?” Muff asks two days later as I walk through the compound.

“It’s going,” I mutter, keeping my head down as I head towards the room where I know Skye is.

“You okay?”

I stop and look up. I want to say no, I’m not okay, but nothing comes out. I do what I always do. I smile and I don’t mean it, but Muff’s grin gets bigger and he accepts it. Like they all do. “I’m fine, Muff. Sorry. I’m just distracted.”

“No worries.”

I wave and rush off. I reach the room and stop with my hand on the handle. I take a breath, preparing myself for the fake Ava act. Today, it’s hard. Today is pushing all my limits. That would be because last night I learned that the alcohol isn’t numbing it anymore—that I have to drink more and more to get to the place I need, and it’s not working like it was. Not to mention I’m spending a good deal of my wage on buying the stuff. Soon I won’t be able to afford my rent and then I’ll have a lot to explain to my family.

That scared me. It ripped open my wounds and reminded me that they’re still there, and they’re still raw.

I’m still broken.

If I’m not absolutely smashed, then I can see her face every single time I go to sleep. Every time I close my eyes I hear her screaming, begging, telling me that she wanted to go home. I should have tried to get us out; I should have told him to take me; I should have done something other than what I did.

“Hey,” Skye says when I step into the bar area, where she’s sitting with my sister, Addi.

“Hey Sis.” Addi grins.

“Hey,” I say, but it sounds broken and defeated.

“You okay?” Addi asks, standing.

“I’m good. I’m okay,” I lie. “I just had a really long night; I’m exhausted.”

I slide onto the stool. I’m not working this afternoon, which means I don’t have that distraction. It’s already nearing lunchtime and I’m freaking out, feeling restless, feeling lost. A small, pathetic part of me is trying not to

go to the bar and drink, but I know if I don't find another option, that's exactly where I'll end up.

"You've been working a lot lately. Is everything okay?" Skye asks.

"Sure, just some big projects. Where are all the guys?"

"Meeting. Must be some shit going down," Addi mutters.

"Anything interesting?" I say, acting uninterested when really I desperately want her to tell me what she knows.

She laughs. "Sis, you know I couldn't tell you even if I wanted to."

Dammit.

I shrug, acting like I don't care. "True. What are you guys up to tonight?"

"Just a quiet movie," Skye says. "You want to join?"

"Nah, I'm good." I smile. "I'm going to get an early one."

"We have to catch up soon. It's been ages."

"We will."

"Mercy has been desperate for a girls' night."

Addi stands. "I'll let you two discuss girls' nights, which by the way, I'd totally die for. I'm going to find my husband."

"Yo, precious, Cade's lookin' for you," Spike says, coming into the room.

"See," Addi says. "Duty calls."

Skye and I laugh as she disappears with Spike, her arm curled through his, chatting his ear off.

"I should get going too," I say to Skye. "Just wanted to say hi."

"We need to catch up soon!"

"Skye."

We both turn to see Danny standing at the door with Max by his side. His eyes flick to me and lighten. "Shit, Ant, didn't know you were here."

"I was just leaving."

"Right. I wanna talk to you before you do," he says, then turns to Skye. "You ready to go?"

"Go where?" I prod, staring as Skye's cheeks flush and she nods.

"Takin' her for a ride. She needs a new jacket."

I grin. Danny glares. Skye blushes.

"Sounds fun." I smile. "Hey Max!"

"Hey Ava. What's crackin'?"

"Not much. You going for the ride, too?"

Max grins. “And cramp their style? Nah.”

I laugh. Danny shoots Max a glare. “Need a word, Ant. Skye, go wait for me.”

Danny steps forward and takes my arm. “You’re so bossy,” I mutter, as he leads me into the hall.

“You haven’t returned my calls,” he says, as soon as we’re out of earshot.

My face falls. For a second, just a second, I forgot my pain and smiled with my friends. With one sentence, he’s taken me right back.

“I’ve been busy,” I say.

“Too busy to answer your best friend?”

“Jesus, Danny, I’ve been working.”

“And in the mornings?”

“Sleeping!”

“All day?”

“Danny!” I snap. “Enough. I’m not doing this now.”

He glares at me. “But we will do it, Ant. I’m coming by tomorrow when you’re finished work. You be home, or I’ll find you.”

I open my mouth to argue but he leaves.

My shoulders slump, and the tightness in my chest increases until I’m struggling to breathe through it.

I need to get out of here.

~\*~\*~\*~

I shoot back one shot and then another. I’m six shots down and not even close to being numb. Desperation runs rampant in my body and no matter how much I drink, the pain isn’t going away. I rub my hand over my face and order another one. It has to go away soon—it has to. If it doesn’t then I won’t be able to cope, and I *need* to cope.

*“Please, I have a family.”*

I flinch and down another shot. The thoughts are coming in harder and harder with each passing day. Every second I refuse to cope makes it that much worse. I don’t want to see it; I don’t want to keep seeing her face, hearing her voice pleading, and knowing that I’m the reason she isn’t here. I had one single second of weakness that led me to losing every piece of myself.

“Hey there.”

I flinch and look up to see a good-looking young man standing next to me, smiling down.

“Oh, hey,” I mutter.

“What’s a pretty girl like you doing in here all alone?”

I shrug, ignoring him.

“Mind if I sit?”

“It’s a free bar,” I mutter. “Do what you want.”

He sits, seemingly unperturbed by my poor attitude. He waves a hand and orders a drink, then turns to me. “Do you live around here?”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Do I look like I want a friend?”

He grins. “You look like you need something.”

I do. I need this alcohol to start working. I swallow down another shot, ignoring him.

“Let me buy you a drink . . .?” he trails off, clearly waiting for a name.

“Fifi,” I mutter.

He snorts. I glare.

“Sorry,” he says. “Hey Fifi, my name is Tony.”

“Great.”

I stare at my phone that’s vibrating on the counter. Dad. Checking in. As always, if I don’t call him every few hours he freaks out. I lift it up and punch out a quick text that I’m going to bed, and I’ll see him tomorrow. I assure him the alarm system is on and everything is fine. It’ll keep him happy. Tony orders another drink, and I fumble about in my purse, looking for more cash. Surely I haven’t gone through this much already.

“Here, it’s on me,” Tony says, sliding a shot towards me.

I take it, not looking at him, and shooting it back.

“Would you like another?”

I shrug.

He gets me another.

Hey, if he’s paying, so be it.

Two hours later and I’m finally smashed, more than I’ve ever been. I have tried and tried to get this drunk in the last few days with little success. I don’t feel like I’ve had much—in fact, I’m sure I’m only up around eight or nine—but it seems so much more. My entire body is light. I’m laughing, dancing, talking to random people and feeling like there isn’t a smidge of the troubles of the world laying on my shoulders.

“Listen, you should come outside with me. I have more alcohol in my car,” Tony says, wrapping his arms around my hips as we dance.

I snort. “No thanks. I’m not stupid.”

He puts his hands up in an innocent gesture. “Seriously, I’m not lying.”

“Dream on, buster.”

“Come on,” he says, pulling me, his fingers wrapped around my wrist.

I laugh, careless. “No.”

“It won’t take long, at least we can hear each other talk properly out there. Come on.”

“She said no.”

I spin around. Tony’s hand drops at the cool whip of the voice behind us. I raise my eyes and stumble back to see Lucas standing in our space, his arms crossed, and his big body on full alert.

“Sorry man,” Tony says. “I was just dancing with her.”

Lucas steps forward, takes my chin, and tilts my head back, studying my face. Boy, he’s pretty. So freaking pretty.

“Hey Detective.” I giggle.

“Enough, Ava,” he murmurs, studying my face.

He lets me go, turning to Tony. “What did you give her?”

Tony puts his hands up again. “Nothing, I swear.”

“I’m a cop; I’m also not stupid. What did you give her? You tell me and I let you walk, or I can arrest you, but considering I’m off-duty, I’d rather not.”

Tony gapes, then turns suddenly and runs through the crowd. Lucas sighs but doesn’t go after him. I guess he figures it isn’t worth the chase. I laugh.

“You,” Lucas says, looking at me. “Let’s go.”

“I’m fine here, thanks.”

“Now, Ava,” he warns.

“I’m sorry, who made you boss?”

He takes my arm and pulls me to the bar, leaning over it. “She owe you anything?”

“No.”

Then he turns and pulls my stumbling form out of the bar. I find myself in his car again. I reach for the radio, but his voice instantly stops me.

“Don’t touch that, kid.”

He starts driving, and I glance at him. Such a gorgeous man. I can't help myself. I reach over and stroke my fingers over the bulging muscle on his jaw. "You're very pretty, Detective."

"If that's your idea of a compliment, please don't."

I run my fingers down over the stubble and to the corner of his lips. He's tense the entire time, but he makes no move to stop me. "Are you in love right now, Lucas?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"A logical one." I laugh.

"No, Ava, I'm not. Now, put your hand down so I can concentrate on driving."

"Don't you liked being touched?"

His jaw muscle jumps beneath my fingers.

"I don't like being touched by drunk females."

"If I wasn't drunk"—I grin—"would you like it then?"

"No, kid." He sighs.

"You know what I think, Detective?" I say, removing my hand. "I think you'd have dimples if you smiled."

"Ava," he says, his voice resigned.

"Mmmm?"

"Stop talkin'."

"Okay, Lucas."

"Okay, kid."

I press my cheek against his window and fall asleep smiling.

# CHAPTER 13

## THEN – LUCAS

I clutch her shirt to my face and I cry, I cry harder than I've ever cried in my life. It's the first time in three months I've come into this room, and everything was as she left it. Her little drawings. Her little clothes. Her smell. *Her*. I breathe the shirt in, and my body trembles with every sob. I don't hear Jennifer approach; I just feel her arms go around me.

"I'm sorry, Luke."

I cry harder, pained bellows leaving my throat.

"I'm so sorry."

I clutch my daughter's shirt until there are no more tears left in my body. Everything hurts. Everything fucking hurts. I lift my head and look over to my wife, who looks awful. Did I do this to her? Is it my fault she's like this? I reach over, cupping her face. She turns into me, her eyes broken and drawn out.

"We have to stop," I croak, my voice hoarse.

"We have to stop."

"No more wallowing, no more locking ourselves away, no more drinking and no more drugs."

"No more," she sobs.

"I'm sorry, baby," I groan, pulling her into my arms. "So fucking sorry."

"You were hurting. I understand."

"Not an excuse. Never an excuse. She wouldn't want this for me. She'd want me to honor her memory instead of torturing it by sinking myself."

"Then that's what we'll do. Honor her."

"I don't know how life is going to go on. I just don't know . . ."

She holds me tight. "It'll never go on, Luke. It'll just get easier."

I hope she's right.

~\*~\*~\*~



“You’re still doing drugs,” I say two weeks later, watching Jennifer walk around the house, a spring in her step.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says, happily cleaning the counters, way too chirpily considering she hates cleaning. “I gave that up weeks ago.”

“Don’t lie to me, Jenn,” I mutter, stopping her, curling my finger around her arm. “I’ve gone back to work. I’ve fought to pick myself up; you promised you would, too.”

“And I am, Luke. You’re overreacting.”

She’s lying to me. I know she is. I just don’t know how to deal with it.

“Jenn,” I warn. “Don’t do this.”

Her eyes flash, and she crumbles slightly. “It’s not easy to stop, Luke. You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t, but you asked me pull myself out of this darkness. I’m asking you as well.”

She starts to cry, and I put my arms around her, holding her tight, trying to be the husband I promised to be. My emotions are all over the place. I’m trying to remember the love I have for her, but everything in my chest is breaking. My arms around her are there almost as if they know they need to be, but not because I want them to be.

I really don’t know that I’ll ever be able to find comfort again, let alone give it.

And that fucking scares me.

## CHAPTER 14

### NOW – AVA

I wake with a groan, pressing a palm to my forehead. I have a headache, which is unusual. What the hell did I do last night? I sit up in my bed and mumble a curse as I throw my legs over the side and rub my temples. I try to remember what happened the evening before, but it's a little hazy. I remember Tony, and Lucas . . . oh man. Lucas found me at the bar. What the hell was he even doing at the bar?

“You're alive.”

I jerk back with a scream and look up to see Lucas standing at my door, coffee mug in hand. I blink a few times. Rewind. Did . . . did . . . oh man . . . did I sleep with him?

“No,” he answers, as if reading my thoughts. “I brought you home. You passed out in bed.”

I glance down. I'm wearing what I was wearing yesterday. Thank god. I exhale. “And you stayed?”

He walks in, putting the coffee down beside me. He smells fresh and clean, and god, he looks so good in the morning. “You live with nobody; I wasn't going to leave you here alone.”

Thank god dad's patrols didn't catch him bringing me in. All hell would have broken loose.

“Right,” I murmur. “And why exactly were you at the bar last night?”

“For the reasons you think. I was checkin' on you.”

I meet his eyes. “And why would you do that?”

“Because I don't like to watch you hurt yourself any more than you're already hurting.”

I flinch. His eyes hold mine, unforgiving. “I'm sorry you had to do that,” I mutter.

“You were given drugs last night, Ava. It's a good thing I was there.”

I flinch. “Drugs?” I ask.

“Yes, I suspect ecstasy. It’s why you probably felt different.”

He’s right; I did feel different, so different. My chest clenches, and I stare at the floor. I was given drugs? This should bother me, but the remembrance of being carefree for a small moment isn’t scaring me—it’s calling me.

“Well, I didn’t take them willingly.”

“Would you have?” he asks, and I jerk.

I don’t even want to ask myself that question, because I’m afraid as hell of the answer.

“No,” I snap.

“I know shit is hard,” he says, but I raise a hand and cut him off.

“Why are you here, Lucas? I’m not your pity case. I’m doing just fine on my own.”

“Are you?” he snaps. “It doesn’t fuckin’ seem like it to me.”

“What does it matter to you?” I yell, throwing up my hands. “I’m not your problem, so go home and stop making me your problem.”

He takes two long strides towards me, his eyes alight, his mouth tight. When he reaches the bed, he drops forward, placing both hands down on the mattress so his face is close to mine. “I found a girl, desperate, broken, having seen something nobody should see. She proceeded to lie to me—”

“I didn’t lie!” I cry.

“Do *not* interrupt me,” he growls. “You lied to me. Whether you’re willing to admit that is neither here nor there; I know the truth. You then promised, your eyes on mine, that you wouldn’t drown—that you’d *fight*. You lied again. Now you’re drinking yourself into oblivion, and you have the audacity to tell me not to pity you? I *do* pity you, Ava, because I know how fucking awful it feels to have nobody.”

With that, he launches himself off the bed, turns and strides out.

“Yeah,” I mutter to myself. “Well fuck you too, Shadow.”

~\*~\*~\*~

“Shift over, princess.”

I glance up from the swing I’m sitting in at the compound, staring out. Everyone’s laughing and having a good time at the cookout. Cade stands before me, holding two beers. I smile up at him. “Hey there, bro.”

He grins and hands me a beer. I graciously take it and slowly drink, not wanting to let him see how quickly I need the cold liquid to slide down my throat. “What’re you sitting over here alone for?”

I shrug. “Just thinking.”

“About . . .?”

I glance at him. “Nothing in particular.”

“C’mon, don’t lie to me. I can read you like a fuckin’ book, Ava.”

“And you’re not my father, Cade, so, not to be rude, but I don’t have to share everything with you.”

He grunts. “You coping with everything?”

“Yes,” I mutter.

“Then why do you look like someone has just told you your best friend died?”

I look away, staring out at the house.

“Ava?”

“Cade, please,” I whisper. “I just want to cope in my own way. You care, I know you do, and I love you for that, but please . . .”

“Not goin’ to push you, princess. If you’re anything like your sister, you’ll probably clock me in the guts.” He reaches out and puts a hand on mine. “But I want you to know I’m here, all the same.”

I smile, and it wobbles. He smiles back. It’s no wonder Addi loves him so much. I don’t blame her.

“Yo, Cade,” Dad says, approaching. “Scoot off and let me sit with my girl.”

Cade grumbles something and stands. Five seconds later, Dad sits down. We both stare out at everyone laughing and having fun.

“You’re not coping.”

I flinch. “Dad,” I whisper.

“See it in your eyes. You get the same look your momma gets when she’s sad.”

“I’m fine, Dad,” I lie. “I just . . . it was a big deal, and I’m still coming to terms with what I saw.”

“First time you see something like that, it fucks with your head. If I could have protected you from that, Ava, I would have. I never . . .” His voice, so pained, so broken.

I shift closer and curl into him. He lifts his arm and wraps it around my shoulder. “It isn’t your fault, Dad.”

“My mess my daughter got caught up in.”

“And I’ll be okay. I promise.”

He sighs, squeezing me.

“Is . . . is the mess cleaned up?” I dare to ask, even though I know he won’t tell me. I know the rules better than anyone.

“Can’t talk to you about that, baby girl.”

I turn and breathe him in a little, needing his comfort. The demons in my head are having a party, and I’m not coping. Not at all. I’m thinking about the nameless girl I allowed to die. I’m thinking about Lucas. I’m thinking about my next drink and wondering if I can find drugs to take the edge off. That scares me. So much.

“Did you find him . . .?”

“No, but you’re safe.”

I nod, swallowing.

“I’ll find him, Ava. Don’t doubt it.”

“I know, Daddy.”

“There you two are!”

We look up to see Ciara smiling as she nears. “Jacks, Spike needs help with the grilling.”

“Is he burning that shit again? Who gave him control?” Dad mumbles.

Ciara laughs, the pretty sound travelling through the air.

Dad turns, pressing a kiss to my temple. “Later, baby.”

“Later, Dad.”

He stands and disappears, barking something at Spike who flips him the bird. I smile.

“How you doing there, kiddo?” Ciara asks.

I smile up at her. “I’m good.”

“That’s good.”

She flashes me a smile, and then leaves me to it. I sit while the smells of brats and burgers fill my nose. My stomach grumbles, and I take another sip of beer, trying to ease the desperate twitch in my body. I want to drink more. It’s all I can think about. I have a problem. I know I do. I just don’t know how else I can cope.

“Jacks,” someone yells. “You got a visitor.”

I turn my face to see a large handsome man storming into the compound. I’ve never seen him before. He’s got blond hair and is well-muscled and tall. Dad glances his way, and his face scrunches up. I watch as

he drops what he's doing and walks towards the man, both of them stopping before the group of people.

"What're you doing here? This is a family gathering. You know we conduct business elsewhere."

Mom stands by Dad's side now, her arm curled around his bicep, gently coaxing.

"I want answers!" the man barks. "I've given you time to find him; you're not living up to your end of the deal. I want him dead, Jackson. He took my baby girl."

I flinch.

Suddenly I know exactly who he is. It's her father. The nameless girl. The girl I killed. Vomit rises in my throat, and I stand with shaky legs. The man notices me and his face changes. "You!"

I stop moving, my entire body turning to ice. He storms towards me, not angry, but desperate. When he stops in front of me, he stares down, and he's panting. I can see the pain in his eyes. He's broken.

"Tell me what happened in there. Tell me. No one will tell me what happened to my Bethy."

At the sound of her name, finally hearing it, I flinch and step back.

"Leave my daughter be," Dad growls, barging in and stepping in front of me.

"I just want answers. She was there," the man roars. "I just need to know what happened to my baby. It's killing me. She was my only child. I'm fucking dying. I need to know."

His eyes find mine. I'm frozen.

His only child.

*Fucking dying.*

I start to pant.

"She is damaged enough from the ordeal. She doesn't need your pressure."

"Please," the man begs. "Please tell me what happened to her."

"I . . ." I croak.

"Did she suffer? Did she feel anything? Was she scared?"

Tears well in my eyes, and I can't breathe.

"Did he hurt her? Was she okay?"

*Kill her. Let me live. Please. I have a family. I don't want to die.*

I press a hand to my chest as the images of her brains coating the walls of the room fill my mind. I gasp.

“Enough,” Dad roars. “You get the fuck out of here and wait until I call you.”

“She knows,” the man cries, his voice so broken. “She knows what happened to my Bethy. I just want a fucking answer.”

“She doesn’t know,” Dad barks. “You have five seconds to leave.”

“Just answer me,” the man bellows in my face.

People move quickly after that. Cade, Spike and Muff take the man and drag him out, bellowing. Dad turns to me. His hand cups my face, but I can’t breathe, I can’t hear—everything is exploding inside me. I take a step back and gasp, “I need to . . . go.”

“Baby.”

“Please,” I rasp. “I need to go.”

“Ava, honey, it’s okay,” Mom tries.

I turn, and I run. I run with all my might. Danny calls out for me and Skye tries to follow me, but I don’t stop until I hit my car. I throw myself in and with shaky hands, turn on the ignition. Tears tumble down my cheeks as I skid out of the parking lot to the compound. Memories assault my mind, and by the time I arrive at the bar, I’m trembling and an emotional mess.

I rush inside, throwing down a fifty. The bartender gives me tequila and I drink it, shot by shot, but it doesn’t ease the pain exploding in my heart. My hands shake so hard I knock a shot off the bar and it smashes all over the floor. I skid off my chair, not hearing the bartender curse at me, and rush to a seedy group of men sitting in the corner. They’ll have what I need. I’m sure of it.

“Well hey there, pretty lady.” One grins.

“I’m not here to talk. I want ecstasy.”

Their eyes widen.

“What’s a pretty thing like you lookin’ for that kind of thing for?” a man asks, glancing around as if he’s making sure no one is listening.

“Have you got it or not?” I snap, trembling.

He nods. “Meet me in the bathroom.”

He disappears, and five minutes later, I follow him. When we’re in the male bathroom, he tucks me into a corner and pulls a white pill from his pocket. “How much?” I say, my entire body shaking.

He gives me a price. I toss the cash at him, snatch the pill and shove it in my mouth. I use some water from the tap to swallow it down, and then I run out of the bar. My phone is ringing over and over. I pull it from my purse and throw it with a cry. It slams against a brick wall and smashes. I drop to my knees and sob. I sob so hard my chest burns. I stay like that until the easy rush of the drug enters my system.

Then I stand.

And I start to walk.

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# CHAPTER 15

## NOW – AVA

I have no idea where I'm headed until I stop at the police station, my entire body loose, my mind a fuzzy mess. I push the front door open and see Amelia sitting at the desk, picking her nails. When I enter she looks up, and her eyes widen. I walk over, pressing my palms to the counter. "Is Lucas here?"

She blinks. "Detective Black? You want to see him?"

Black. Lucas Black. It fits him perfectly.

"Yes, I want to see him."

"Does he know you're coming?"

I slap my hand on the desk. "No, of course not."

She jerks back and stands, scowling at me, then she storms down the hall. I walk over to the seats and flop down, staring at my shoes. They're really very pretty. I wiggle my feet and flex them up and down. Nice.

"Ava?"

I jerk my head up and see Lucas standing in front of me, his arms crossed, wearing a white rolled up button-up shirt, and a pair of slacks. The shirt is tucked in messily and god, he looks good. So good. I stand and look up at him. "How's it going, Detective?"

He studies me, and his face hardens. "I don't have time for this." He turns and starts walking off.

Desperation hits me hard and I know I can't bear to have him walk away. "Please," I cry out.

He stops, his fists clench and unclench and he turns slowly, staring at me. "What do you need, Ava?"

I meet his eyes. "To talk?"

He jerks a thumb down the hall. "Five minutes."

I follow him into his office and as soon as the door is closed, he growls, "You're high again. I'm considering arresting you for being so damned

careless.”

He storms to the window, places his hands on it, and looks out. He’s angry at me. *Disappointed*. I don’t know this man, but for some reason I’m drawn to him, and the disappointment I see in his face bothers me. I take a step towards him, then another, the alcohol and drugs in my system making me bold.

“You’re angry at me,” I whisper, stepping up behind him.

He doesn’t move, but his body tightens. “Yes, I am. You push me away, tell me not to pity you but you come to me like this . . .”

“Because I’m careless. Because I don’t care.”

He flinches. “Because you’re careless. Because you don’t care.”

“And . . .?”

He doesn’t look at me. “You’re letting it beat you, kid, and it’s fucking killing me to watch, knowing that I’m damned helpless to stop it. You have people to help you, and you won’t lean on them.”

“They can’t help me,” I whisper.

“Why not?” he mutters.

“My dad is a biker.”

“He is.”

“You can’t see the problem with this situation?”

He steps even closer, leaning down until our lips are nearly touching. “The problem here lies in you, Ava. You have family. You have friends. You have the help you need.”

“All of which I can’t take. You’re the only person I can . . . I don’t know . . .” I whisper.

“And why is that?”

“You know the answer to that, Detective.”

“So you’ll have me believe,” he says, reaching up and curling his fingers around the back of my neck, “that you have nobody.”

“Yes.”

“Except me.”

“Yes.”

His eyes flash. He drops his hand and stands. “I was never any good for this. You need to rely on your family.”

My lip starts trembling and I can’t hold it back. Tears explode and run down my cheeks. “I can’t,” I croak, and he stops, but doesn’t look back at me. “I can’t. I have no one. Please, Lucas, I need someone.”

He walks to the door and puts his hand on the knob. “I don’t think I can be that someone.”

With that he walks out.

~\*~\*~\*~

I catch a cab home and thankfully, no one is there. No doubt they’ve already come by and looked. I quickly step in and close the door, locking it with the chain and the key, then I set the alarm. Then I go to my cabinet and search desperately. I have no alcohol left. I pull bottle after bottle out and toss them on the floor with a smash. A scream rips from my throat, and I throw the last bottle across the room and it smashes against the wall.

I turn and run into my room, slamming the door with a ragged cry. I drop to my knees on the floor and whimper helplessly. So alone. So broken. I want to stop seeing her face. I want it to go the hell away.

I curl into a ball on the floor, and I cry myself into a pitiful, restless sleep. Images of her, of Bethy, dance in my mind, tormenting me. And nothing I can do will make it go away.

A warm hand curling under my legs and back jerks me awake from my sleep. I sleepily try to figure out what’s going on when a low voice fills my ears. “Say nothing,” he warns, his voice soft but stern. “Just say nothing.”

*Lucas.*

I start to cry again as he walks me to the bed, jerking back the covers. He lays me down, and I hear rustling as he kicks off his boots and tosses his shirt. Then he slides in beside me, rolling me to him, tucking me into his strong arms and pressing my face into his chest. We both lie still and stiff for sometime, neither of us comfortable with the situation. I don’t know him. He doesn’t know me. Yet he’s here, under the strangest circumstances, and I can’t help but be grateful for that.

He keeps stroking my hair until the sobbing stops, and my body finally relaxes into his. His breathing deepens, and the bicep that’s curled around me becomes less tense. My eyelids flutter closed and when darkness takes me, I feel him squeeze me tighter.

Grateful. Yes.

Definitely.

~\*~\*~\*~

I wake in the morning without a man wrapped around me, and I wonder if Lucas was an illusion. I sit up, rubbing my eyes, and make a little squeaking sound when I see Lucas sitting on the chair in the corner, pulling on his boots. He's got his white shirt back on but it's unbuttoned. I can see his hard body beyond it, and the colors of his tattoos peeking out.

"You weren't a dream."

He looks up and those intense brown eyes meet mine. "Listen," he says, standing, leaving his laces undone. His hair is messy, he's got two-day growth on his chin, and he looks rugged. So rugged. So handsome. "I don't know you. You don't know me. Last night was . . . it was . . ."

"Comfort," I whisper, looking at him through my lashes.

He stiffens. "Ava, I can't be what you need. I'm a cop, a good cop, and when it comes to my job, I follow protocol and provide the right level of comfort for those who come in, but this isn't my job, this is outside of my job, and it's personal. I don't know how it became personal, but it did. It can't go on."

"What do you think it is I want from you, Lucas Black?"

His eyes flash. "What you want and what I'm willing to give vary, kid."

"What you gave me last night, it helped. I don't know why, considering I don't know you, but it helped. Nothing has helped except alcohol and . . ."

"I can't be the binding factor, Ava. I can't be what puts you back together. You need to find your strength on your own."

"I've tried," I whisper.

His eyes soften slightly. "I'm not even supposed to be here, doing this."

"I just need someone to talk to," I whisper. "A friend."

His eyes flash. "I don't know how to be a friend."

"What you did last night—that was all you needed to do."

He sighs, dropping his head and running his hands through his hair. "I'm risking everything doing this. It's wrong for more reasons than one."

"Then why are you here?"

He looks up. "Because I've seen the pain in your eyes in my own before, and I know how it fuckin' feels."

"It's still there."

He narrows his eyes. "What?"

"The pain in your eyes. Maybe you could use my help as much as I could use yours."

He studies me, his eyes reading mine like an open book. “I can’t promise anything, but if you can’t breathe, if you’re struggling . . . you know where I am. It’s the best I’ve got.”

“That’s enough.”

“But you have to stop the drinking. It won’t fix anything, and if I so much as see you pop a pill again, you and me will go and visit the station.”

I smile—it’s weak, but it’s there.

He smiles—weak, but there.

“I was right,” I whisper.

“What about?”

“You do have dimples when you smile, Detective.”

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# CHAPTER 16

## THEN – LUCAS

“How’s the paperwork for the case going?” my partner, Johnson, asks, as he walks into my office, tucking his dark hair behind his ears and crossing his arms.

“It’s going,” I mutter. “Worst part of the job.”

“You’re tellin’ me. At least it’s another case down.”

“Yeah,” I say, rubbing my forehead, tired.

It’s been seven months since I lost my baby girl. Seven long, broken, empty months. In that time, I’ve thrown myself back into work instead of dealing the way I should. I know that isn’t the right thing to do, but it’s the only thing that helps me cope. The busier I am, the less time I have to miss her with an emptiness that’s all consuming.

Jennifer, on the other hand, is not coping.

She’s drinking more, she’s taking more drugs, and she’s staying out late doing god knows what. I’ve asked her, I’ve helped her, I’ve held her, but nothing is working. She doesn’t want my help. She doesn’t want to stop. The harder she sinks, the worse it gets for both of us.

“Detective?” my receptionist, Amelia, says coming into the office.

“Yeah?” I respond, my voice tired.

“Your wife is out front.”

She is? What the fuck is she doing here? She never comes into work.

“Is she okay?” I ask.

Amelia frowns. “Ah, I think she may be drunk.”

Dammit.

I push my chair back, and Johnson gives me a concerned look. I storm out of my office and see Jennifer sitting next to a woman who is waiting for her drunk husband that was brought in two hours ago. I storm over, taking her by the arm and lifting her to her feet. “What’re you doing here?”

“Talking to this nice lady,” she slurs.

“Come with me.”

I pull her down the hall, and when we reach my office, I slam the door and spin on her. “Enough is enough; I’m not doing this anymore. You’re going to get the help you need, like it or not.”

“You’re being so dramatic.” She laughs, swaying. “I’m fine.”

“You’re drinking, you’re doing drugs, you’re losing weight and you lost your job—don’t tell me you’re fucking fine. You asked me to get better. For what? For you to fucking drown?”

“I’m fine, Lucas.” She waves a drunken hand. “You need to ease up.”

“I’m done here. If you want this marriage to work, you and me are going to get you the help you need.”

“I don’t need help!” she yells.

“You need fucking help.”

“No,” she slurs. “I don’t.”

“I’m not arguing with you. I’m taking you into a clinic, a program—I don’t fucking care. Dammit, you’re my wife, but I won’t live the rest of my life like this.”

“Why don’t you fucking leave then?” she screeches. “Why don’t you go away? You don’t fuck me, you don’t love me—you just push me away.”

“I’m trying!” I bellow. “I got out of that house. I fixed shit with my family. I came back to work. I’m trying to fucking breathe. What are you doing?”

“The same!” she snaps.

“That’s not fucking trying.”

“To you!” she bellows.

“We’re done here, Jennifer. You either take the help I’m giving you, or you walk. What’s it going to be?”

She leans in close. “I’m going to fucking walk!”

Then she turns and stumbles out.

*Fuck.*

~\*~\*~\*~

“You’re going to be okay,” I soothe, stroking a cold cloth over Jennifer’s forehead a week later.

She didn’t walk.

She came back sober and begged for my help. I locked her in the bedroom and I took a week off work, and for the last eight days I've been listening to her cry, scream and beg in that room. I've cleaned her vomit. I've bathed her. I've listened to her abuse and her pleading. I've stood by her side, because she's my wife, and she needs my help.

"Please, Luke," she croaks. "Just a tiny bit."

"No, baby," I murmur. "No."

"I need it!" she screams.

"You don't. We're going to get through this together."

"No," she yells. "No."

"Yes."

"Luke please."

I keep stroking her face, gliding the cloth over her damp forehead. "Got you, honey. It's okay."

"Please," she wails before drifting off into sleep.

I drop my head against the wooden pole on the bed. When the fuck did life turn into this big, ugly mess?



# CHAPTER 17

## NOW - AVA

My fingers tremble as I rock back and forth, fighting the overwhelming urge to grab my keys, go out and get drunk. I didn't realize how heavily I'd come to rely on the alcohol. Sure, I'm not an alcoholic, but it has become my lifeline, the only way to cope. I promised Lucas I'd try to stop, try to fix myself, but it's four days in and I'm struggling more and more with every passing second.

An agonized groan escapes my lips, and I scratch at my legs. Surely it wouldn't matter if I just had one sip, just to calm my nerves. I don't want to feel like this. I don't want to keep fighting against myself every day. Tears gush down my cheeks, and I'm equally as tired of them as I am of feeling so helpless.

My phone rings beside me.

I glance at it and see Lucas's number. He calls me every day since the night he gave me comfort. Some days we have a one-minute conversation, other times he just tells me about his day, but he always calls. It's getting less awkward with each conversation. I decide to take the call, needing him in a way that scares me. I know nothing about him, but he was placed in my life for a reason, and that's enough for me.

"Lucas," I whisper into the phone.

"What's wrong, kid?" he says, the second he hears my voice.

I start to cry harder. "It's hard. I'm . . . I'm trying so hard, but I don't know how to cope without it."

"Sit tight. I'm coming over."

He hangs up, and I drop my phone. I sit there for twenty minutes, my head in my hands, breathing deeply. I hear my door open and close and the sound of heavy boots walking across my living room. Then a hand curls under my chin, and I lift my head to see Lucas kneeling in front of me, his eyes concerned.

“How long has this been happening?” he asks, touching my clammy forehead.

“I’m trying,” I croak. “I don’t want to drown, but it’s so hard not to drink. It’s the only thing that makes it feel better.”

“There is another way,” he says, studying my face. “You could talk about it, let me in. Tell me what really happened and start to heal.”

“I told you what happened,” I whisper, turning away.

His hand cups my face. “You lied.”

“Lucas . . .”

“If you’re not going to let me in, Ava, I can’t help you.”

“I told you everything I know,” I say desperately.

He meets my eyes. “If you’re not willing to feel this, it’ll never leave.”

“I am feeling,” I yell.

“You’re not. Feel, Ava,” he says, his eyes hard.

“I am!”

“You know what,” he says, his voice resigned. “I can’t help you if you won’t let me in. Call me when you’re ready to talk.”

He turns and starts to walk away. The very idea of him leaving scares me so much that I’m speaking before I have even thought about it.

“He shot her in front of me,” I cry, and he flinches. “She was in there with me. She begged and she pleaded, too much, and he shot her. Right in front of me. I . . . I . . . it was so awful. Her head . . . Lucas, her head . . .”

He leans down, scooping me into his arms. I cling to him and cry so hard it hurts. I bury my face into his shoulder and hiccup as he sits on the sofa, holding onto me tightly. “Hush,” he murmurs. “You’re going to be okay. It’ll ease. Those images will ease.”

“They won’t leave me,” I wail, clutching him. “Every time I go to sleep I see her eyes, hear her screams, and then see the moment she was killed. It was horrific; I could have never imagined something so awful in my worst nightmares. She was my age, Lucas. She had so much ahead of her.”

He doesn’t say anything; he just holds me tight as I cry the tears I should have cried when I got home that awful night. I bottled it in, locked it away and drank until I couldn’t feel. Now I can’t hold them back. Lucas is the first person I’ve let see the pain that lies deep in my heart, and now I’ve let him in, I can’t stop it gushing out.

“That’s a girl,” he murmurs. “Get it out. Come back from this.”

“I don’t want to feel this for the rest of my life. I don’t want to see her face. I want it to go away.”

“It’ll never go away,” he says, his voice pained.

I start to cry harder at that harsh reality.

“But it’ll get easier, kid. It’ll get easier until you learn to breathe again.”

I make a pained, desperate sound, and clutch him tighter.

“Drinking won’t make it go away; you have to feel it, process it, move on from it. Talking, letting people in, it’s the only way to do that.”

“I don’t want to feel it.”

“But you’re going to. I won’t stop until you get every piece of ugly from your heart.”

I bury my face into his neck and I let it in. I let myself see her face. Hear her screams. Feel her pain. I cry so hard my body shakes and the sobs turn silent. He holds me through it all.

I cry myself into exhaustion. Lucas strokes my hair, holding me with his strong arms, keeping me together when I’m ready to fall apart.

And fall apart I do.

There in his arms, I let it all go.

~\*~\*~\*~

I wake in my bed, my entire body hurting. I don’t know what the time is— I assume it’s late in the evening and I cried myself to sleep in Lucas’s arms.

I don’t know where he is now. The room is dark.

I sit up, and my body groans in protest. I’ve cried so much, let so many emotions release, that everything aches. Like the last few months of pent-up pain all came gushing out in one hit.

I rub my eyes and throw my legs over the side of the bed, standing. I fumble my way to the door and push it open. The light in my hall is on and as I move down the hall, I see the kitchen light is on, too. I step around the corner to see Lucas standing, talking on the phone softly. He looks up when I come in, and his eyes do a quick onceover of my body before settling on mine. I give him a weak smile.

“I’ll call you back, yeah?” He hangs up the phone. “You’re up.”

“How long was I asleep?”

“Four hours, give or take.”

“And you stayed the whole time?” I ask, smothering a yawn.

“Wasn’t goin’ to let you wake alone.”

My heart thrums in my chest, and I do everything I can to ignore how that little statement just made me feel.

“Thank you,” I say softly. “For . . . getting me through that.”

He nods, his eyes holding mine. “You want coffee?”

“Sure.”

He obviously figured out where I keep my coffee because he goes about fixing me one. I sit on the stool at the counter and watch him work.

I like Lucas Black, more than I’ve liked anyone outside of the club. He’s mysterious and dangerous, a little broody and very deep. He’s given me comfort even though it’s clear he struggles to know how.

“Do you have to work or anything?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I’m on call regularly. It’s part of the job.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.”

“Not your fault,” he says, placing the coffee mug down in front of me. “I have learned to work my life around it.”

“Have you been a detective long?”

“Six years.”

I nod approvingly.

“How are you feeling?” he asks.

“My body is really sore,” I say, twisting and groaning.

“That’s normal after a sudden emotional release. It’ll ease. Hot shower will help.”

“I’m sorry you had to see that. I—”

“Don’t be sorry,” he says, cutting me off. “I wanted that from you. Not to mention how badly you needed to let it out.”

“So it’ll get easier now, right?” I ask hopefully.

“Not sure it works like that, but it’s a step in the right direction.”

I frown down at my coffee mug.

“You can call me, if you need . . .”

I look up at him, smiling slightly. “Does that mean we’re friends, Detective Black?”

His face lightens, just a touch, but he doesn’t smile. “Yeah.”

“Do you have many friends?”

“That came into my life the way you did? No.”

“Sometimes life has a funny way of introducing people that it wants in our lives. Why do you suppose I was put into yours?”

Something flashes across Lucas's face so quickly I nearly miss it. I can't put my finger on the emotion, but it makes something deep in my gut twist.

"Maybe you just needed someone like me to pull you out of that hole you were digging."

"Maybe," I mumble.

His phone rings again and he glances down, sighing. "Gotta take this, kid."

I nod, and he leaves the room. When he's gone, I sip my coffee. He made it good, just how I like it. I wonder how he knew that? I ponder the look that crossed his face and take my mind back to the conversation he had with my father about a girl, a girl I'm still sure wasn't me. I wonder what happened in his life, what put that pain in his eyes, the resistance in his heart. Lucas is drawn to me, but for what reason I do not know.

I'm just glad to have him.

"I have to go into work," he says, entering the kitchen again. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Do I get a choice?" I say, and it's meant to be a joke, only he doesn't laugh.

"Ava . . ."

"Sorry," I whisper. "I'll be fine. No sudden urges to drink myself stupid."

He flinches. "Call me if you need, hear?"

"Sure, Lucas."

He walks over, big strides, and stops in front of me. Without hesitation, he curls his hand around the back of my neck in a way I love so much and presses his lips to my head, lingering there for a long moment. "Keep fighting. You're nearly out," he says against my skin and steps back.

"Lucas?" I call, as he heads towards the door.

He looks back to me.

"What exactly are we doing here with each other?"

His eyes hold mine. "Learning how to swim, kid."

Indeed.

## CHAPTER 18

### NOW – AVA

A knock sounds out at my door a few days later, and I rush forward to answer it. It's my day off, and I'm planning on doing a whole lot to keep myself busy. The urge to drink is so strong that I'm having to distract myself in any way possible to stop it. Lucas had to go away for a few days, and even though he calls, without him I feel weak and helpless.

I open the door to reveal Danny, Skye, Max and Mercy, all of them grinning, beers in hand, pizza hot and fresh.

"Yo!" Danny calls, kicking the door open with his boot. "We're comin' to chill with you. Hope you don't mind."

I scowl at him. "Too bad I had plans."

"Now you don't." He grins, pressing a kiss to my head.

"Come in then. Not like I can stop you."

He passes me, making himself at home.

Max enters next, a big grin on his face. I can't help it—a smile breaks free and I hug him. "How're you doin', Ava?"

"Kicking on, Max. You?"

"Same same."

He walks into the kitchen, calling, "Danny, you fucker, don't take up all the fridge space."

"Hey chicky!" Skye says, stepping in and hugging me. "How you doing?"

"So good to see you." I smile, hugging her tight.

"You weren't getting out of this one. Danny insisted."

I roll my eyes and reach for Mercy, giving her a hug. "How are you, honey?"

She grins. "Awesome."

"Merc," Skye says, "tell her what you did?"

My brows go up.

“It was nothing,” Mercy scoffs.

“It wasn’t nothing. Spike flipped his lid.” Skye laughs, thrusting the pizza box into my hand.

“Do share,” I say to Mercy, as I close the door and follow her into the kitchen.

“I may or may not have gone on my very first date and kissed the man right outside the compound without telling him, and he caught me,” she says this all in a rush without breathing.

I burst out laughing. “No way!”

“Way,” Danny grunts. “Dad lost his shit.”

“I’m old enough to date; it isn’t like I did anything wrong!” she cries.

“Kissing the dude right out front of a biker compound? Not your finest moment, sis.”

She flips him the bird and I laugh, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “The real question is, was it a good kiss?”

She gags. “No, it was awful.”

I giggle, and Skye joins in.

“Like slug-in-your-mouth kind of awful?”

“Worse.” She frowns. “It was like he was trying to dig for my breakfast.”

“Grosse!” Skye and I cry.

“Fuck me,” Danny grunts. Max just laughs.

“So your first kiss was an awful experience, then your dad busted you and made it worse.” I chuckle.

“Dad came storming out, lifted the guy by the scruff of his neck and hauled, I mean *hauled*, him onto the road.”

I laugh harder. We all do.

“Then he threw me over his shoulder, ranting the entire way into the compound about how he’s going to tie me up and never let me out of his sight again. Then your dad gave me a lecture about bringing strangers to the compound.”

I grin. “I remember the same lecture.”

“Bikers,” she huffs. “The rate I’m going, I’ll never get laid.”

“Oh, fuck no!” Danny yells. “Fuck, Mercy.”

“Sorry bro.” She grins.

Ah, it’s good to have them back in my life.

Maybe Lucas is right; maybe I am climbing out of that dark space.

~\*~\*~\*~

“Aw, come on, have a beer. Just one,” Danny says, thrusting a beer at me.

“Nah,” I say, my eyes flicking to the cold bottle. “I’m fine.”

“Since when did you turn down a beer? Stop being a sad sack.”

He pops the top and hands it to me, thrusting it into my hands. My fingers shake around the bottle. Surely I can have one and it will be fine? I’m dealing with things better now; I can’t spend the rest of my life away from it, right?

I force a smile and take a sip. The first of the cool liquid runs down my throat, and my smile turns real.

“There we go. Now let’s play poker!”

We all sit on the ground and start playing poker. As the game goes on, the alcohol flows more freely. Everyone except Mercy is drunk, and we’re all laughing and having fun. Even during that, I feel tense – my neck and shoulders constantly ache. The last few days have been agony and having a drink is like coming to life, but the more I drink, the more guilt begins to play in my heart.

At first it was fun, a relief. Then I thought of Lucas and all he’s done, and the guilt becomes difficult to handle. I smile and force myself through the game, but as soon as everyone is gone, I stare at the empty bottles in my house and start to shake. What have I done? I promised him I wouldn’t do this, that I’d fight, and I just gave in. Tears trickle down my cheeks as I lift a bottle and throw it across the room.

It’s never going to end.

Is it?

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# CHAPTER 19

## THEN – LUCAS

*Two days.*

She's been gone two days. I've looked in all the usual places she frequents, and she hasn't been seen or heard from. I kept her clean for one month. One full month. I watched where she went, did everything for her, nursed her back to health, and did everything I could to help her. Clearly I did it all wrong, because she's missing. Twenty-four hours is what it takes before anyone will take it seriously, but I'm a cop; I called it after twelve.

I can't find her, and I'm beside myself with worry.

Since losing Shylie, I've been a broken, fucked up mess. I've done everything I can to get my life back on track—taking on my wife was something extra I didn't need. But I did it because I love her, and because this was her way of coping, but I don't have the strength to hold her up anymore. I don't have the strength to be her rock when I'm barely keeping afloat myself.

But I can't lose someone else. I can't. I won't.

I pull out my phone and dial her best friend, Kat. She answers on the second ring. I've tried her seven times, and she hasn't answered; hearing her voice is a relief.

"Lucas, I don't know what you want, but I haven't done anything," Kat says, as soon as she answers the phone.

"You seen Jennifer?"

She goes silent. "Why?"

"It's a simple question, Kat. Have you or have you not seen her? She's been missing for two days. I don't . . . I don't know where the fuck she is. So if you've seen her, you need to tell me."

"She's missing?" she whispers.

"Yeah, Kat, she's missing. You know what we've been through in the last two months—hell, the last fucking year. I have done all I can to keep

her away from drugs, but I have a sick feeling that's what she went looking for. If you know anything, you'll tell me."

She's silent for a few minutes.

"Lucas, I'm sorry, I don't want to do this . . . I don't want to hurt you more . . ."

"Kat," I warn. "What do you know?"

"She's been seeing someone else!"

My entire world comes crashing down around me. The remaining tethers of my heart rip to shreds and crumple, weak and pathetic, broken and emotionless. The woman I loved, who was the only good mother my daughter had, my best friend, my wife, has been seeing another man. Another man, when I needed her.

A pained bellow leaves my throat.

I lost my first wife. I lost my daughter. It shouldn't have been me fighting for *her*; it should have been her fighting for *me*, and she didn't. She turned to drugs, she pushed me to get through it, and then she found another man. Another. Fucking. Man.

"Who?" I say, my voice like ice.

"Lucas . . ."

"Who?" I roar.

"He . . . he . . . he's part of a motorcycle club."

I flinch. A biker. She is fucking a biker while I'm busting my ass to try and help her, even through my pain.

"You need to understand—"

"I don't need to understand a fucking thing!" I bark.

"She was broken; you were broken. She needed something . . . someone to love her."

"I lost my daughter," I roar, slamming my fist into the wall beside me, shattering it until a large hole forms. Blood trickles down my knuckle.

"I know," she whispers. "And I'm so sorry, but she . . ."

"There is no excuse for this—none. Tell me what club."

"Luke . . ."

"Don't you fuckin' call me that. Tell me what fucking club!"

"Hell's Knights," she whispers quickly. "I don't know who; she never told me a name. She just said . . . she said they . . ."

It clicks, like a sledgehammer to my brain. "It wasn't about the man, or the company—it was about the fucking drugs. She's doing what she can to

get the drugs.”

“She’s clean. She was really trying.”

“Bullshit,” I bark.

“Just calm down, Lucas, think about this—think about how hard it’s been for her and—”

I hang up.

Then I bellow in agony.

~\*~\*~\*~

The Hell’s Knights’ compound is a red brick house with sheds, surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. I go to the front gate and two bikers stand, smoking and laughing. When they notice me, they both stop. I’m not driving my patrol car, but I have no doubt they know exactly what I am. Just like I know exactly what they are.

“What the fuck you want, cop?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Lookin’ for my wife.”

They study me. “What makes you think she’s here?”

“I have some solid information that tells me she’s here.”

“And that information would come from where?” a big, burly guy says, grinning.

“I lost my fuckin’ daughter, I lost my fuckin’ life, now I’ve lost my fuckin’ wife!” I bark. “Dammit, all I’m askin’ is for you to tell me if she’s here. Don’t care what you do. Don’t care what you say. I just need to know if she’s here.”

Their faces soften, only slightly, but it’s there.

“What’s her name?” he asks gruffly.

“Jennifer Black.”

Their brows shoot up and burly guys speaks. “Jenn is your wife? Didn’t know she was married.”

My chest coils tightly. “Well, she is. She here?”

“Haven’t seen her for the last few days. She was here Monday night.”

The last time I saw her.

“Anything you can tell me about what she was doin’ that night?”

They look to each other, then the burly one orders, “Go get Jackson.”

They disappear inside to get the man who is no doubt their president. Which means they don’t want to tell me what they know, or worse, they

know it'll be hard to take.  
Neither is good.

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## CHAPTER 20

### NOW – AVA

I sit on my sofa, staring at my phone.

Lucas has called seven times. I don't know why. I can't bring myself to answer it, because I know he'll hear it in my voice. He'll know I've had alcohol, he'll know that I've let him down, and I can't bear it. So I'm just sitting against my kitchen counter, my legs tucked to my chest, my chin touching my knee. I can't believe I gave in; I can't believe I didn't try harder.

A pounding on my door jerks me from my trance. I glance over at it, seeing a silhouette outside the front window. The shadow of Lucas 'Shadow' Black. I stare at it, unmoving.

"Ava!" he bellows, pounding on the door. "You in there?"

He sounds concerned—pissed, even.

"Your lights are on. Open up."

I don't move.

"I'll bust the door, kid. Countin' to three."

I shift slightly. He'll do it; he's that kind of man.

"One."

I push to my knees.

"Two."

I push to my feet.

"Three."

I rush over and fling the door open just as he's lifting his foot. My eyes widen. "You were really going to do it?" I whisper.

His eyes flash to me, and his foot drops. "Yeah, I was."

"Why are you so frantic?" I ask, stepping back and staring at the ground.

"You've been drinking."

My body flinches, and I don't look up.

“Why, Ava?”

“Some friends came over . . . We were just having fun.”

“Except you’re not in a place where you can drink for fun.”

I blink back the burning under my eyelids.

“I don’t think I can do this, Lucas. I’m trying. I’m trying but . . . I need something to help with the pain. How do you suppose I deal with the horror if I am forced to just live with it?”

He’s silent, so I lift my head and see he’s deep in thought, his face twisted in an odd way. I’d go as far as saying it’s regret, realization and sadness.

“I’ll be back in the morning. Be ready.”

I blink.

“Pardon?”

He leans forward forcing me to step back. He takes the door handle and murmurs, “Lock up. Don’t drink anymore. I’ll be by in the morning.”

I open my mouth, and I’m hurt. I’m hurt he’s leaving. He’s angry at me, I get that, but I thought . . .

“Lucas,” I whisper. “I’m sorry.”

He says nothing; he just pulls me forward and kisses my forehead.

“Tomorrow, Ava.”

“Lucas . . .”

He turns and walks off. “Lock the doors.”

Then he’s gone, disappeared into the darkness.

# CHAPTER 21

## THEN – LUCAS

Jackson stares at me. I hold his gaze.

I've never met him, but I've heard stories about the President of the Hell's Knights MC. He's fierce, ferocious, and doesn't take lightly to people messing around with his club, his family, or his lifestyle. I've had a few encounters with the club and issues surrounding it, but never directly spoken to Jackson. On a good day, I'd care about being seen here.

Today, I don't give a fuck.

I don't care what his club is doing. I don't care about anything but finding Jennifer. Betrayal is strong in my chest, but she's my wife, and god knows I have to find out where she is and make sure she's safe and clean. Then, and only then, will I confront the fact that she's been seeing another man.

"What're you doin' at my club?" Jackson mutters, crossing his big arms.

"I ain't here to cause shit," I grunt. "I'm lookin' for my wife."

"So I heard," he says, studying me. "Haven't seen her for two days."

"What the fuck was she doin' hanging around here anyway? You been giving her drugs?"

His eyes harden. "Accuse me of anything, cop, but don't you fuckin' accuse me of giving women drugs. If she got drugs, it wasn't from me."

"Then what fuckin' reason has she got to hang around your club?"

"She was unhappy. She liked the company; we gave it to her."

I tense. "By letting her fuck around?"

"Listen," Jackson snarls, stepping closer. "I don't want your home problems brought into my fuckin' life. If your wife was here, it was off her own back." He leans in even closer. "If she was takin' dick, it was off her own back. Now, you ask what you gotta ask. I'm givin' you five minutes before I kick you the fuck out."

I want to raise my fist and punch him. Anger is bubbling in my chest, but I don't act on it. I'm not here to fight; I'm here to find my fucking wife.

"You sayin' you haven't seen her?" I say, my voice hard, icy even.

"I saw her two days ago; she hasn't been back since."

"And the man she was with?" I say through clenched teeth.

"He's here. You wanna speak with him? I'll let you. You raise a fuckin' fist? I'll end you."

I grind my jaw. "Not here to fight. I'm here to find my wife."

He studies me and then jerks his head in a nod.

I cross my arms and wait.

~\*~\*~\*~

"Sent her packin'," the man named Chris mutters, his arms crossed, leather stretched across his shoulders. "Found out she was married. Not up for that. Told her I couldn't see her no more."

I study him. I don't know if he's telling the truth or if he's lying, but I need answers, and any answer is a lead in the right direction.

"You givin' her drugs?" I ask.

He glares at me. "Fuck no."

"Then where the fuck was she getting them?" I snap.

"How the fuck am I s'posed to know? She was just here havin' fun. We gave her fun. If she was high, it wasn't from us."

"And you're saying you have no fucking idea where she was sourcing her drugs?"

He shrugs, lighting a cigarette. "Coulda been anyone."

I don't believe him. The last people to see my wife were those in this club, and they're trying to tell me they know nothing. I don't fucking believe them, but I have nothing to go on.

"I find out you're fuckin' lying to me . . ."

"You'll do what?" Jackson barks. "We've told you what we know. Your woman ain't here. Time to leave."

I cross my arms, holding his intense glare. "I've got my fuckin' eye on you. She doesn't come home? You can rest assured I'll come knocking."

He says nothing, just keeps his hard expression.

They know more than they're saying. I'm nearly sure of it.

And I plan to find out what.



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## CHAPTER 22

### NOW – AVA

I stare at Lucas as he jerks open my drawer. It's five a.m. and I'm standing, my blanket wrapped around me, staring at him through bleary eyes. He woke me up by pounding on my door at some ungodly hour, and now he's going through my clothes, looking for what I do not know. Hell, I don't even know why he's here; he's supposed to be pissed at me.

"What exactly are you doing in my drawers?" I ask.

He doesn't answer. He's wearing loose basketball-type shorts with a tight black tee and sneakers. He looks like he's going running. His hair is fresh, his clothes tight and fit, and his body pumped, slightly sleeked in sweat. He probably ran here. I don't even know where he lives.

My eyes travel down his body and stop on his bare calf muscles. I've never seen his legs, but there, right there on his body, is a picture of the most beautiful little girl I've ever seen in my life.

My eyes widen.

I didn't know Lucas had a daughter.

"You . . . is that your daughter?"

He stops, his entire body turning to stone. "Was," comes his reply, broken, dead and empty.

I open my mouth, close it, and then just stare. Lucas Black had a beautiful, sweet daughter and now he doesn't. She's gone. I don't know how she's gone but from the way he just said that, she is. Maybe the wife ran away and he simply hasn't seen her, but from the emptiness in his eyes, I think it's worse, far, far worse.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

Such a simple, common answer, an answer that probably means nothing to people who have lost so much, but it's the only thing I can come up with. The only words I can force to the surface. Lucas doesn't answer me.

He pulls out an old pair of running pants and a tank and turns around, his face impassive as he extends his arm. “Get dressed.”

My eyes drop to the clothes in his hands. I haven’t seen them for years—hell, I don’t even know why I still have them. I went through a stage. I was going to get healthy—I swore it to myself. I put them on, went running for a whole of thirty seconds before deciding that was never going to happen, and I stashed them away and haven’t seen them since.

“What exactly do you want me to do with those?”

“Put. Them. On,” he says, his voice hard and clipped.

“Look, Lucas, I get you’re angry at me, but this isn’t going to help anything.”

He steps forward, thrusting the clothes at me. I catch them in my hands and watch as he leans forward. “I’ve given you comfort. I’ve let you cry. I’ve been there for you. I’ve done what I thought was right, but the past and something you said to me last night made me realize I’m doing it all fuckin’ wrong. If you trust me, if you believe I can help you, then you’ll put those clothes on and meet me downstairs.”

Leaving me with that, he turns and walks out.

I stare down at the clothes. Do I trust him? God, I don’t even know him. Seeing that tattoo on his leg proves that. I don’t know where he lives. I don’t know if he has any family, an ex-wife, a girlfriend, kids . . . There is nothing—nothing at all, and yet I know without a doubt that Lucas Black would never do anything to hurt me. So, I get dressed and I go downstairs.

Because I believe what he says.

Mostly, I believe in him.

~\*~\*~\*~

I stare at the punching bag swinging in front of me. I adjust the tight pants around my hips and glance quickly around the busy gym. This isn’t what I had in mind. I thought perhaps he’d take me for a run, maybe he’d take me to a class of some sort, but I didn’t expect a gym and certainly not a punching bag.

“Crying helps, talking helps, but as you know, even with all those things, sometimes it just isn’t enough. You need more. You need to vent. To get out the anger, the rage and the frustration. I wish I’d known what I’m about to show you. I wish I’d figured this out when I needed it most.”

“You want me to punch the bag?” I whisper, my eyes wide.

“I want you to do whatever you need to get that desperate empty hole from gaping in your chest. I want you to have something to turn to when the need to drink takes over.”

I blink. “You want me to beat . . . this bag?”

He steps up behind me, one hand falling to my hip, the other taking my wrist and raising it up. “I want you to beat this bag.”

I stop breathing. The feeling of his massive body behind mine sends a strange and unusual feeling through me. A feeling I’m not used to having. It feels like coming alive. It feels like rain. It feels like breathing. My skin prickles, and I try to concentrate as Lucas gently guides me forward.

“When you hit,” he says, raising my fist, “never close your thumb in your fist; it should always go on the outside.” He positions my thumb outside of my now balled fist.

“When you hit, try to line it up so your first two knuckles”—he touches my pointer finger and my rude finger—“hit the bag.” He extends my hand forward, touching my knuckles on the punching bag. “Punch with your body; gently flex your elbow so as not to strain it.”

He pulls my fist back and pushes it forward again, his other hand tightening on my hip as he twists my body to the side to show me the correct position to punch the bag. Then, much to my dismay, he steps back, leaving me feeling empty.

“Now hit it.”

I take a breath and hit the bag. It barely moves.

“Hit it, Ava,” he says, his voice firmer. “Hit it like it’s the man who took that girl’s life; hit it like it’s all the pain trapped in your chest bottled in one space; hit it like your damned life depends on it.”

I stare at the bag, remembering Bethy, remembering the man who took her life in front of me, remembering my father’s broken face, and remembering how god damned hard my life has been in the last month. I stare at the bag and see it all mixed in one. My throat gets tight, my skin prickles, and pain explodes in my chest.

My fist lashes out without thought, slamming into the bag.

It feels *incredible*.

I do it again and again, until my fists are pounding the bag, and I’m expelling every ounce of pain that’s built up in my body, in my heart, and in my broken, shattered soul. I cry out, hitting it harder and harder until tears

roll down my cheeks. I'm panting and crying with every connection of my fist to the plastic covered bag.

Big arms go around my waist, hauling me back, then I'm turned and crushed into Lucas's big, hard chest. I clutch his shirt, my knuckles sore and bruised, and I cry. I cry for what seems like the thousandth time, but as always, he lets me do it. He always lets me do it. "It'll get easier. Every time you hit that bag and find a way to vent, it'll get easier."

"T-t-t-thank you," I croak into his chest.

"Don't thank me. Just keep fighting."

I pull back and look up at him. His eyes meet mine and we just stare at each other. A rush of warmth spreads through my chest and something flutters low in my belly. His eyes flicker over my face before he lets me go and looks down at my hands. "You should get some ice on those. Next time, I'll get you gloves."

I stare at my hands all red and puffy. "The pain kind of helps."

"Yeah," he says quietly, stroking a thumb over my knuckles.

"Lucas?" I say.

He keeps staring down at my hands, but murmurs, "Hmmm?"

"What happened to you?"

He stops stroking.

"You don't have to tell me," I blurt out. "It's just . . . I feel like you're helping me because you've felt pain, and you asked me to trust you, and I do, but I don't know you and . . . well . . . I want to."

He looks up to me again. "I lost my daughter. I lost my life. I'm just doing what I can to survive. There's nothing to know."

"I'm so sorry about your daughter," I whisper. "It makes my problems seem . . . pathetic in comparison."

He starts stroking my knuckles again. "No problems are pathetic, kid. Pain is pain, no matter the form. There isn't a person in the world who deserves to be judged for feeling it, nor should they play it down because there's another worse out there."

"What was her name?" I say quietly.

"Shylie."

"That's pretty."

He doesn't reply, and I don't push. He's not ready to tell me more, and I understand that.

I understand him more than he thinks.

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# CHAPTER 23

## THEN – LUCAS

My feet pound on the pavement as I finish my run, turning towards my house. It's been three months. Three months since I've seen my wife. Three months since I heard her voice. Three months since she slept with another man and left me. I don't know where she is; I don't know if she's even alive, but she's gone, and I'm doing everything in my power to find out where she's gone to.

The Hell's Knights club knows where she is, of that I'm sure, so I've started investigating them. I've been following them, tracking them, finding out what mess they've been getting themselves into and piecing together what happened to Jennifer. They're starting to clue in, and things are becoming heated. I don't give a fuck what they want. I need closure, and the only way to get that is to find my wife.

I hit my front drive and see Jackson standing on my porch, his arms crossed over his chest. I slow down, ripping my earplugs from my ears and tucking them into my pocket as I jog up the front steps. I stop right in front of him, panting, my muscles straining. His face is tight; his body is rigid. He's pissed off. I knew he would be. I knew he'd come my way after what I just discovered.

"I wondered when you'd show up," I mutter, swiping sweat off my brow.

"You're stickin' your nose into my shit, investigating something I have no fuckin' idea about, and I don't like it."

I step up closer. "But you do know, Jackson. Tell me, how long have you been supervising the drugs coming in and out of this town?"

He flinches. The only answer I need.

"No fuckin' idea what you're talkin' about."

"Oh." I laugh bitterly. "You fuckin' know, but you don't need me to tell you that. Any other time, I'd care what you fuckers were up to in my town,

but right now I only have one goal—to find my wife.”

“And I told you,” he barks, “I don’t fuckin’ know where she is.”

“Your club got her back into drugs, into trouble, so don’t you fuckin’ tell me you can’t get the information I need to find her.”

“I fuckin’ can’t, and even if I could”—he clenches his fists—“I’d never help a fuckin’ cop.”

“You got a kid, Jackson?”

He flinches.

“Cause if you do, you’d understand exactly why I’m doing what I’m doing. I lost everything. My daughter died, and I couldn’t save her; now my wife is gone, and I can’t find her. I had no control over my daughter, but I can control what happens here, and I’m going to find my fucking wife, even if it kills me.”

Jackson holds my gaze. “You’re barking up the wrong fuckin’ tree,” he snarls before stepping past me and disappearing down the road.

Yeah, we’ll see.

~\*~\*~\*~

“So you haven’t heard anything?” Jennifer’s sister sobs, clutching my shirt.

I try to comfort her, but comfort doesn’t come easily to me these days. I stiffly hold her in my arms, staring above her head and over at the wall. I know she’s worried. I know she wants answers, but I don’t have answers for her. I have nothing but a blank fucking hole to try and fill.

“No,” I mutter, running my fingers tensely down her back.

“Oh Luke,” she sobs, and I flinch. “I just want to know where she is.”

“I’m doin’ everything I can to find her, Kasey. It isn’t easy.”

“I know; I know you are. You love her so much.”

I clench my jaw. Do I love her anymore? I don’t know. Hell, I don’t even know what love feels like. I just know lately, I can’t feel anything but determination to get answers. I don’t know that I’m finding her because I want her back, or if I even want to help her, or instead because I need to get the closure of knowing she’s okay.

“I’ll find her,” I say, stepping back.

Kasey looks up at me, so much like her sister, yet so different. Kasey is prettier than Jennifer in a more petite, softer kind of way. Jenn had the good



looks that made her stunning to men, but Kasey makes them want to lift her into their arms and hold her.

“I know you will. I’m just so worried.”

“As always, if you hear anything, you just need to call me.”

“I haven’t heard anything—not a single thing. She’s my sister and she hasn’t called me. We were close, you know? I was with her through it all, and she hasn’t called me.”

That is alarming in itself, but I don’t say so. “We’ll get answers.”

I just hope I’m right.

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## CHAPTER 24

### NOW – AVA

I carry two handfuls of groceries to my car, feeling light, energetic even. After my intense gym session with Lucas, I went home, cleaned and strapped my hands, and decided for the first time since it all happened to get out of the house for something other than work or drinking. I didn't go far, just to the store to get some food to make myself a nice dinner, but it was a start, and it felt good to do something productive.

I think about Lucas as I walk and how incredible it felt to be with him. I didn't realize until that moment in the gym that I have feelings for the broody, mysterious detective. I don't know when they started. I don't know how they formed, but they were there and they felt amazing. I haven't experienced anything like it, and it scares the hell out of me.

Lucas and I . . . we're from two different worlds.

I juggle my bags as I lift my purse to get my keys. I reach in and find them, pulling them out.

"Ava, how wonderful to see you."

At the very sound of that voice, my entire body goes stiff. I straighten my back and turn slowly, seeing a face I never wanted to see again in my life. I take a shaky, terrified breath and clutch my purse close, praying this is just a dream.

When he steps closer, I know it isn't.

"You didn't think I would just disappear, did you?"

I stare at the man who shot Bethy, the man who ruined my life, the man who wants to destroy my father. I stare and a hard, thick lump forms in my throat as I see her face flash before my eyes as she begged for her life. He must see it, because he throws his head back and laughs. God. Evil. So incredibly evil.

"Look at you; I can just about read your thoughts." He chuckles. "Let me guess—you're seeing her face? How does it feel? I mean, it looks like

you're doing just fine, but that couldn't be true because you chose to end an innocent life. There is no possible way you could feel normal."

Pain stabs into my chest, and I slowly move my hand down to my phone in my bag. I'm not going to let this man take me—not again. I can't. *I won't*. My fingers curl around my phone and I carefully press the button on the screen to unlock it, praying it's right. I pray that my finger is hovering over the #1 button that will dial Lucas. I pray.

"What do you want from me?" I whisper, literally begging the gods that Lucas has been dialed and has answered the phone. I shift, hoping if by some small miracle my phone call has been answered, that Lucas can hear. "I did everything you wanted. Now leave me alone."

He barks a laugh. "You're not doing everything I wanted. I wanted you to suffer, to break, to make your family hurt, and that isn't happening. Look at you here—shopping, enjoying yourself like you didn't do a horrible thing."

"Just leave me alone," I whisper, my voice cracking.

"Do I need to take you again? Do I need to make it hurt more? Do I need to make you fucking scream again?" he growls, leaning in close.

"Just leave!" I scream, dropping my groceries and spinning to try and get into my car.

He slams my body against it, crushing my face down onto the glass. I gasp and squirm, but he leans down close, growling, "Don't you think you can forget. I won't let you forget. I won't let you get better. I'll make it burn for the rest of your fuckin' life. I'll never let you sleep without seeing her face. Murderer."

I start to sob, pain ripping my chest apart.

"Your father is going to pay in the worst possible way. Remember that."

With that, he lets me go. I crumple to my knees, sobbing and gasping for air. I close my eyes, and images of Bethy's head exploding flash. I scream, clutching my hair and praying, just praying, that it will go away. All I wanted was for one single second of my life to be normal again. But it'll never be normal. *I'll* never be normal.

I lift my purse and groceries, then push my body into the car.

Completely forgetting that I dialed Lucas.

~\*~\*~\*~

I sink down into the bath, my eyes burning from crying, my chest heavy with pain and horror. The hot water washes over my skin, and I sink in farther. I keep sinking until my face goes under, the water completely surrounding me. I'm in control, and yet my body will start screaming for relief soon. I close my eyes and forget the pain for a second. I think about just staying down here, for a brief moment I let that come into my mind.

Would it be easier?

I don't think it would be. He wants pain; he wants me to suffer; he wants me to destroy my family. Staying under this water, letting it take my life—that would be letting him win. That isn't what I want. I don't want him to win—hell, I don't want to feel any of this anymore, but it seems nothing I do will relieve the desperate, broken part of me.

My lungs start to burn and just as I'm about to go up, two hard hands curl around my arms, and I'm hauled out of the bath. I gasp and my eyes blur with water as it runs down my face. I'm confused, scared and grasping at a hard, panting body. It's only when he speaks that I realize it's Lucas that's hauled me out of the bath and is now crushing me against his chest.

"What's wrong with you?" he says, his voice frantic and so pained it hurts. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Luca—"

"It's never bad enough for that. Never fucking bad enough for that."

Oh god.

He thinks I was trying to kill myself.

"Lucas—" I croak.

"Don't you fuckin' give up, Ava. You're better than this—stronger. You don't ever give up. Do you hear me?" He's yelling in my face now, hands on my shoulders, shaking my body. He's frantic and terrified, so terrified his nostrils are flaring, his body is tense, and his eyes are wide and alarmed.

"Lucas," I beg, coughing as water hits my lungs.

He leans down, launching my naked body into his arms and striding into my room. He sits on the bed, his arms around me, crushing me against his body. Tears burst forth and start running down my cheeks.

"Never give up," he whispers into my ear. "Don't stop fighting, baby."

*Baby.*

I start crying harder.

"I won't let you drown. Won't fuckin' let you suffer."

I clutch him now, not caring that I'm naked, not caring that he misread the situation, not caring about anything except the man with his arms around me, giving me a comfort I have never had.

"Lucas," I croak. "I wasn't . . . I didn't . . ."

I can't finish the sentence, because a part of me, a tiny part of me, wishes I could have just drifted into oblivion in that bath. That scares me so much I go stiff in his arms, and a horrendous pain tears through my body. Oh. God. Was I going to do it? Was I going to let the pain take my life? Was I going to let him win?

"Don't you ever," he rasps, "*ever* fucking let me see you doing that again."

"H-h-h-he . . ." I stop speaking, closing my eyes, letting him rock me against his chest. Lucas is a cop, but I trust him. I trust him enough to let him in. To finally let someone in. "It's my fault."

He stops rocking and whispers, "I don't understand."

"The man that t-t-t-took me . . . the other girl that was there, the one he killed . . . it was my fault."

"You can trust me, kid," he says into my ear, clutching me tighter.

"He wanted to get back at my dad," I admit, feeling a rush of something intense travel through my body—relief that I've finally said the words. "He took me and another girl. I don't know who, I don't know why, but it was a way to get back at the club. He said he wanted to send a message and to do that, I had to choose which one of us died."

Lucas goes still.

I keep talking. "She was screaming. He kept shooting her, hitting her legs and demanding that I make a choice. I've never been so terrified in my life—never been so confused. I begged. I tried all I could to change it, but . . . I was so terrified, I screamed it before I knew what was happening. I said . . . oh God . . . Lucas, I said her."

He doesn't say anything. He just sits still, almost like he's not even awake.

"The second it left my lips, I said me. I said to take me, but . . . it was too late. He shot her. He just . . . shot her. It's my fault she's dead. I'm . . . I'm a . . ."

"Don't," he says, his voice hard. "Don't you dare say that word."

"That word is the truth."

He moves so quickly it throws me off guard. He flips my body, dropping me to my back on the mattress, then he comes down over me, his hard body falling flush against mine, his face coming down close. His eyes are intense and terrifying, so deep, deeper than I've ever seen them. "You are not anything but a girl who was taken, put in a position that no human in this fucking world could handle. Do you think you're the only one who would have made that choice?"

A tear leaks out. "I said her . . . in a moment of weakness and fear, I said her, and because of that, an innocent person was killed."

"If it was her choice, you think she wouldn't have said the same thing? Do you think anyone would have laid their own life down without a second thought?"

"Yes," I whisper. "A hero . . ."

"A hero comes in many forms."

"I killed someone."

"No. You were put in a position that gave you little choice."

"I should have said me."

"Do you really believe that would have changed the outcome?"

I look away.

"Look at me, Ava."

I don't.

"Ava," he warns.

I turn my face back to him.

"You did not kill that girl."

"That's your opinion," I whisper. "I'm sure not everyone would think like that."

"You're right, not everyone would, but I don't give a fuck what everyone else thinks. I care only what you think."

"I didn't do anything wrong," I say, my voice sounding like a broken mewl. "I was just finishing work . . . I just . . . I . . ."

"I know," he says, his voice soft. "I know, kid."

"He wanted to hurt my dad."

"Then it's your dad who should have paid the price, not you."

I look at him, and my eyes widen. "No, my dad is a good man."

"A good man who let you fall into the hands of a monster."

"Lucas, no . . ." I start to fight, trying to get out from underneath him. How dare he. How dare he blame my father?

“Don’t fight me, Ava,” he barks. “Don’t deny what’s right in front of you. Club business got you into this mess, and the leader of that club is your father. I heard that phone call today; I was fuckin’ out of my mind with fear, but I heard what he wanted. He wanted to break you to make your father pay. So tell me, if it isn’t his fault you got taken, then whose was it?”

I flinch and the cold, hard reality that issues with the club put me in this position hits me hard.

“I had a daughter,” he whispers. “I had a daughter, and she was taken from me. I did everything I could to fight . . . but her death was not on my hands because I never would have allowed it to be.”

“He loves me,” I say pitifully.

“I know,” Lucas says, and he means it. I can hear it in his voice. “But this isn’t your pain to wear. It’s his, because it should have never happened in the first place.”

“He didn’t mean . . . he would never hurt me. He . . . it would kill him to know what has happened to me.”

“And you don’t think he needs to feel that kind of pain? You don’t think that maybe he needs something to change the way things are running in that club?”

My jaw tightens. “I’m not doing this,” I rasp. “I’m not going to try and make you see you’re wrong about this, but you are . . . You don’t know him.”

He goes quiet for what seems like hours.

“My daughter drowned.”

I jerk, and my head snaps to the side as my eyes find his again. “Lucas, I’m so . . . sorry . . .”

He just found me in a bath, thinking I tried to drown myself. God, what kind of monster am I? How would that have felt for him to see in that water?

“I couldn’t save her. I would have done anything, given my fuckin’ life, to save her . . . but I couldn’t.”

I see his point.

I see it, and I understand it.

I reach up, and my fingers graze his jaw.

“I saw you under that water tonight, and it all came back.”

“Lucas, I’m so sorry. I didn’t kn—”

“And I realized that I can’t fucking do this anymore,” he interrupts me.

My eyes widen, and he pushes himself off me. He stands and looks down at me, his eyes travelling over my naked body. His body goes tense, but not with anger. “I can’t save you. I couldn’t save my daughter, and I couldn’t save . . .” He looks away. “I can’t save you.”

“Lucas,” I whisper, pushing to my feet, not caring that I’m naked, not caring that he can see it. “I’m not asking you to save me.”

“I can’t,” he says, his jaw tight. “I can’t heal you when I’m so fucking broken myself.”

I step closer, reaching up and cupping his jaw. “I’m not asking you to heal me, either. I’m simply asking you to just be.”

He looks to me and I push up on my tiptoes, throwing everything aside and pressing my lips to his. A long, still moment passes and I’m sure he’s going to push me away. His body is so stiff, his breathing so shallow, but then, like his soul just opens right up for me, he wraps his hand around my hip and hauls me against him.

Then he’s kissing me.



## CHAPTER 25

### NOW – AVA

Lucas's tongue grazes my own, his lips parting mine as the kiss grows deeper. I press myself against him, clutching his shirt, breathing him in, tasting everything about him. He makes a throaty, deep sound and starts backing me towards the bed, his big body dominating mine, making me feel so tiny and yet so safe.

I pull my mouth away from his as he slides a hand down, gripping my ass, hauling me up against him. "Shouldn't be doing this," he murmurs, his lips full, his eyes lusty, his arousal pressing against my stomach.

"Maybe," I whisper. "But we both know it's a mutual want."

His eyes flash, and his hand curves around my bottom before giving a light squeeze. I know I should tell him I'm a virgin, but I'm terrified it'll scare him off and right now, if he walks out on me, I don't think I'll cope. I need him more than I need my next breath, and I'll do anything to make him stay. Anything I can. So I don't open my mouth and tell him what he needs to know. Instead, I press my lips to his again and I kiss him.

He lets me, slowly lowering my body to the bed. His mouth moves softly against mine, and his hand slides up my sides, roaming over my skin until he reaches my breast. He gently squeezes, rotating my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. A little gasp leaves my lips and I arch up, spreading my legs, letting his body fall flush against mine.

"I can feel how hot you are," he growls against my mouth. "Even though my jeans, I can feel your pussy."

I shiver. No one has ever spoken to me like that before, and I love it. More than I ever could have imagined. I whimper and clutch him, my fingers going into his thick hair, tugging, wanting him closer even though he can't possibly make it so. His hand slides down, gently falling between my legs. He leans back on his knees, gently nudging my thighs farther

apart. His eyes fall on my exposed sex, and he makes a pleased sound deep in his chest.

“You’re beautiful, Ava,” he says, his voice genuine. “So fucking beautiful.”

My eyes meet his, and my cheeks heat, flushing with pleasure and shyness.

“So are you,” I whisper.

He looks down, not responding to that, and he reaches over and swipes his finger through my flesh, making a throaty sound when it comes up wet. “Yeah,” he rasps. “You’re ready for me, but I need to fucking taste you, so taste you I will.”

Then he’s lowering his face towards my sex. I gasp and squirm, but he pins me down with his hands to my hips. His lips brush against my exposed clit and I gasp at the thrilling sensation that runs up my spine. When he closes his lips around me and sucks, I buck, my hips lifting off the bed. He slams them back down with his hands and works my pussy harder, his tongue swirling, his lips sucking, his mouth humming.

“Oh god,” I cry out, my toes curling.

I’ve never felt anything like it. I’ve imagined so many times what this might feel like. I’ve experimented with my own fingers, but nothing has ever come close to feeling this incredible. I moan deep in my throat, and my head falls back, my breasts swollen and nipples hard—my body on fire. Lucas sucks and works my clit until a flood of warmth builds low in my belly.

“I think,” I groan. “I think . . . oh god . . .”

A tingly pleasure builds higher and higher until my fingers clutch the sheets beside me, and then I’m coming, exploding into his mouth with a cry and a gasp that sound loud even to my own ears. Lucas licks and sucks every last shudder from me, and then he’s moving up my body, his lips dragging over my skin until he reaches my throat, where he gently sucks as he takes hold of his shirt, pulling it up and over his head.

Then he’s kneeling again, staring down at me, unbuckling his belt. I glance down at the hard, thick length straining against his jeans and I know . . . I know I should tell him, but I can’t. I don’t want him to leave. I don’t want him to think I’m not ready for him.

I’ve been waiting for him. For this moment. For the person I let in enough to take something I’ve held so close.

My eyes stay on his hands as he jerks his jeans down, freeing his cock. It's magnificent. Not too long, not too thick—just the perfect width and length. At least, it looks perfect to me.

He curls his hand around it and strokes, making the tip turn a desperate shade of red, then he reaches into his jeans and pulls out a condom. I watch as he tears the foil with his teeth and then rolls it down his length. It's yellow and odd looking, and it takes away the rather intriguing view of his dick. I've never seen one up close, but I've seen enough pictures to know what to expect. Even still, Lucas is impressive.

He leans forward, dropping his hands onto the bed, and slowly moves over me. Butterflies stir in my stomach as I realize it's about to happen—it's really about to happen. He's going to make love to me, to take my virginity and introduce me to a world I've so desperately wanted to enter with him. I reach up, cupping his jaw, and his eyes find mine as he nestles between my legs, his cock pressing right against my entrance.

“You ready for this? Because once I start needing you, baby, I'm not goin' to stop.”

Needing me.

He needs me?

My heart flutters.

“I don't want you to stop.”

His eyes warm, and he curls a hand around the side of my head as he slowly inches forward, pressing his cock to my entrance and pushing in just slightly. It doesn't hurt so bad yet, so I take a deep breath and try to relax, stroking my fingers through his hair, brushing my lips against his. “God, you're so fucking tight,” he murmurs, sliding in a little farther.

I feel it then. The break through, pain that shoots up my spine. I stiffen and gasp. It burns and feels like someone is stretching me wide. I knew it would hurt, but this badly? No.

Lucas has gone still above me, and when I dare to turn my face to his, he's staring down at me, his eyes confused and a little concerned. “Tell me it's just been a while since you've had a man,” he whispers, his voice clearly not wanting to make an appearance.

“Lucas . . .”

He jerks back, launching off me, and stands, panting, looking down at me. His cock is jutting upwards, looking strained, but he does nothing about it. He just watches me. “You're a virgin.”

It isn't a question.

"Does it matter?" I whisper.

He laughs bitterly, and it's the first time I've heard something even close to a laugh leave his lips. "Does it matter? Fuck me, Ava, of course it fucking matters. What the hell are you doing, giving something that important to someone like me?"

I push up to my elbows. "I . . . I want to give it to you."

"No, you think you want to."

I frown. "Don't tell me what I want, Lucas. I'm not a child. Whatever this is going on between us, I feel it and I want this. I want it to be you because you're the first real thing to happen to me, and I don't want to waste that."

His face softens slightly and he stares at me, his eyes scanning my face. "You can't take something like this back."

"I don't want to take it back."

"Ava," he says, his voice strained. "You're going through a hard time; you can't possibly know what it is you want."

Anger bubbles up in my chest and I launch off the bed, throwing myself at him and shoving him so hard he takes two steps back. "You know what, Lucas Black? Screw you. I'm tired of you treating me like I have no fucking idea what it is I need. If you don't want this, then don't stand there and put it back on me. Man up and accept it."

I go to step past him but his hand lashes out and catches me, curling around my belly and swinging me back around towards him. "Never said I didn't want it," he says, his voice low.

"I know what I want. I've never been more sure of anything in my life," I say, my voice softening slightly. "I want you inside me." I look up at him. "I want you surrounding me. I want everything you can give because you're the only person who understands me."

His hand slides up my back, pulling me closer. "It's your virginity, honey."

"Yeah," I whisper. "It is, and it's mine to give."

His eyes flash and then he takes a deep breath before pulling me up into his arms, crushing his lips down over mine. He backs us up against the bed and gently lowers me down, kissing me softly, coaxing my body, preparing me. "There is nothing I can do to make this less painful," he says, reaching down between my legs and stroking my pussy softly. "But I can go slow."

“I don’t mind the pain if it’s coming from you.”

He groans and gently parts my folds, pushing a finger into my pussy. I gasp and squirm as pain shoots up my spine once more. He slowly pulls his finger out, before sliding it back in. He does this until the pain is slipping away, and something incredible is taking its place. Then he adds another finger, stretching, thrusting, until I’m bucking against him.

“This isn’t even close to how my cock is gonna feel in you, Ava, but I’m going to do everything I can not to hurt you.”

“I trust you,” I say, meeting his eyes. “I trust you, Luke.”

He flinches and his eyes close. He drops his forehead to mine. “Please . . . don’t call me that.”

“Why?” I whisper.

“Because it isn’t who I am anymore.”

“Then who are you, Lucas Black?”

He lifts his forehead from mine. “I’m yours.”

My heart flutters and I lean up, kissing him again. “Then show me.”

He does.

He removes his fingers from my depths and positions his body over mine once more. I prepare myself for the pain, and it comes. With every inch he pushes himself into me, the pain gets slightly worse. But he’s gentle. He’s soft and caring, and he soothes me with soft words as he guides his body into mine, letting me adjust to every inch.

When he’s inside me, really inside me, we both stop. My hands are resting on his back, his are up by my head and our eyes are locked. So much is passing between us, so much beauty, so much pain, so much that only we can understand. I think in that second that I’m falling in love with Lucas ‘Shadow’ Black.

And I’m completely okay with that.

“Going to fuck you now, baby.”

I nod, stroking his back as he starts to thrust, slow at first, working my body through the uncomfortable sting. That sting quickly turns into a slight throbbing and then a very light tingle. It doesn’t feel incredible, but it doesn’t hurt anymore either. I close my eyes and take it in, feeling every thrust, hearing every grunt, relishing in every stroke of his fingers.

“You feel so incredible,” he groans, nuzzling my neck. “Fuck, Ava.”

“Yes,” I whisper, feeling a light buzz of pleasure between my thighs. “God, yes.”

“I’m so deep, so fucking deep.”

“Please,” I mewl.

“Please what?”

“Please don’t stop.”

He doesn’t. He thrusts and glides until my body is arching, my nipples are hard and his body is coated in a fine sheen of sweat. He’s close, I can see it in his jaw, in the way his body has gone tense and the way his eyes have glazed over. The very idea that he’s finding so much pleasure in my body, in me, makes tingles break out across my skin.

“Are you . . . does it feel good?” I gasp.

“Baby, it feels fucking incredible,” he grinds out. “God, I’m going to come.”

He thrusts three more times and then drops his head into my shoulder and lets out a long gasp of air that’s mixed with a groan. His body shudders, and I feel his dick twitch deep inside me.

God.

*Incredible.*

His body goes slightly slack above mine and he drops his forehead down, resting it against my own. I look into his eyes and whisper, “That was exactly what I needed and more.”

He smiles, the first true, warm, easy smile he’s given me.

And it’s beautiful.

~\*~\*~\*~

“Can I ask you a question?” I ask later that night, as I’m tucked into Lucas’s arms.

“Mmmm,” he murmurs, his fingers gliding through my hair.

“If you could choose how you were going to die, would you?”

He stops stroking and thinks on that a while, then in a gruff voice he says, “No.”

I blink. “You wouldn’t?”

“Nope.”

“How come?”

“I don’t think you’d ever truly be able to choose. If you could say how it was going to happen, it would give you too much control. The thing about dying is you never know when, you never know how—you just know that

one day it'll happen. It's terrifying enough as it is, the very thought of no longer being here—imagine adding the option of deciding how that would be.”

He makes a good point.

“That’s true.”

“Would you, kid?” he asks, rolling, still keeping his arms around me. “Would you choose if you could?”

I shrug. “I guess I would, yeah. If you had asked me that a few months ago, I would have said no, but after seeing . . .” I trail off and look away.

Lucas reaches over and takes my chin, gently turning my face back to his. “Keep going.”

“After seeing Bethy—that was her name, you know—die . . . I wondered how something like that would feel. Did it hurt? Did she just disappear without any pain? I think that if I could choose, I’d go easily, simply, without any of that horror.”

“Life isn’t simple or easy, baby,” Lucas says, stroking his thumb over my bottom lip. “If it was, we wouldn’t be here.”

My smile wobbles, and I nod.

“My words won’t change how you feel about it all, I know that, but I want you to know that it wasn’t your fault. Any person, even the strongest of us, would weaken when faced with a choice like that. You might not believe it now—hell, you may never believe it—but I can assure you that you’re not a murderer, and it wasn’t your fault that happened.”

I stare into his eyes, and I know that he believes the words he’s saying. He doesn’t think I’m a murderer, and he doesn’t think what I did was awful or repulsive, but I just don’t know how I can ever feel that way. It doesn’t matter how much I try to reason with myself, I can’t ever seem to push the guilt from my chest.

Lucas’s phone rings on the bedside table and he sighs, rolling and taking it into his hand. He presses a button and puts it to his ear. “Yeah?”

He listens a moment. Then he grunts. “Fine. I’ll be there in twenty.”

He hangs up and turns to me. “Knew this night was too good to be true. I gotta go.”

“Work?” I ask.

“Just for something different.”

“Are you always on call?”

“Pretty much,” he says, sliding out of the bed. I catch a glimpse of his muscled ass as he leans down to find his jeans. He pulls them on and then stands. God, he looks good like that, standing there, his jeans unbuttoned, his big body strong and rippled, his hair mussed, and his eyes lusty. “If a lead for a case pops up, I’m there, like it or not.”

“That sucks,” I say, glancing down at his abs as he reaches for his shirt.

“Yeah,” he says, sliding it over his head.

I want to ask him if I’ll see him again, if this was just a one-night stand, if anything has changed, but I can’t bring myself to. It’s probably fear that the answer will be something I can’t handle, and that scares me. The best thing for me is to just pray and hope I’m not going to lose him, because I couldn’t cope.

He lifts his things and shoves them into his pockets, then he walks over to the bed again and leans down, curling a fist into my hair and bringing my forehead to his lips. He kisses me, lingering a while before pulling back just enough to catch my eyes. “I’ll call you later. Make sure you’re doin’ okay. Keep your alarm on, I’m goin’ to be looking into that fucker that caused you trouble, whether you like it or not.”

My breath gushes out with resignation and I nod.

“Later, honey.”

I smile softly. “Later, Detective.”

He grins.

I lied. I thought his smile was the most beautiful thing I’d seen.

No. His grin is.



## CHAPTER 26

### THEN – LUCAS

“Tell me when you last gave her drugs,” I bark, slamming the junkie against the cold brick wall.

“I-I-I don’t remember one person from the last,” he stammers.

“You’re fuckin’ lying,” I snarl, getting close. “I know for a fact you gave her drugs, and I wanna know when it was.”

“Listen, man, I don’t know her face. I swear.”

I pull him off the wall and then slam him back so hard his head cracks against the brick. “Stop fuckin’ lying to me,” I bellow.

“Okay,” he screeches. “I saw her a month ago. She came to me askin’ for a specific kind of drug. I gave it to her. End of story.”

“What drug?”

“It’s a new mix. Good stuff.”

“And where do you get this fuckin’ drug?”

“Can’t say, man. I’ll be killed.”

I pull out my gun and press it to his temple. “Trust me when I say I’ll fucking kill you if you don’t tell me.”

“Please,” he cries. “I didn’t do nothin’ wrong.”

“I beg to differ. Now answer the fuckin’ question or I’ll blow your brains out, and believe me, I’ll play it off as self-defense.”

His eyes widen, and I don’t know if he knows that I’m bluffing or not, but he quickly starts rambling. “Alls I know is that a member of the Hell’s Knights was sellin’ the drug. Don’t know if they made it themselves, but I know it’s where they started it. The girl was hooked because of them, and she came to me when they kicked her ass to the curb.”

They kicked her ass to the curb? Jackson said he didn’t see her, that she just left, but this guy is saying they gave her the boot. Something isn’t adding up.

“Are the Knights dealing around these areas?”

“Don’t know. Just know that drug is highly sought-after, and they’re sourcing it.”

“Thanks for the info,” I say sarcastically. “Now you and me are going for a little drive.”

“You said you’d let me go!” he bellows, squirming.

“Well,” I say, leaning in close with a grin, “I lied.”

~\*~\*~\*~

I stand at the front fence of the Hell’s Knights compound, rattling the gate to make myself known. Five minutes later, Jackson, his VP, Cade, and a friend of theirs, Spike, come storming out. I cross my arms over my chest and wait for them to reach the fence. Jackson is furious, his eyes dark, his jaw tight. “What the fuck you doin’ here, Shadow?” he demands.

Shadow.

To say I’ve been on a rampage since Jenn went missing is an understatement. I’ve been digging into criminal worlds, tracking drugs, and finding out information. The nickname came from the club, because apparently I come in like a shadow and disappear as quickly as one. I have to be stealth; what I’m doing goes against the books, and I can’t risk losing my job over it.

“I spoke to a friend of yours last night,” I say, holding his eyes. “He told me about the drugs you’re makin’.”

Jackson growls, and Cade’s eyes narrow.

“I ain’t makin’ no drugs.”

“Really? ’Cause from what I hear, you’re mixing dangerous shit and hooking people.”

“Then your source is wrong,” he hisses.

“I’m never wrong. You have a connection to my missing wife, and so help me fucking god, I’ll die before I stop searching for that connection. You can either help me, or you can’t, but I won’t stop.”

“You best be careful, cop,” Jackson growls. “Your wish might just come true.”

“Which one?” I snap.

“The one about dying.”

We hold each other’s eyes. “I want no business in your fucking club, Jackson. I just want to know where my wife is. You’re makin’ shit harder

than it has to be.”

“You’re a broken man that can’t let go,” he growls, “because if you stop doing this, you might actually have to face everything you’ve lost.”

I flinch, and his words hit me right in my soul, penetrating deep and causing an unwanted pain to resurface.

“In fact, I don’t even think you want to find your fuckin’ wife. I don’t think you truly care at all. You lost your daughter, and now you’re terrified of going back to a life without her so you’re clutching at straws, tryin’ to put my club in shit it has nothin’ to do with, just because you can’t face life.”

I lunge forward, curling my fingers around the barbed wire and snarling, “You don’t know a fuckin’ thing about me.”

“You want to believe my club has something to do with that woman disappearing, and you’re not goin’ to consider anything else.”

“You were the last fuckin’ people to see her. She was screwing one of your members. Don’t tell me there’s no fuckin’ information,” I roar.

He leans close. “There is no information. Whatever she got herself into, was on her, not us. We gave her no fuckin’ drugs.”

“Then explain your name comin’ up,” I grind out.

“You want my name to come up, Shadow, and if you want it bad enough, you’re goin’ to find any excuse to get it. I have enemies, I won’t lie, but I’m not makin’, dealin’ or handlin’ drugs.”

Pointless. So fuckin’ pointless.

He won’t give me what I want.

So I’ll keep digging.

I’ll never stop.

## CHAPTER 27

### NOW – AVA

“Stop it.” I laugh, throwing a grape at Danny. He ducks with a grunt, and then launches himself up and throws an apple at me. I duck to the side, my eyes wide, and screech, “Dude, that could have killed me.”

He snorts. “No, it couldn’t. Don’t be a fuckin’ sissy.”

“Leave her alone, D,” Skye says, watching this little exchange. “She’s going to kick your ass.”

Danny grins at her. “Like to see her try.”

“Now now, kids,” Mom says, walking into the room with Dad standing beside her, his arm slung around her shoulders. “Stop throwing fruit.”

“He started it,” I say, jerking a thumb at Danny.

“And I’m sure you didn’t mind playing.” Dad grins at me.

“You know me too well, old man.”

He winks at me. I smile. I don’t care what Lucas says; my dad isn’t at fault here.

“Yo!” Spike says, walking into the room with Mercy by his side.

“What’s happenin’?”

We’re at the compound, having a cookout. I haven’t been to one since the last and that didn’t end so well after Bethy’s dad came in and made a scene.

“Go and get the beer,” Dad says, tossing the keys at Spike. “Stop bein’ so fuckin’ lazy.”

Spike flips Dad the bird, and then turns to Mercy. “Stay here, squirt. You leave, and I’ll kick your ass. And you know your old man don’t wanna do that.”

Mercy narrows her eyes at him and crosses her arms. “Can I at least find Max and have some decent conversation?”

He studies her. “He got a phone?”

“Dad!” she snaps, crossing her arms. “I’m leaving to college in a week, which means you don’t get to keep treating me like I’m five!”

“You sneakin’ out, doin’ shit behind my back is askin’ for me to treat you like you’re five.”

She shakes her head and storms out. When she’s gone, Spike sighs and looks over to Danny. “Go and make sure your sister doesn’t borrow someone’s phone to do whatever the fuck she’s been doin’.”

“Cut her some slack, old man. She’s old enough now to make her own choices.”

“She’s livin’ in my house and she’s my little girl. While those two things exist, she ain’t doin’ what she wants.”

Danny shoots me a look and I shrug, then he goes to find Mercy. I turn to Skye and whisper, “What was that about?”

“Apparently Mercy snuck out the other night and got into some trouble, and her dad found out. He wasn’t happy.”

“Seriously?” I gasp. “I can’t believe she didn’t tell me.”

“You’ve been a little busy.”

I frown. Too busy to be there for my friends?

“It’s okay,” she amends quickly. “No one is holding it against you.”

I force a smile and stand. “I’m going to find Max. I haven’t spoken to him in ages.”

“Ebs is back, so he’s been hanging out with her.”

I beam. “I didn’t know Ebs was back.”

Ebony is Max’s step-sister. Her dad was a member of a rival club, and he died, leaving her mom, Janine, my mom’s best friend, alone. Janine met Muff and he instantly adopted the two, falling in love with Janine and practically adopting Ebony. Then they went on to have Max.

“She is, just for a week.”

Ebony has finished college and is now working her dream job, being that she’s a few years older than the rest of us. She comes home when she can, but she seems to be making a good life for herself. That’s all anyone can ask for.

“Well, I’m going to go and say hello, and make sure Mercy is okay.”

“I’ll be here. I want to talk to Dad.”

I smile at her. “Later, chicky.”

“Later.”

I walk down the halls, poking my head into each room until I find Mercy sitting in one of the club rooms that is no doubt used for unsanitary things. It only has a double bed and a couple of ratty old bedside tables, but she's in here anyway, standing by the window, staring out. I guess Danny didn't find her, or maybe he did and she sent him packing.

"Knock knock," I say, and she turns, smiling weakly at me.

"Hey Ava."

"You okay?"

She shrugs. "Sure, if I wasn't on house arrest."

"What happened?"

She sighs. "I . . . god, I don't know."

"Skye said you snuck out and got busted."

She nods and stares out the window again.

"Wanna share, or do you just want to go get a drink?"

"I met this guy."

I go over and stand beside her, saying nothing, just letting her go on.

"I . . . I can't even explain this without it sounding really bad."

"Try me," I say, encouraging her with a smile.

"I went to a small local concert with a friend. We won a couple of VIP tickets through a competition. Since I turned twenty-one, I thought it would be awesome to see, even if the band is just small and nothing major. So, we went to the concert, we watched them play, and then we went backstage to meet them. Pru went and got chatty with one of the members and so I got stuck with the lead singer, and god, Ava, he was a jerk. An absolute pig. I was excited. I asked him questions and he just grunted at me, treating me like a stupid little girl. I got so angry I told him exactly what I thought of him, as I have a bad habit of doing. I mean, I got right in his face and just ripped it up him, and then he stood up and kissed me."

I blink. "Pardon me?"

She flushes and nods. "Yep, he just stood up and kissed me, then he was gone. I've never . . . God, Ava, I've never felt anything like it in my life. It was so intense and he was so . . . hot. They were playing again the next night and I wanted to see him, so I tried to sneak out. I don't know why. I just . . . I needed to know what the hell went on."

"Wait, first, why did you sneak out?"

She huffs. "Dad cracked the shits because I didn't come home on time the night before. He likes to know where I am—you know what they're

like. Anyway he told me I wasn't going out again that weekend and while I could refuse, being that I'm twenty-one, I didn't want to poke the bear so I agreed to stay in, but . . . I just couldn't."

"So you made the bear really, really angry," I laugh.

She nods. "Yep, and I never got to see the guy again."

"What's the band?"

"They call themselves Wrath. I don't know why. They're only local, obviously just trying to take off."

"And did you catch his name?"

She nods. "Diesel. That's all I got. No last name. Nothing."

"That's a pretty unique name. You could probably find him if you wanted to."

She shakes her head. "Nah. The more I think about it, the stupider I feel. I mean, he probably just kissed me to shut me up and hasn't thought about it again. Last thing I want to do is come across as a stalker."

I laugh. "No, I guess not. Still, couldn't hurt to maybe find out if he's playing again."

"I start college next week. No doubt I'll be too busy for bands and boys."

I nod. "Are you excited about college?"

She nods. "Hell yes. I love my dad, but I'm really tired of living under his fierce protection."

"Feel ya, babe." I chuckle, and she giggles.

"Bikers, eh?" She grins.

"Bikers."

"What would we do without them?"

God only knows.

~\*~\*~\*~

"So you're loving your job?" I ask Ebony as we mix up some drinks later that night.

"Yeah." She smiles. "It's pretty damned good."

"Done anything horribly rebellious?"

She laughs and flicks her pretty eyes in my direction. Her long blond hair falls over her face as she does, so she shoves it back. "I'm always rebellious."

“Yes.” I grin. “But how rebellious?”

“Yeah,” Muff says, coming up behind her. “How rebellious?”

She turns and grins up at him. He might not be her dad by blood, but he’s her dad in every way that counts. “I’m a perfect angel.” She winks.

He chuckles and curls an arm around her shoulders, pulling her into him. “You learned from the best. It really doesn’t surprise me.”

“Don’t talk about Mom like that,” Eb teases, and Muff grins.

“Oh, I wasn’t talkin’ about your momma.”

I roll my eyes and laugh. “You two are nuts.”

“What about you?” Eb asks, when Muff shakes his head and walks off. “Anything interesting happening aside from the drama that’s been going down?”

My cheeks grow hot, and her eyes widen. “Oh, do tell!”

“Nothing to tell,” I say, wishing I could tell them all about Lucas, but none of them would understand. In this world, he is basically the enemy.

“You’re so lying!” she chastises playfully. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re seeing someone.”

“Say what?”

I spin around and see Danny, Skye and Max all staring at me. It was Danny who spoke.

“I’m not seeing anyone,” I scoff, waving a hand.

“Oh my god! You are!” Skye squeals.

“She is what?” Addison asks, coming up next to Skye and throwing her arm around her.

“She’s seeing someone,” Skye yells.

My cheeks burn and Addison’s eyes widen. “My baby sister is seeing someone?” she screeches. “No way. Come, tell your sister all about it. I want details.”

My face burns.

“Since when are you seein’ someone?” Danny grunts.

“I’m . . . I’m not!” I say, but even I don’t believe it.

“Oh, bull!” Mercy grins. “You’re a bad liar.”

“Really bad,” Max agrees.

“Daddy!” Addison yells. “Your daughter is seeing someone.”

“Addi!” I cry out.

“Hey.” She grins. “I had to endure his wrath; so do you, sister.”

I put my head in my hands, and Ebony giggles beside me.



“What’s this about my baby seein’ someone?” Dad grunts, close by.

“I’m not seeing anyone!” I grumble into my hands.

“She is. She so is,” Skye sings.

I lift my head and shoot her a glare, then I give Dad a sheepish look.

“Well,” he grunts, crossing his arms, giving me his Dad eyes. “Who you seein’ and where can I find him?”

“Dad!” I protest.

“Spill the beans, baby girl. I’ll find out.”

“I’m not seeing anyone,” I attempt again.

I mean really, I’m not seeing anyone. I slept with Lucas, but that doesn’t mean we’re seeing each other. He hasn’t indicated even for a second that that’s what we’re doing here, hell he hasn’t even called me, just a few simple texts. Besides, even if I was, I’m not about to tell my dad about it. He’d lose his shit. No, that doesn’t even cut it. He’d probably kill Lucas, chain me up for life, and then lose his shit.

“Don’t lie to me,” he warns.

“Dad,” I huff. “I’m not seeing anyone. I’m being serious.”

“Then why are you blushing?”

“I’m embarrassed,” I correct, “because you all just bombarded me!”

He studies me. “I don’t like any fucker touchin’ my baby girl.”

“Oh poo!” Addison waves a hand before I can speak. “She’s a grown girl, Daddy-O. She can get touched as much as she likes.”

Dad shoots her a glare, and I can’t help it—I burst out laughing. Addison is forever on his case, and sometimes she just says the most ludicrous things.

“It ain’t funny,” he mutters, crossing his arms and staring at me.

“It’s a little funny,” I say, pressing a hand over my mouth.

“It’s really really funny.” Skye giggles.

Cade comes over and joins the group, throwing his arm around Skye’s shoulder, too. “What’s funny?”

“Dad is having a fit at the very thought of Ava getting some lovin’,” Addison taunts, giving our dad a shit-eating grin.

“So he should. You okay with our daughter getting some lovin’?” Cade grunts, and Addison stops grinning.

I laugh harder.

“You lot are up to no good again,” Mom says, coming in beside me. “I can hear you all the way in the kitchen.”

“That’s because Dad is being an overprotective rock ape again,” I tease lightly.

Mom grins. Dad’s lips twitch.

“He can’t help it.” She smiles at him. “It’s just the way he is.”

“Well, maybe he should channel more of it on you,” I point out.

She flushes, so adorable. “Oh, he does.”

“Ew!” Addison cries. “No! I’ve told you about details, woman.”

Mom flips her the bird, and I start laughing again. My crazy awesome family—I don’t know where I’d be without them.

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## CHAPTER 28

### NOW – AVA

What the hell am I doing?

This is too much. It's too much, right?

I glance down at the sandwiches in my hands, and the bag of pop in the other, then I look up at the police station where Lucas works. I don't know if this is the right thing to do. Hell, I don't even know if Lucas wants to see me. We haven't talked for the past four days. He probably wants to run a good mile and here I am bringing him lunch, like I'm his damned wife.

Oh God.

It's definitely too much.

He hasn't even called me. He texted last night saying he was busy at work and would call me today. Stupid me thought it would be a good idea to bring him lunch if he was busy.

I keep staring at the building as if it'll miraculously give me the answers I'm seeking, but no, it just sits there as it was five seconds before.

I should go.

Yes, I'm going.

I start walking in a hurry so I can pass the building quickly. I don't want anyone to notice me. Thank god Lucas's office is located on the other side of the building. Just as I pass the building, I catch sight of two people against it. There is a little seat and a couple of tables there. I skid to a stop when I realize those people are Lucas and Sheila.

My heart skids to a halt as I take them in.

Sheila is standing against the wall, her back pressed against it, her face tilted up towards Lucas. He's got one hand on the wall beside her head and he's leaning down close, saying something to her, their bodies quite close, maybe only inches apart. My hands tremble. The position they're in doesn't leave much to the imagination. There are only a few scenarios that would put people in that position. Something tightens in my chest, something

painful and ugly. I take a step back and trip on a chair, stumbling once or twice before catching my footing.

When I look back up, Lucas is watching me. He steps away from the wall, his eyes on mine, confused, intense.

“Ava,” he says, his voice thick.

“I was just,” I say, my voice small and timid, “I was just . . . I thought . . .” I hold up the bag of food. “I . . . never mind. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

I drop the food and pop onto the table and turn, rushing off. The second I hit the street, tears spring to my eyes and rush down my cheeks. I find my car and throw myself in, speeding off before anyone can stop me. Not that I think anyone would. Clearly I interrupted Lucas with the woman he was dating. God, she probably doesn’t even know about me. She’s probably his girlfriend.

I’m an idiot.

A damned idiot.

My phone rings once, then twice, and on the third time I glance down at it to see Lucas’s number on the screen. I turn it off and keep driving. God, my mascara is probably running. I am ready for work. I thought I’d have lunch with Lucas and then head in for my shift, but clearly that won’t happen. I’ll go in early. Michael won’t care. The more he can make me work the happier he is.

I arrive at work ten minutes later and get out of the car, leaving my phone behind. I dig through my purse and find a tissue, cleaning up my face. I’m red and blotchy, but I’m sure no one will notice. I take a deep, shaky breath and head inside. The office is busy, as always, so I quickly go to my desk and fire up my computer. I don’t need to talk to anyone; I’ll just do my job and distract myself.

“Ava, you’re here early.”

I look up and see Michael coming towards my desk, carrying a stack of papers.

“Yes. I was in the area; I thought I’d come in and get a bit extra done.”

He nods, his eyes dropping to my breasts. Ugh. Such a fucking pig.

“Yes, well, it’s nice to see you. May I have a word with you in the conference room?”

Great. He’ll probably fire me. It’s that kind of day.

“Sure.”

I stand and follow him into the conference room. When we're in there, he turns to me. "I just wanted to see if you're okay."

I blink. "Pardon?"

"Well, you look like you've been crying."

I study him. Michael doesn't do anything to help anyone. He's selfish and creepy, and there is always a reason he asks questions like these.

"I'm fine. Just a long night."

"I'm heading out to lunch soon. Would you like to join me?"

Um. No.

"No thanks," I say quickly. "I have a lot of work to do."

He steps closer, and my skin prickles. "Of course, but I'd still like you to join me."

He's creeping me out. "My boyfriend wouldn't like that, I'm afraid," I say quickly. "Unless it's to do with business, I must decline."

There. That sounds professional.

"I didn't think you had a boyfriend," he says, stepping closer. "I imagined you to be . . . somewhat innocent."

Okay. He needs to get the fuck out of my space. "I'm sorry?" I say, my voice a little pissy.

"I just didn't picture you as the type to date. You're so sweet, so innocent."

*Ick.* "Well, I have a boyfriend, and he's great. He's also a cop."

That makes him step back, but he still gives me a skeptical look. "I hope you're not lying to me, Ava. Because I'd find out. And I really wouldn't be happy."

"No sir," I mutter, stepping towards the door. "Not lying. I have work to do."

I rush out before he can say anything else. My skin is crawling. I hurry back to my desk and sit down. I'm there barely five minutes when our receptionist, Hayley, comes over. "Ava? You have a visitor."

I stare up at her. "I do?"

"Yes. He didn't give a name, but he said it's urgent. I've buzzed him up."

Lucas. I'd bet on it.

"Thanks." I sigh.

She disappears and I turn back to my computer, anger and sadness competing in my chest. When I hear the deep, sexy voice behind me, I stop

scrolling through my screen, but I don't turn.

"You goin' to ignore me all day?"

"Why are you here, Lucas?" I say, not glancing at him.

"Look at me, kid."

"Don't call me that!" I snap. "And I'm working. You need to leave."

"I'm not goin' to leave," he grinds out. "So turn around and give me your eyes."

Lucas is pissed. I shiver and turn around, looking up at him. He looks so good, so damned good. He's got a pair of black jeans on and a white button-up shirt that's rolled up at the sleeves. His tie is loose and his boots are slightly scuffed. He looks like a rebel cop, and that's hot. His hair is mussed and he has a few days growth on his jaw. His eyes are intense as hell as he studies me.

"Can you hurry it up?" I say, my voice pathetic and weak. "I'm busy."

He furrows his brows. "You stormed off before lettin' me explain."

"Explain what?" I mutter. "You're seeing another woman—that's fine. You and I...it was fun. I get that. You don't need to explain."

"Ava. . ."

"No seriously, it's fine, Lucas. Just because we slept together doesn't mean anything. I get it."

"Ava," he growls.

"I fucked up. I thought wrong—"

"Ava!" he barks.

"It isn't like you promised me anything—"

He cuts me off by swooping down, hauling my body out of the chair and crushing me against him. Then his mouth is on mine. He kisses me hard, brutal even. I gasp into his mouth and let his lips crush mine. He lowers me down after a few seconds and I stare up at him, eyes wide.

"What you saw was me warning Sheila to stay away from me."

I swallow.

"You were . . . against the wall."

"She came into my station, demanding attention. I took her outside, she gave me sass so I put my hands on the wall and got in her face. If you paid attention, if you looked hard, you would have seen I was fuckin' pissed at her."

Oh.

"I . . ."

Yeah, I've got nothing.

"I'm not seein' her or anyone else. I didn't fuck you for the fun of it," he rasps, so close I can feel his breath.

"You didn't call," I whisper, pitifully.

"I was workin'."

Right.

I look away and realize that everyone in the office has stopped what they're doing and are staring at us. My cheeks burn, and I look back to Lucas. "I'm at work. We shouldn't be doing this here."

He turns his head and glances at everyone, then straightens and runs a hand through his hair. I could swear I hear a sigh from somewhere in the room.

"Callin' you later," he says, leaning down and brushing his lips across mine. "Answer the phone, baby. I won't be happy if you don't."

Then he turns and strides out.

My knees go wobbly.

*That was hot.*

~\*~\*~\*~

My fists pound the punching bag over and over as I expel my rage. My day went from bad to worse. After Lucas left my office, Michael, the pompous prick, gave me a written warning. He said that public displays of affection in the office are out of bounds, and if I do it again, I'll be fired. Fired! Because someone kissed me. It has nothing to do with that and everything to do with his obsession with me. God dammit.

I can't afford to lose my job. It's hard enough to get one around here. My boss is acting like a jealous asshole and my—god, I don't even know what Lucas is to me—is being bossy and demanding. My fist hits the bag again and sweat trickles down my brow. I came here because I wasn't ready to go home. I needed to let off some steam. I've been emotionally shredded for days and this was the only way I could think that would allow me to let off some steam.

"I told you to answer the phone."

I flinch and stop punching the bag at the angry, raspy voice behind me. I turn slowly to see Lucas in his exercise clothes, his arms crossed, and his eyes on mine.

“I didn’t hear my phone, so technically I didn’t ignore it,” I mumble, turning back to the bag.

“Ava . . .”

“I’m not in the mood, Lucas. My boss gave me a god damned warning because you came in acting all broody and manly and kissed me. Now I’m angry and I need to get that out, so if you’ll leave me to vent, that’d be great.”

He goes silent, then his hand lashes out and curls around mine, spinning me towards him. I slam into his chest with a *humph*. “Your boss gave you a warning.”

It’s not a question.

“Yeah, he gave me a warning. He was angry that you kissed me in his office. He’s also very jealous because he has a slight obsession with me, and I think I killed all his fantasies that I was a sweet, innocent virgin he could fuck.”

Lucas stiffens. “What?”

“It’s nothing serious, caveman,” I mutter. “I think he has a slight crush on me.”

“Has he done anything?” he demands.

“No . . .”

“You’re lying.”

“Stop it,” I snap, stepping back. “I’m here to get some anger out, not create more by fighting with you.”

“What has he done?”

“Lucas!” I cry.

“Ava,” he warns.

“He looks at my breasts sometimes, drops pens and makes me bend down and pick them up—nothing major.”

His eyes flare, and I realize I shouldn’t have said that. Lucas isn’t the kind of man to take something like that lightly. This is confirmed when he snarls a filthy curse and grabs my hand, tugging me until I move. He pulls me into the locker rooms where he barks at everyone to leave, flashing his badge. They do, then he backs me into a locker and puts his hands up either side of my head.

“He looks at your breasts,” he snarls.

“Lucas . . . he’s a man . . .”

“He makes you pick up pens so he can check out your ass . . .”



“Lucas . . .”

“He fuckin’ makes you feel uncomfortable.”

I stop talking. There isn’t any point in arguing with him.

“Well?” he murmurs, dropping his voice.

“He makes me uncomfortable,” I confirm. “But we’re not talking about this right now. You need to let me go so I can—”

“He ever touched you?”

“Lucas!” I snap.

“Has he?”

“No,” I screech. “God, will you let me go?”

“No.”

“Lucas!”

I shove at his chest and he takes hold of my hands, jerking me towards him so fast my mouth slams against his. A painful sting radiates through my lip before I forget the pain and let him kiss me. I kiss him back, pouring my fury into him. I reach up, grabbing his hair, tugging it until he winces. Our kiss is brutal, angry even, and he pushes me harder against the locker.

“Take it out on me,” he rasps, stepping back. “You want to release your anger? Go ahead.”

I take him up on his offer, taking his shirt and jerking it up and over his head. My heart is pounding. I have no idea what I’m doing, but I am sure of one thing. I need to touch him. To feel him. To breathe him in. So I wing it. I do what feels right to my body.

I rake my fingers down his bare abs, causing him to shudder, then I hesitantly slip my hand into his shorts. He hisses, and I gasp as I curl my finger around his cock. It’s hard and throbbing already.

“I don’t . . .” I look into his eyes. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Keep doin’ what you’re doin’ right now,” he grinds out through clenched teeth. “It’s fucking good, baby.”

I stroke my hand up and down, squeezing softly. He growls and takes hold of my shorts, undoing the string before shoving his hand into my panties. There he finds me wet. I can’t help it. I whimper as his finger glides through my sex, and he raises his hand out, licking his fingers. “You’re wet.”

My eyes flare with lust, and I stroke his dick harder, causing his balls to tuck up tightly against his body.

“I need to fuck you. Got no condom,” he growls, bringing his hand down and sliding his finger inside my pussy.

“I’m on the pill,” I whisper. “I’m clean.”

His eyes flash. “You trust me?”

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t?”

His eyes hold mine. “No. I’m clean.”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

His face grows dark, and he rasps out, “You still sore?”

I’m a little sore, but I’m not about to turn him away. “I’ll live.”

“Goin’ to eat you first. I need to taste you.”

I shiver, and my cheeks heat as he lowers himself, forcing my hand off his cock. He takes my shorts as he moves down my body and for a long moment, he just stares at my pussy. “Sweet,” he says, so low I can barely hear it. Then he reaches down, takes my ankle and puts it on his shoulder.

My cheeks burn, and I squirm nervously. I feel so exposed. So vulnerable. “You look sweet as hell when your cheeks go pink. Are you nervous, honey?”

I swallow and nod.

“Wondering what I’m thinking about while your leg is on my shoulder, pussy in my face?”

My smile wobbles with nerves.

“What I think,” he says, leaning close and inhaling, “is that you smell so fuckin’ good, my dick is going to explode.”

I shiver.

“What I think,” he purrs, sliding his tongue up my pussy and making me gasp, “is that your pussy is so damned sweet I want to keep my mouth in it all day.”

I moan as he sucks my clit into his mouth, hard.

“What I think . . .” he moans, “is that I want so badly to stick my cock inside you, it’s killing me to wait.”

“Then stop waiting,” I whimper as he sucks my clit deep, flicking the tip with his tongue.

“I’ll stop when you come in my mouth.”

“Well on my way,” I breathe, arching into him, thrusting my hips so my pussy presses farther into his mouth.

“You’re a closet bad girl, aren’t you, honey?” He grins up at me, thrusting his fingers inside.

“Please,” I whimper.

“You want my tongue? Fuck my face.”

I open my mouth, then close it and just stare down at him.

“You want to come?”

I nod, desperately.

“Then fuck my face. Rotate your hips. Show me how you want it.”

He grabs my hips and pulls me back down onto his mouth. He licks me, but I have to rotate to get his tongue to go where I want it. I do as he asks. I fuck his face. My hips swirl and rotate, grinding against his mouth, pushing his tongue further. I come with a cry, my knees going weak. Lucas pulls his face from my depths and stands, pulling his cock free from his shorts.

He lifts one of my legs, putting it around his waist, and then he’s sliding his cock inside me, slowly, torturously. One of his hands clutches my ass and the other curls around my back and with perfect rhythm, he fucks me. He starts slow, easing me onto him, letting my body adjust to the bittersweet pain that radiates up my spine. It quickly turns to pleasure and he increases the pace, and he’s fucking me hard against the lockers, my body slamming into them.

“Oh. My. God,” I scream.

“Fuck,” he barks. “Fuck me.”

“Lucas,” I whimper.

I feel a tight coiling deep in my belly, something unusual and foreign, something I’ve never experienced before in all my life. It builds higher and higher with every thrust from Lucas, and before I know what’s happening, an explosion radiates through my body, starting in my womb and travelling outwards until I’m quivering in his arms, my head thrown back, moans trailing from my throat. I vaguely hear him growl my name and then he too is finding his own release, clutching me, our bodies joined in a way so personal it can’t be explained.

“Oh my,” I say in a shaky voice when my body stops trembling.

“Whatever that was, I want it again.”

“Me too,” he says gruffly, putting me down and reaching for a pile of clean towels sitting on a bench close by. He gently places the towel he takes off a near by seat between my legs. “I’ve had women come on me before, but never like that. Fuckin’ intense.”

Jealousy burns in my chest at that comment, but I don’t let it show. Instead, I look down at his hand, gently cleaning between my legs, and my

heart swells.

“Lucas?” I ask.

“Mmmm.”

“What is this . . . that we’re doing here?”

He looks up at me, his eyes gentle yet intense. “I don’t know, honey, but whatever it is . . . I don’t want to stop.”

Thank god.

Neither do I.

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# CHAPTER 29

## THEN – LUCAS

It's been more than a year since I started looking for Jennifer. More than a full fucking year, and I still have no idea where my she is. My life has gone from it being all I breathed for, to me slowly realizing there's a solid chance I'll never find her again. I've delved into Jackson's club, followed all the drug leads, but either he's fuckin' smart or he's not involved. I don't know which. I don't know if I believe him, but I do know that either way, nothing is giving me answers.

My wife is out there somewhere, and I have no idea if she's alive or dead.

I don't think I'll ever rest until I find out, but I've exhausted all my options—there seems to be no way around it. She either doesn't want to be found or she's delved into the deepest, darkest part of the world, and I'm not sure I'm ready to go to there. I've already lost everything; I don't think I can break anymore. Losing Shylie was enough, losing Jenn was enough, but to lose myself, too . . . I can't risk that.

It's been nearly two years since I lost my little girl, and it doesn't get easier. Instead, I've learned to live with the pain that lingers in my chest each day. It's become my life; it's become normal. No longer do I remember what happiness feels like, nor do I remember what my life was like before Shy. Even the joy I felt with her seems to be a distant memory sometimes. Most days, I can't even remember how to smile.

“Yo, Lucas!”

I look up from my desk to see my colleague Jeremy standing at the door leaning against it. He's only new to the force, but he's fitting in well and is a fuckin' good detective. He's spent a lot of time helping me look for Jenn, who I had to report officially as a missing person to be able to investigate further. That did nothing to help. I can't find her and the harder I dig, the emptier I become.

I wonder if I'll ever be able to sleep freely again if I don't find out what happened to her?

I don't think I will.

"What's up?" I ask, pushing back and standing.

"Got some info you might like."

"On what?"

"Jennifer."

I flinch and glance at him. "Better be good, Jer. You know I'm not dealing."

"It's good. Talked to some of the leads, dug a little deeper. One of them snitched and said that there's a girl named Jennifer dating the head honcho of a drug ring."

My body freezes.

"Said he doesn't know if it's her, but she came to the main man about a year ago, askin' for drugs. He took her in, they got together, and the rest is history."

"There are a million Jennifer's in the world, Jer. Could be anyone."

"Fits the description perfectly."

"Why would someone spill now? We've been digging and digging for a year trying to get information. All we get is dead ends."

"This guy wants to get out; he's part of a drug ring. I offered him a safe place if he told me what he knows."

I narrow my eyes. "Seems suspicious to me. No one gets out of those places; surely he knows that."

"Could be a set-up, for what reason I don't know. Maybe they got word you're lookin' for her."

"Maybe," I mutter. "Are we lookin' into it?"

"Yeah. Got a few names. It's a better lead than we've had in months."

I nod, turning and staring out the window.

I don't know if I want the answer to the question burning in my brain.

Do I want to find Jennifer, if that's the life she's been living?

~\*~\*~\*~

I jog down the pavement, sweat trickling down my forehead. I needed to wear off some energy, because fuck knows it's been a hectic few weeks. We've followed some of the leads provided by a man I'm still one hundred

percent suspicious on, and we seem to be getting closer to an answer. I'm convinced whoever sent him in is trying to get me close, probably because I'm sniffing about and they don't like it.

I've had to be extra careful. I can't afford to lose my life for a woman who clearly stopped giving a shit about me a year ago.

I round a corner, and a light rain begins to fall, not enough to soak my clothes. I pick up the pace, jogging until I'm pouring with sweat and my heart is pounding, making me forget the events of the last few weeks. A broken sniffle catches me off guard and I come to a stop, glancing around in the darkness.

That's when I see her. She's only small, curled up on the pavement, trying to get to her feet.

Dark hair trails down around her face, so I can't see much, but she's crying, her fingernails digging into the concrete. I pick back up into a jog, getting closer and closer by the second. When I'm towering over her, I take her in. She's only young, maybe in her early twenties, possibly her teens. She's a tiny little thing with mobs of dark hair that's damp and trailing over her face. I don't want to startle her, but by the looks of things, she needs some help.

"Hey," I say carefully.

She flinches and lifts her head, blinking a few times. She's absolutely stunning, even through the blood and mess. A pixie-like girl, tiny and sweet, with the biggest blue eyes I've ever seen. A nearby car shines a light on her face, and I see dark blotches all over her body and clothes. I reach down, swiping my finger over one and rub them together. She's bleeding. As I suspected.

"You're bleeding."

She doesn't say anything; she just looks up at me with those pitiful eyes and stares.

"What's your name?" I say, my voice gentle.

"A-a-a-ava," she whispers.

Poor kid.

"Ava, are you hurt?"

Her eyes flash, and pain skitters across her features. She's hurt all right.

"Y-y-yes."

"All right," I say, squatting down and gently reaching for her to take her into my arms. The station is nearby, and this girl needs some help. "My

name is Detective Lucas Black. I'm goin' to get you off this street—yeah?"

She nods.

I lift her into my arms.

Little do I know she's going to change my entire life.

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## CHAPTER 30

### NOW – AVA

*“Take her, please. I’m too young to die.”*

I gasp and shoot up in bed. It takes me a moment to realize where I am, and I quickly take the blanket, jerking it to my bare chest. I’m at home. Lucas is with me, because he’s been at my place for the past two nights, fucking me in ways I didn’t know I could be fucked. He got called out tonight, and as soon as he left the bed, the nightmares returned as they always do.

“You dream like that all the time?”

I jerk and try to stare into the darkness, but I can’t see where Lucas is sitting. He’s out of sight but he’s in the room, his husky voice bringing me some comfort.

“Mostly,” I say, my voice hoarse. “Was I crying?”

“Yeah. I only just came in, but I could hear you down the hall. Scared the shit out of me.”

“Where are you?” I whisper. “Come to me, please.”

He shuffles about and then he’s by my side in the bed, pulling me into his arms. He smells good, like fresh coffee and Lucas.

“You should talk to your family, kid,” he suggests gently. “I think the only way you’re goin’ to heal from this is to tell them what really happened.”

“I can’t do that; you know I can’t.”

“I don’t know why you can’t. Your dad—he’d want to know. If I was a dad . . . I’d want to know.”

“Even if it destroyed you?”

He ponders that, then in a quiet voice, says, “Even if it destroyed me.”

I decide to change the subject, because the fact of the matter is Lucas and I will never agree on this. I don’t want to see my dad destroyed because I made a bad choice. I couldn’t bear it.

“Did you have a long night?” I ask, snuggling into his arms.

“Mmmm. Could say that.”

“You smell like coffee.”

“Had to stay awake somehow.”

I laugh softly. “It must suck.”

“Sometimes it does, others I enjoy it. Keeps my mind active. If I’m alone too long, I think about things.”

“Lucas?”

“Yeah, baby?”

God, I love when he calls me that. “What happened to your wife?”

He stiffens, and then mutters, “Shylie’s mom?”

Does he have another one? Who else did he think I’d be talking about?

“Yeah?”

“She died giving birth to Shy.”

God, that’s awful. I couldn’t imagine how that must have felt—to lose his wife and then his daughter. I don’t even know how he’s still breathing, let alone coping.

“I’m so sorry, Lucas,” I say, my voice soft.

“She was a good woman. I loved her. She would have loved Shy, and she would have been . . . devastated if she knew what I let happen to her.”

“No,” I say softly. “God, no. Don’t think like that. Accidents happen all the time. You did the best you could.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Lucas . . .”

“Don’t wanna talk about this, Ava.”

“Are we ever going to talk about it? You keep telling me to let people in . . .”

“My past is my past; it isn’t anyone’s business.”

I flinch at that. “Not even mine?”

“We’re fucking, Ava. We’re not married.”

Those words hurt. They rip to my very core. “Is that really how you feel?”

He sighs. “Fuck, no. It’s not how I feel, but my past is just that—my past. I need you to drop it.”

“How am I supposed to know you if you won’t let me in?”

“Drop it,” he barks. He lets me go and stands. “I gotta get back to work.”

“Lucas,” I call.

He walks out of the room and I slide out of bed, throwing a robe on before rushing downstairs. I get to the bottom of the stairs and skid to a complete halt, my blood rushing from my head, as I see my father, Cade and Spike standing in my lounge room, glaring at Lucas. Oh no. This isn't happening. This isn't how Dad was meant to find out.

“What,” Dad spits, “the fuck?”

“Daddy,” I whisper.

His eyes shoot to me and widen as he takes in my robe. He doesn't give me a chance to explain. He lunges at Lucas. The two men crash to the ground and fists fly.

“Stop!” I scream, jumping towards them, but Spike skirts around the tumbling pair and jerks me to his body, his arm around my chest.

“Let them go.” It's a gruff order, and he sounds mega pissed.

“Daddy!” I cry as he throws punch after punch into Lucas's mouth. Lucas returns them, and soon there is blood and curses flying everywhere.

“Please!” I sob.

“What the fuck do you think you're doin' in here with my baby girl?” Dad bellows, one hand around Lucas's throat.

“Ain't what you think.”

“Fuckin' ain't it?” Dad roars. “You've been lookin' for a way in my club to get your answers for over a year now, and what better way than to go through my daughter? I told you once, I'll tell you a thousand fuckin' times—I don't know where your fuckin' wife is.”

I flinch in Spike's arms as my father's words penetrate. A way to get into the club. A wife. Lucas just told me his wife died giving birth. A cold chill runs up my spine, and I rasp, “What?”

Lucas looks to me. “Whatever he's sayin', it ain't why I'm here, baby.”

“Call her baby again and I'll gut you,” Dad barks.

“Dad,” I cry, my pained, broken voice finally cutting through. He turns to me.

“You been fuckin' this man, Ava?”

“It's none of your business,” I sob.

“It's my business. Do you know who he is?”

I stare at him, not answering.

“Has he told you why he's with you?”

I look to Lucas, who has tight fists and is glaring at my father.

“Lucas,” I whisper.

His eyes find mine again. “He’s wrong, kid.”

“About what?” I shriek.

“He’s a fuckin’ cop who has been sniffin’ around my club for over a year lookin’ for his wife.”

“B-b-b-but you just told me your wife is dead.”

“She is,” Lucas grunts.

“Oh,” Dad snorts. “You didn’t tell her you’ve been married twice and the second one you’re still married to?”

My heart skitters nearly to a stop, and it hurts, really fucking hurts.

“Y-y-y-you’re married?”

Lucas looks to me. “Yes.”

My knees buckle, and Spike holds me up.

“Ain’t what you think,” he says, trying to step towards me, but Dad stops him with a loud punch to the chest.

Lucas stumbles back, bellowing in pain as the wind is knocked out him.

“Dad, stop!” I cry.

“This man has used you to get back at the club. He has some twisted illusion that we know where his wife is, and he won’t stop until he gets his answers. He’s using you, baby girl.”

No. Lucas wouldn’t do that to me; he wouldn’t.

“Lucas?” I say, my voice a broken tremor.

“It isn’t what you think.”

“Are you looking for your wife?”

His eyes flash, and he nods.

“And the club. Are you suspicious of them?”

He growls low in his chest. “Still ain’t what you think.”

“So you used me . . . you . . . used me?” My tears explode and tumble down my cheeks. “You knew what I’ve been living through and you used me to find your wife?”

“I didn’t fuckin’ use you.”

“Shut the fuck up and get out of my daughter’s house,” dad demands.

“Don’t give me fuckin’ orders. You wanna come in here and ruin what I’ve got then walk away unscathed? You know nothin’ about your little girl, Jackson. If you did, you’d know I’ve been the only fuckin’ one to keep her from downing in the last month.”

Dad’s eyes flash.

“Lucas,” I croak. “Stop.”

“Did you know that bastard that took her is still giving her hell?”

Spike flinches behind me and Dad turns, his eyes pained as he looks to me for an answer. Damn Lucas. Damn him.

“Is that true?” he asks me.

“Daddy . . .”

“Is it true?” he bellows.

“Yes.”

He spins fast and his fist hits the wall, smashing through it as he roars his pain. I shove out of Spike’s arms. I can’t take this any longer. I can’t. I run towards the door and dodge Cade, who looks like he’s about to explode with anger. He makes no move to stop me, but Lucas does. “Ava!” he calls.

“Don’t.” I spin around, my hands up as he and my father try to get closer. “Don’t either of you come near me. Stay the hell away.”

Then I rush out the door before any of them can stop me.

~\*~\*~\*~

My phone is ringing over and over.

I don’t answer it.

Text messages are blaring in.

I don’t read them.

I just sit on a local bridge, my feet dangling over the side, listening to the pointless chatter of people strolling past. Dried tears are now stiff on my cheeks, and my hair is damp from the small shower of rain that passed about an hour ago. A bird sings in the distance, its chipper tune making me feel that much worse. I press my forehead against the railing and sigh.

Lucas is married.

He’s been looking for his wife.

All this time, all the soft, comforting words . . . were they all a lie? If you’d have asked me three hours ago, I would have said he was the most genuine person I’d ever met, but now . . . now I just don’t know. I can’t see how he could be so real and lie to me all at the same time. Is it possible every word he said was a lie? Did he mean any of it? Did any of it mean anything?

A wife.

God. He has a wife.

A pain in my chest expands until it feels as if it's going to explode. I press my hand to my heart, fighting back my emotion. Everything inside me is screaming to just run, to find somewhere else, to find something else. Leave the club. Leave Lucas. Leave the horrific events of this town behind.

I stare down at the bottle of vodka in the brown paper bag beside me. I rushed out and bought it.

I haven't had any. I don't think I will, but having it here is almost a comfort. I could imagine nothing more numbing than drinking the whole bottle, but I'm stronger than that. I have to be stronger than that. If Lucas taught me one thing, it was that I can't live a life drowning—I have to pick myself up and move on.

Even if that is alone.

Someone sits down beside me and I flinch, turning and seeing Lucas. He isn't looking at me; he's just staring out at the water, his face unreadable.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper, my voice too scratchy to make an appearance. "How did you find me?"

"Your friend Skye told me this is your favorite place."

Skye? She doesn't even know him. "Why would she do that?"

"Because she knows I'm not a bastard."

I flinch. "Pity I don't feel the same."

He turns to me, and I see the bruising forming on his face. His lower lip is busted. He looks awful. "I can talk until I'm blue in the face; you're either going to listen to me or you aren't."

I look away.

"I had a wife, yes. After my daughter died, she started doing drugs. She disappeared, and the last person that saw her was a member of your dad's club. I have been looking for her, not because I love her still, but because I need closure. I wasn't using you to find her, regardless of what Jackson said."

"You lied to me," I whisper.

"No," he says. "I just didn't tell you the entire truth."

"You told me your wife was dead."

"She is. My first wife, and Shylie's mom, is dead."

"So you've been married twice, and you want me to believe you're serious about me?" I laugh, but it's broken and pathetic.

“Yeah, Ava, I want you to believe that because I want you to fuckin’ believe in me.”

“Well I don’t,” I whisper. “I don’t believe in you.”

I regret those words as soon as they leave my lips.

Lucas looks to me, his eyes pained—I can see so much broken in them, but mostly I can see the heartbreak I just inflicted on him. “Then we’re done here.”

He stands and I open my mouth to cry out, to scream at him to stop, but nothing comes out. My bitter, broken heart won’t let me call after the man I’ve fallen in love with. It just shuts down, taking my body with it.

I watch him disappear into the darkness, his shoulders slumped, his big body broken beyond repair.

And I know I’ve lost him.

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# CHAPTER 31

## NOW – AVA

I stand out the front of the club, seeing the people milling around, grouping off together, no doubt looking for me. I've been gone for more than a day, but I needed to get my head together and stroke my broken heart before I could face my father. He's going to want answers, and I don't know if I can give them to him. I don't know anything anymore.

It's Muff who notices me standing pitifully at the gates first, and his eyes soften. He calls to my dad, who turns and stares at me, relief flooding his features. My mom beats him to the chase and runs towards me. I open the gates and step in. She reaches me and throws her arms around my neck, holding me tightly.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I didn't know."

"It's okay, Mom," I say, hugging her tight, needing her comfort. "I'm okay."

"He was harassing you and we didn't know. We didn't . . ."

"I'm okay."

Such a lie. Such a big, fucking lie.

Dad reaches us and says, "Serenity, let her go. Take everyone inside and leave us be."

"Jacks," she says softly, and he turns his eyes to her. They're leaving no room for argument.

"Inside."

"Go easy on her . . ."

"Now, darlin'," he murmurs, gentler this time.

She nods and kisses my cheek before disappearing with the rest of the club inside.

I stare at my shoes, not looking at my dad, not wanting to see the pain, but mostly not wanting to see the disappointment.

"A cop."



I flinch.

“You were sleepin’ with a cop.”

My bottom lip quivers.

“And you went to him. You. Went. To. Him.”

I look up.

“That piece of shit that took you was givin’ you hell, and you went to him.”

“Daddy . . .”

“Why?” he whispers, and the pain behind it hurts me so much.

I step back, hand over my heart. “I love him.”

Now it’s his turn to flinch. “No,” he growls. “No, Ava. He’s using you.”

“He’s not,” I say, truly believing that. “He might have withheld the truth, but he’s not using me.”

“He’s using you,” he barks. “Lucas Black is a player.”

He’s wrong. If he knew what Lucas had walked me through, he’d know he was, but if I tell him that, I’m going to break him even more. If he knew what really happened that night, he’d never be the same.

“You’re wrong about that, but even if you weren’t, it isn’t your choice to make.”

“He’s a cop!” he bellows.

“And you’re a biker!”

He jerks.

“What’s the difference?” I whisper. “What’s the damned difference? You hate him. He hates you. It wouldn’t matter which side I was on.”

“You’re on this side, and you know better.”

“You’re right, Dad, I do know better, but I fell in love. Love has no boundaries. None. You should know that better than anyone.”

His eyes soften just slightly. “Two different worlds, Ava, it can’t work.”

“Well,” I croak, “lucky for you, it won’t. We broke up.”

His eyes fully soften now. “He did?”

“I’m sure it doesn’t surprise you. After all, you think he was just using me.”

He crosses his arms and stares down at them.

“Even if he didn’t leave me, it would be my choice, Dad. You know I love you, but it would be my choice.”

He looks back up at me. He says nothing.

“And as for the other problem, I don’t know what that horrible, evil man wants from you. I don’t think he’ll stop until he gets it.”

“He hurt you?” he says.

Something in his eyes almost begging me to say no.

“No, Daddy, he didn’t.”

“You didn’t come to me.”

I stare at the trees behind him. “Didn’t want to hurt you.”

He makes a pained, throaty sound. “Tell me you’re fuckin’ shitting me, baby?”

“No, Dad, I’m not shitting you. I know what my being taken did to you . . .”

He steps forward. “Ava.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Ava.”

Tears burn under my eyelids, and I keep looking away.

“Baby.”

One trickles down my cheek.

“Fuck.”

He steps forward and hauls me into his arms. I clutch his leather jacket, breathing him in, needing his familiar scent.

“I’m sorry,” I croak.

“Don’t be.”

I cry harder.

“I loved him, Daddy.”

He holds me tighter.

“I loved him so fucking bad.”

He doesn’t get up me for swearing, he just hangs onto me as I break.

“He . . . saved me and now he’s gone.”

“I’m sorry.”

It’s all he can say, I know that. But at least he’s saying it like he means it.

~\*~\*~\*~

ONE WEEK LATER

I haven’t heard from Lucas.

I tried to call him once; he had his phone off. I called his work. They say he's unavailable. He doesn't want to speak to me. I get that. I broke his heart after everything he'd done for me. I ripped an already battered mess apart and stomped on it. I could understand if he never spoke to me again. I wouldn't speak to me, either.

I've been at the club for the past two days. Dad has called lockdown until he can find the man who has been causing all the problems. I've spent a lot of time with Skye, Danny, Mercy and Max, but nothing is lifting my spirits. My heart is breaking, my nightmares are worse, and nothing I can do is making any of it better.

There was only one person who could make it better, and he's gone.

"Hey sweetie."

I look up to see Mom walking in, her eyes soft on mine. She's got a cup of tea in her hand.

"Hey, Mom."

"How're you feeling?"

I shrug, crossing my legs.

"You've barely said a word to anyone for the last week."

I look away.

"It hurts, doesn't it?"

I look back to her, and she places the tea down before sitting beside me.

"What?"

Her eyes grow pained. "Heartbreak."

I nod, and my bottom lip quivers.

"You loved him, huh?"

"Yeah. I loved him."

"Do you want to tell me about him?"

I meet her eyes. "He's against the rules."

"You're my daughter. Nothing is against the rules."

I reach over and take the cup of tea. "He was good to me. He helped me cope after what happened. He was there for me, whenever I needed. He . . . was so broken but he fixed me, Mom."

"Sounds like he cared about you, too."

"Yeah. Maybe."

"Did I ever tell you how your father and I got together?"

I shrug. "I know you were the daughter of a club member, but that's all."

“I was the daughter of a pig. He was the rival club president, and he was awful. He sent me in to spy on your father and bring his club down. I entered this club full of lies and deceit.”

My eyes widen. “You did?”

“Yeah. I was told to give any information I could to take your dad down, but I fell in love with him.”

“What happened when he found out?” I ask, my eyes still big.

“He lost it. I thought I’d lose him; hell, for a second of my life, I thought he’d kill me.”

I gasp. “But he loves you so much.”

“Yeah, he does, but he was hurt. I crushed him in the worst possible way.”

“How did you fix that?”

She smiles sadly. “I was pregnant with you, and I guess he understood in time why I did it. But believe me, for a horrible stretch there, I thought it was over.”

I take all this in, having had no idea that had gone down with my parents. “That’s full on.”

“Yeah.” She laughs. “But the point is, there’s a calm after the storm. Don’t give up on Lucas yet.”

I glance at her, confused. “He’s a cop.”

She laughs softly. “Yeah, and I was the daughter of a rival club president. Love has no boundaries, Ava.”

“You wouldn’t care?”

She reaches over, cupping my cheek. “No. I wouldn’t care.”

My heart warms.

I love my mom.

## CHAPTER 32

### NOW – AVA

I sit out the front of the compound on an old swing my dad made for me when I was little. It creaks as I push backwards and forwards, staring at nothing in particular. I'm off in my own little world, thinking about Lucas. I've tried to call him at work, but his receptionist always says he's busy. I've even asked her to leave a message. He never calls back.

That hurts, and I'm barely hanging on.

My nightmares have gotten worse. Three times I've woken up with my dad, Mom or Danny staring down at me, asking what's wrong. They suspect something more is at stake, but I just can't talk to any of them. It'd destroy them to know what sort of person I became that awful night. So I'm drowning again, only this time I have nothing to numb it.

"Hi there."

I turn and see Bethy's father walking towards me. I wonder how he got in? My mouth opens and closes, and I want to curl up and hide. His eyes are less frantic and pained today than they were the last time I saw him, but even still . . . I can't face him. I can't. Just seeing his face makes me want to lean over and vomit from the pain that coils in my chest. Clearly he sees the anguish in my face because he puts his hands up. "I'm not here to yell at you."

"Then why are you here?" I say in a quiet voice.

"I just want to talk."

"I don't have anything to say."

He leans against the tree and studies me. "I know you went through hell that night, I do, but I can't . . . I can't move on unless I know what happened. I've tried, believe me I've tried, but I feel helpless. I see her face every night in my dreams. I just . . . I need closure."

I stare at him, and my heart breaks into a thousand tiny pieces. He deserves closure, but telling him means revealing something I can't cope

with.

“Closure isn’t always a good thing,” I say, my voice hoarse.

“Please, Ava. You’re the only one with the answers.”

“I don’t think you truly want to know what happened. That won’t help you heal; it’ll give you nightmares. Live like you are. Keep your memories special. Don’t tarnish them.”

His eyes well with tears. God damn. This big, burly man is crying. “She was my only daughter. I’ll never see her face again. Please.”

I look away, and my own tears start flowing and before I can stop it, it all comes rushing out. I’ve only told Lucas what happened, and that healed some small part of me, but telling this man seems to rip that scar right back open again. “He wanted to get back at you and Dad for plotting against him. He . . . he wanted to send a message.”

“Go on,” he whispers.

“I didn’t even know her name. I . . . I didn’t know anything about her, I just knew that we were both there for the same reason. She was afraid, and so he gave me the choice.”

“The choice of what?”

Tears pour down my cheeks as I relive that moment again.

“He told me that I had to make the choice who lived or died,” I gasp out, clutching my chest. “She was screaming, he was screaming and he kept . . . shooting at her. She was begging to live; he was telling me to make a choice and I was so afraid. I . . . I . . . I said her.” The words tumble out of my words. “I said her and he shot her.”

Silence. Dead silence.

“I’m the reason she’s dead.”

He says nothing for so long I wonder if he’s still there, and when I look up through my tears, he’s staring at me, his face utterly broken.

“You let him kill her.” His voice is a low whip.

“I was scared . . .”

“You let him murder my baby girl,” he roars, and I flinch.

“I tried to take it back. I was scared and . . .”

“So you thought her life was worth less than yours? You as good as killed her. You fucking murderer.”

I slide off the swing and start sobbing, my knees on the dirt, my head dropped. He’s right. I’m a murderer.

“I ought to kill you. She was my only child. You killed my only daughter.”

“What the fuck?”

I hear Dad’s voice and the sound of crunching boots.

“Your daughter killed mine; she fucking gave the go-ahead to kill her. Murderer! Fucking murderer!”

“Get the fuck out,” Dad bellows. “Before I put a bullet between your eyes. I’ve tolerated this once, but not twice. Get out. We’re done.”

“I hope her face haunts you every single day, you worthless—”

A loud crack echoes through the air.

“Get out!” my dad roars so loudly I start crying harder.

I hear shuffling and the man’s pained cries as he’s escorted out. I stay on the dirt, sobbing so hard my body shakes.

“Ava.”

*Dad.*

“Ava, baby, hey.”

I don’t answer him, I just cry harder, finally breaking, finally letting everything that’s been trapped inside explode from my chest.

“Honey, please.”

“Jacks, she’s hurtin’. Get her inside.” *Spike.*

“Ava, I’m goin’ to lift you now, okay?” Dad says.

“No!” I scream. “Leave me here. Leave me. I don’t deserve to breathe.”

“Baby, come on. We can talk about it.”

“No,” I wail, clawing at the ground.

“Oh god.” I hear my mom’s pained cry. “What happened?”

Her arms go around me, but I’m stiff. “Ava?” she asks. “Baby, talk to me.”

“Let me go,” I wail. “I’m a murderer. Let me go.”

“Hush, no,” Mom soothes.

“Lucas,” I pant. “I need him. Please. He’s the only one who understands.”

“No way in hell is he coming into my club. Talk to us, Ava.”

I look up at my father, and he sees something in my eyes that makes him stand and bark to Cade, “Find the cop. Now.”

I drop my head back down and sit there with my mother’s arms around my stiff body, not feeling anything but the tears pouring down my cheeks.

I’m a murderer.

~\*~\*~\*~

“Get out of the way.”

I hear Lucas’s voice and lift my broken head, staring at him through blurred vision. My mother stands; she gave up trying to comfort me an hour ago. I’m still on my knees in the dirt and the rocks have broken my skin, but I don’t care. Lucas comes forward, and my dad steps in front of him.

“You don’t touch her, Shadow.”

“Get the fuck out of my way,” Lucas warns. “I’ll hurt you, Jackson, and I don’t wanna do that, but my girl is on the ground, and I’m the only one she wants, so you either move or so help me god, I’ll fuckin’ make you.”

They stare at each other for a moment, then Dad steps to the side. Lucas comes over, squatting down beside me.

“Hush, honey,” he murmurs. “I got you.”

He scoops me into his arms and I curl into him, pressing my face against his chest, breathing him in. I cry harder.

“Get me a first-aid kit,” he barks as he walks towards the compound. “And water.”

I clutch his shirt and hear the murmurings as Lucas carries me into the club, but I don’t look up. I sense the moment he sits down, and he carefully adjusts me into his lap so I fit better. Tears have already soaked his shirt, and my sobs have turned into pained whimpers.

“I got you,” he keeps saying to me. “Always got you.”

“I’m a murderer,” I whimper.

“No, baby, you’re not.”

“What’s she talkin’ about?” Dad asks.

“Not right now,” Lucas mutters.

His hand goes to my hair, and he gently smooths it down. “Don’t you drown on me now, baby,” he says, his voice soft. “Don’t you go and fuckin’ leave me.”

“You left,” I croak. “You . . .”

“Fucked up. I’m here now. Not going anywhere again. Wanna know why?”

I lift my head from his chest and look up at him.

He reaches down, stroking a tear from my cheek. “Because the second I found you lying on the sidewalk that night, I knew you’d change my life.”

My bottom lip trembles, and I hiccup.



“There is nowhere I’d rather be.”

“I’m broken,” I whisper.

“And two broken pieces can make a whole, kid. Remember that.”

He cups the back of my head and brings me close, brushing his lips against mine. “Now I’m goin’ to put you to sleep because you’re exhausted, and I’m goin’ to sit down and tell your family what happened to you. It’s time this ends.”

I don’t know if I’m ready for this.

I also don’t think I get a choice.

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## CHAPTER 33

### NOW- AVA

“Not Ava. Not our Ava. She would have told me. She would have opened up to me. Not my baby. She’s been drowning, and I didn’t fuckin’ see.”

I can hear my mother’s cries and my father’s despair as I sit in my room, my back against the wall, and my head pressed against my legs that are tucked up to my chest. I heard Lucas tell them what happened. I heard them lose it. I heard all the tears and the heartache. I heard the exact moment I stopped being their innocent little girl.

“She’s been drowning,” Lucas says. “She didn’t want to hurt you.”

“She should have told me!” Dad bellows. “She should have . . .” His voice trails off, brokenly.

“My little girl,” Mom sobs. “My poor baby girl.”

My nails dig into my skin as I continue to listen to their pain travel through the walls.

“Why didn’t you come to me?” Dad demands.

“Wasn’t my secret to tell. She needed me, and I was there.”

“Is this some sort of revenge tactic?”

Lucas barks a deadly laugh. “You can turn this around on me any which way you want, Jackson, but the fact of the matter is that it was your club that got her into this mess. My suggestion to you, instead of trying to pin the blame on me, is to see what’s right in front of you and fuckin’ stop it before it hurts anyone else.”

“You fuckin’—”

“Jacks,” Mom cries. “Stop it. Stop.”

“You wanna hit me?” Lucas mutters. “Go ahead. It won’t fix the problem. This man is messin’ with your family, and you’re lettin’ him. Your daughter is in there, and she’s broken. Let go of your hate and be there for her; fix this shit and don’t give that motherfucker what he wants. He did this to hit you where it hurts, and right now you’re lettin’ him.”

“She’s my daughter!” Dad bellows.

“Yeah, she is, and she always will be. So be there for her and fix this, but don’t let it destroy you or her, because then he wins.”

“It’s my fuckin’ fault it happened in the first place.” The pain in Dad’s voice rips my heart to shreds. It rips it wide open.

“Don’t live with blame and regret. It won’t fix anything—take it from me.”

“Don’t you compare me to yourself, Shadow.”

“Why not?” Lucas hisses. “I fucked up and because of that my daughter is gone. I know what loss feels like. I know what regret feels like. I know exactly what this feels like. Don’t give that piece of shit what he wants. You can heal your daughter without breaking.”

Silence.

“Jacks,” Mom says. “Go and get your head together. Ava doesn’t need this. I’ll go be with her.”

“With all due respect, ma’am,” Lucas says, “I would rather be with her right now.”

“Like fuck,” Dad mutters.

“Jacks,” Mom snaps. “Don’t forget who you are. This is our baby girl. You need to go and cool off. Lucas, of course you may go and be with her.”

“Thank you.”

A few minutes later, my door creaks open and Lucas steps in. His eyes go to the bed and flare in slight alarm when he realizes I’m not there. They travel over the room before finding me sitting on the ground. “You heard all of that, huh?”

I nod.

“You okay?”

I shrug. “Are they?”

“They will be.”

“I’ll never be the same in their eyes again.”

Lucas walks over, sliding down the wall beside me. “You’ll always be the same, kid. Always.”

“They sounded so hurt,” I whisper.

“It’ll take time. Come here.” He pulls me into his lap and I let him tuck me into his arms.

“I feel sore all over,” I say tilting my head to look up at him.

“Because you finally let it all out. It can only get better from here.”

I let out a long, slow sigh.  
“You need to rest.”  
He stands and carries me to the bed.  
“Will you stay with me?”  
“Always, baby. Always.”

~\*~\*~\*~

I wake in the middle of the night and Lucas is dead asleep beside me. I have been tossing and turning. Not wanting to wake him up, I slide out of bed and straighten my clothes before sneaking out of the room. I walk down the dark halls and into the compound kitchen. I get myself a glass of milk and put it in the microwave, then I stretch my neck from side to side. It’s aching. In fact, my entire body is.

The microwave dings and I pull my milk out, holding it in both hands as I quietly move to the lounge. I notice the shed light on and wonder who is awake in this house. It must be two a.m.

I quietly exit the house and walk down the front steps, moving towards the shed. When I reach the door, I hear soft music playing. I push it open and step in to see my dad sitting on an old stool, a beer in his hands, his head dropped.

This is exactly why I didn’t want him to know.

My heart cracks open.

“Daddy?”

He looks up, and his eyes are red and glassy. “Did the music wake you?” he asks, his voice hoarse.

I study him and my heart splits in two. My hard, broody, masculine dad has been crying. I put my milk down and walk over, taking a stool and placing it in front of him.

“No,” I finally say in response to his question.

“Then you should go get some sleep, darlin’. I’m just thinkin’.”

“Dad . . .” He looks up at me again. “It wasn’t your fault.”

He flinches and his jaw tightens. So much pain explodes from his body I can feel it to my very core. “It was my fault, and I’ve gotta live with that.”

“This is why I didn’t tell you. This is why—”

“He hurt you,” he rasps. “He fucking hurt you because of me.”

“Dad . . .”

“He took my Ava away and broke her.”

I swallow the lump forming in my throat.

“I will never forgive myself for that.”

“Don’t give him what he wants,” I say. “Please, Dad. Don’t give him what he wants. He did that to me. Not you.”

“He took you because of me.”

His fingers clench around his beer bottle and I reach over, putting my hand on his jacket.

“I forgive you.”

“Took my little girl and fucked her up.”

“I forgive you, Daddy.”

“Broke her,” he rasps. A lone tear trickles down his cheek, and it hurts me so much to see. I scoot closer, putting my arms around his neck. He doesn’t move. He just sits there, his head dropped, his hands around the beer.

“If you can’t forgive yourself, you’ll never heal,” I say. “I need you to heal because I need you to be my dad.”

His body shakes.

“I can’t be me without you, old man.”

He drops one hand from the beer bottle and wraps it around me. “I’m so fuckin’ sorry.”

“Don’t let him win,” I whisper.

“I’ll kill him for hurtin’ you.”

I pull back. “The only thing that can hurt me now is if you don’t forgive yourself for this.”

His eyes meet mine. “Need time.”

“Don’t we all.”

His eyes flicker with hurt again. “You should have come to me. You should have never suffered like that.”

“No, maybe not, but seeing you broken hurts me so much more. I just wanted to protect you.”

“Not your job,” he says, his voice rough. “Not your job, baby. It was mine, and I fucked it up.”

“Jacks?”

We both look over to see Mom at the door, a robe wrapped tightly around her, her eyes filled with tears. I stand, because I know she’s the only

person who can fix him right now. I lean down and kiss his cheek, then I whisper again, “Forgive yourself, Daddy. I need that from you.”

Then I turn and walk over to Mom. She pulls me into her arms, and we hold each other for a good long time. When she lets me go, I give her a weak smile. “I’m so sorry, sweetie,” she says.

“Don’t be. I’m going to be okay.” I look to Dad. “Right now, he isn’t.”

Her eyes go to him and her face falls.

“Be with him. Tomorrow we’ll talk, okay?”

She looks back to me. “I wasn’t there when you needed me. I won’t let that happen again.”

I take her hand and squeeze it. “Lucas is waiting for me right now. Tomorrow, we’ll talk. Right now . . . he needs you.”

She nods, tears trickling down her cheeks. I hug her again and then step out of the shed. I turn and look back in before leaving to see Mom climb onto Dad’s lap. He drops his beer bottle, puts his arms around her waist, and I hear the pained sound he makes from deep in his throat. She holds him, and I know she’ll fix it for him.

She’s his one. She can fix anything.

Even this.

# CHAPTER 34

## NOW – AVA

It's been three weeks since my major meltdown at the club, and things have slowly started getting better. My dad isn't happy with me dating a cop, but he's also in the position where he gets little to no say about the matter. My mom really likes Lucas, and so do Skye and Mercy. Danny and Max act like any good biker boys, and lecture me often about the matter.

It doesn't matter. Lucas is everything.

Dating him is like coming alive. It's like that first breath when you're drowning, and it's like laughter on Christmas morning. He's kind, he's sexy, and he takes care of me.

We connected that day in the club. We dug through any barriers and found that we are two of the same, fighting the same battles. I never thought I'd learn to breathe again after Bethy, but Lucas is showing me that there is indeed life after horror.

We're taking things as slow as possible. Mostly we get together on his days off and go out, just getting to know each other. I can't say the same for the nights. It's in those times when Lucas and I connect, truly feel each other. Everything he withdraws and hides comes out when he's inside me. Something explodes between us and creates a connection that gets stronger by the second.

Finally, there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel.

"Ava?"

I jerk from my thoughts and see Michael leaning over my desk. I had to work late tonight, some big case he's got going that he needed help with, and the longer the evening went on, the more tired I became, tending to slip off into my own little world.

"Sorry," I say, doing a quick glance around to see that everyone has gone; it's just Michael and I.

That makes my skin crawl in an unnatural way.

“Have you finished my papers?” he asks, sliding his rump onto my desk. I want to reach over and slap him off.

“Yes. I’m just checking them over now.”

“It didn’t look like you were checking them over; it looked like you were thinking about something else. We’ve had this discussion before, and I asked for you to keep your personal life outside of work.”

Jerk.

“I wasn’t doing anything, sir,” I say as kindly as I can, all while wanting to uppercot his chin. “I was thinking about, ah, what I was going to eat on the way home.”

He studies me. “If you like, I can get us some food and we can eat together.”

*I’d rather poke my own eyes out with a fork.* “No, that’s okay. I’m sure you’ve had a very long night and have someone waiting at home for you.”

Wrong thing to say.

He leans over and runs his finger—yes, *runs* it—up my arm. “Actually, I don’t, but if you’d like to join me I’m sure we could work something out.”

Keep cool, Ava. “I’m seeing someone.”

“He doesn’t have to know,” he murmurs, stroking his finger over my neck. I jerk back and force a smile.

“Look, thank you, I’m flattered but—”

“So we’re still going to play this game,” he snaps, and I flinch.

“What game?”

“The one where you come in here in those short skirts, smiling at me, leading me on—hell you even brought your boyfriend in here to taunt me, and now you’re acting like you would rather be anywhere else.”

He has to be shitting me.

“I wear the uniform,” I point out.

“The uniform states a black skirt. It does not state a *tiny* black skirt that lets me see the curves of your ass when you bend over.”

I gag internally and push back from my chair. “Not sure why you’d think I was doing anything to lead you on, but I can assure you I wasn’t. I think it’s best if I leave now.”

“You leave,” he says, standing and crossing his arms, “and you’ll have no job left.”

“You’re threatening to fire me because I won’t sleep with you?” I gasp. He steps up close and I hold my own, my arms crossed.



“We could change that. If you enjoy your job, you could convince me to let you stay.”

“I’d rather eat shit,” I spit in his face. “Now step back.”

He lashes out and grabs my arm. “You and I both know you wanted this, but if playing hard to get turns you on . . .”

He yanks my arm and tries to drag me towards his office. I stomp on his foot, and he hisses in pain but doesn’t let me go. Instead, his hand goes to my skirt, pulling it up. Oh hell no. I’m not letting this happen. Over my dead body.

“Let me go, you piece of shit,” I spit.

“Keep fighting me. I like it.”

“I don’t.”

I hear the gruff male voice behind me and then Michael’s hands slip away from my body. Lucas takes three strides past me and lifts a retreating Michael by the shirt, like he weighs nothing. He slams him against the wall and gets in his face. “Do you know who I am, scum?” he hisses.

“I . . . I . . . she wanted it.”

Lucas pulls him off the wall and then slams him back so hard his head makes a loud cracking sound.

“She did not want it; I was witness to that. You put your hands on a woman who didn’t want it, that’s assault. I’m going to arrest you, you piece of shit, and you’ll wish you never did it.”

“No,” he cries. “I read it wrong. You have no grounds to arrest me. Please.”

“I can do you for harassment and you’ll lose your job. If she decides to tell me that what I just saw was correct, and you had your hands on her, forcing something she didn’t want, I can and will arrest you for assault.”

Michael’s face goes white. “Please. I can’t lose my job.”

“You’re going to,” Lucas says, spinning him around and jerking his hands behind his back, pulling cuffs off his belt and slapping them on. “I’ll make sure of it.” He pulls Michael to his side, one hand firmly wrapped around the linked cuffs, and stares at me. “You okay?”

I nod, rubbing my suddenly cold arms. “Sure. I’m fine.”

“See?” Michael screeches. “She said she’s fine.”

“Shut the fuck up before I make you,” Lucas barks.

“Take him,” I whisper. “I’ll be okay.”

Lucas scans my face. “Come to the station and make a complaint.”

I glance at Michael, who is glaring at me.

“I have to lock up here if he’s going. I’ll meet you there.”

“You don’t have a car. I dropped you off remember?” Lucas points out.

“I’ll call someone; it’ll be okay.”

Lucas studies me, then he slams Michael down on a chair and growls, “Move, I’ll shoot you.”

Then he pulls out his gun and steps over to me, taking my hand and walking me to the door so Michael can’t hear. “You sure you’re okay, baby?”

I nod and look down. His finger goes down and curls under my chin, forcing my head back up. “Ava.”

“I’m okay—just a shock. I knew he was creepy but I didn’t think he would . . .”

“I did. It’s why I’ve kept an eye on you.”

I rub my arms again.

“Who do you want me to call?” he asks.

“I’ll call Danny. It’ll be okay.”

He studies me for a final time and then nods. “I’m taking this bastard to the station. If you’re not there in an hour, I’ll come looking for you, honey.”

I give a weak half smile. “I’ll be there.”

He leans down and presses a kiss to my forehead before fetching Michael and leaving me.

~\*~\*~\*~

“I would have killed the fucker,” Danny mutters, pacing the office as I pack up my stuff.

“Lucas is a cop, D. He can’t do that.”

“I could. So could your dad. So could anyone from the club . . .”

“If you’re about to end that sentence with ‘so you should have picked one of us’ then please don’t. I’m sick of hearing it. If you dislike Lucas, that’s your choice, but I love him and nothing you can say will change that.”

Danny goes quiet. “You love him?”

I blink, not even realizing that came out so effortlessly. I look up and meet Danny’s eyes. “Yeah, D. I do.”

“Fuck.”

“That about covers it.” I laugh softly.

“Still,” he says, “that fucker should be dead for trying to touch you.”

“Lucas will sort him out. Don’t doubt it.”

“Lucky he came in, eh?”

I shiver at the thought, but squelch it down. “I would have kicked his ass.”

Danny laughs, not full and rich, but a laugh all the same. “I’m sure you would have, tiger.”

“We better get to the station before Lucas sends a search party.”

“By the way,” Danny says as we leave, “I called your dad.”

“Danny!” I cry. “He doesn’t need this stress.”

“We got given strict orders that if anything happens with you or to you he is to know, sorry, Ant. You’re my friend, but I gotta follow rules.”

I thump him in the shoulder, and he winces. “You suck.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, well, so do you.”

We get on his bike and ride to the station. It’s a cool night out, with the beginnings of winter starting to make itself known. The air is crisp and a light breeze trickles through, making my hair sail out to the side.

The station is bustling when we get in and Amelia quickly smiles and waves us through to Lucas’s office.

“Not sure I wanna go in here,” Danny mutters, crossing his arms, causing his leather jacket to squeak.

“Stop whining.” I laugh softly.

We get to Lucas’s office, and he’s pacing beside his desk. The moment he notices us, he strides over, hauling me up against his body. “Said an hour, baby. It’s been nearly two.”

“Traffic was bad,” I lie, looking into his eyes. Really, I just needed time to gather myself before calling Danny.

Lucas nods and looks over my shoulder at Danny. “Thanks for bringing her.”

Danny grunts.

Lucas lets me down and I turn, giving Danny a look that has him rolling his eyes and stepping up to my side, throwing his arm around my shoulder. Lucas doesn’t even flinch.

“How long will this statement take?”

“Long as it takes,” Lucas says, and the two hold eyes.

Yeesh.

This is going to be a long night.

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## CHAPTER 35

### NOW – AVA

Lucas takes my statement and my dad shows up halfway through, demanding to see me. He and Lucas share hostile glances, but Dad listens when Lucas goes over what happened. It's nearly midnight by the time we're done, and I'm exhausted. All of us leave the station at the same time, and I am looking forward to crawling into my bed with Lucas, or crawling into his bed . . . either way is fine with me.

"Get on my bike. Takin' you home," Dad says, when I head towards Lucas's car.

Lucas and I stop.

"I'm going with Lucas," I say carefully.

He shoots me a warning glance. "My baby has been through enough without adding this on top, I'm takin' you home so I can assure myself you're okay."

"Daddy, I'm fine," I whisper.

"Then you'll let me take you home."

I glance to Lucas, expecting a protest, but he's holding out a helmet. "On the bike, kid."

I blink. "But . . ."

"On. The. Bike."

His eyes hold mine and remain firm, unwavering. I snatch the helmet from his hands and turn to Dad, who is staring at Lucas for the first time without anger, but instead, maybe respect? I hope that's what I see.

Because of that, I climb onto Dad's bike without protest. Lucas breaks the stare and looks to me, nodding, before walking to his car.

*Broody.*

Dad gets on and then we're off. The entire ride gives me a chance to breathe in the cool air, relaxing my wound up body. I really wanted to be with Lucas tonight, but I can understand why he didn't fight my dad. I'm

sure if it was his daughter, he would want the same respect. My man is a good one, without a doubt.

We arrive at my house, and both of us climb off the bike. Dad leans against it, watching me intently as I hand him the helmet. “You still serious about the cop?” he asks, crossing his ankles and stuffing the helmet beside him.

“Yeah, Dad, I am.”

He studies me, then stands. He walks over, leans in and kisses my forehead. “He wasn’t a cop,” he murmurs there, “he’d be a good man.”

I laugh softly and shake my head as Dad stands back, grinning down at me. “There’s some logic if I ever heard it.”

“Got plenty more where that came from.”

“I’m sure you do. Now go home. I’m tired and need a damned bath.”

“You okay?” he asks, seriously this time, all humor wiped from his face.

I smile softly and nod. “I’m okay.”

He studies me, and then nods. “You comin’ to the cookout on Saturday?”

“Is Lucas invited?”

He glares.

“Then no.”

“Ava,” he warns.

“Daddy, you’re a biker, and I understand and respect the boundaries. You don’t want him in your club, I respect that too, but he’s important to me, and I’m not going to exclude him from everything.”

“So you’re goin’ to use it against me?”

I shake my head. “No, it just means I won’t be at all of those cookouts, but I will be at most. That’s the best I can offer right now.”

“Then it’s what I’ll take.” He steps forward, looking down at me. “Don’t let this come between us.”

“The only person that can do that, old man, is you. I know the two worlds can never mix, but sometimes you just have to be Jackson and he just has to be Lucas, and you simply have to be a father and the man your daughter loves, getting along.”

“You make that sound easy,” he mutters.

“It is, if you want it to be.”

He sighs. “Stubborn bloody daughters . . .”

I grin. “We learned from the best.”

He throws me a smile before getting on his bike and speeding off.  
Yeah, he'll be okay with this.  
In time.

~\*~\*~\*~

I groan as I sink into the water. It's as hot as I can handle it, and filled with pretty-smelling soaps. The water cascades over my skin, soothing all the pent-up stress of the day. I have no idea what will happen to Michael, my job, any of it, but I do know it was for the best. He was the kind of man who would do more of those things, and I couldn't be the one girl who ignored it and let him go on to hurt someone else.

"Don't hear you groanin' like that for me."

I jerk up and see Lucas standing at my door, one arm above his head, resting on the frame.

"You scared me," I whisper, pressing a hand to my heart.

"Sorry, baby," he murmurs, clearly not meaning it as his eyes travel over my body.

"I didn't think I'd see you," I say, my voice thick with lust as I watch him shrug off his jacket and unbuckles his belt.

"Let your dad take you home, gave you the time he needed, but he ain't here now and nothing was keepin' me away from you."

My heart flutters. "No?" I breathe.

"No, honey."

He drops his pants, and my eyes go to the bulge in his boxers. My blood heats as he jerks them down, freeing his cock. He curls his fist around it, stroking as he walks towards the bath. "You like what you see?"

"You know I do," I say, my voice heavy with lust.

"You wanna move over so I can get in and show you how much I like what I see?"

I scoot up and make enough room for him to climb in. He does, his body falling over mine, arms bracing either side of the tub so he doesn't squash me. His eyes are flaring and his big body is hard and hot. Yum.

"If you're going to have your way with me, can I at least get a kiss first?"

He grins and leans down, kissing me deeply, his tongue dancing with mine, his hips rocking down into the water so his cock glides up against my

pussy. When the kiss ends, he pulls back and looks to our left, where a mirror can be seen. It's full-length, and when you're in the bath, you can see yourself rather clearly.

"I have an idea," he murmurs.

"I don't know . . ."

"Trust me, baby."

He curls an arm around my waist, hauling me out of the water. He puts me on the edge of the bath, positioning me with my pussy exposed to the mirror, and then he gets back in the bath, coming up behind me on the ledge and curling his arm around my waist. I can see his head next to my body, and our eyes meet in the mirror.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

"Fuck yourself."

I blink. "Pardon?"

"Fuck yourself, baby. Let me see how you like it."

I glance at the mirror to see myself, body dripping wet with bubbles running over my breasts. My legs are spread and I can see the folds of my pussy glistening in the reflection. It's . . . *weirdly sensual*.

Lucas takes hold of my hand and I watch his muscular arm place it between my legs in the mirror. My fingers graze over my flesh, and I gasp. It feels good, more so than any other time I've done this.

"Show me," he urges, flexing his wrist to make my fingers glide deeper into my flesh.

I moan and take control, watching in the mirror with fascination as my fingers rub over my slow-growing clit. I run them up and down, parting myself wider, keeping my eyes on my pussy as I slip my fingers inside it. Lucas makes a throaty, groaning sound, and one of his hands disappears into the water. He starts stroking and I shiver, thrusting as deep as I can go, gasping in pleasure as my body comes alive.

"See how beautiful you look like this?" he murmurs, reaching around with his other hand and cupping my breast, rolling my nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

"I'm close," I groan, thrusting my fingers deeper, coating them in my own arousal.

"Fuck," he grunts, pushing out of the water. "You're going to save that for my cock."



He pulls my hand back and repositions me so that my hands are touching the tiles on the ground in front of the bath, half of my body propped up by the bath. He's still in it, holding my ass to him. I can see us both. It's hot.

"Brace yourself," he warns. "Goin' to fuck you hard."

I curl my fingers slightly on the ground, hoping I won't slip, and my moans fill the air as he slides inside, pushing his cock inch by inch into my depths. I watch him in the mirror, studying his face, loving how intense he looks, how his eyes soften with pleasure. He pulls back, and all the muscles on his body flex as he slams back in.

"Lucas," I gasp.

"Luke," he murmurs. "Call me Luke. It's not felt right since...since everything but with you, it feels right again."

My heart melts, and I whisper, "Luke."

"Yeah," he growls. "God yeah."

His cock slides in and out with ease, and I'm quickly building to a release again. His jaw is tight in the mirror, his eyes deep, full of pleasure. Just the sight of that sends me over the edge and I explode, coming so hard my hands slip forward. Lucas reaches down quickly, catching me around the waist and hauling me up against his wet, hard body as he finds his own release, his mouth near my ear, rumbling grunts echoing through the room.

"Remind me to do that again," I murmur lazily when we've both come down from that incredible high.

"I plan on doing it millions of times over."

I smile at him in the mirror.

And he smiles back at me.

A real, vibrant, beautiful smile.

## CHAPTER 36

### NOW – AVA

I fidget in my dress, stroking my hands over it. We're in Lucas's car on our way to a police charity evening with his team. He asked me to come and of course I agreed, but now I'm nervous. What if they don't like me? What if I don't fit in? This world is so different to the one I was raised in; will I feel that?

Lucas reaches over, taking my hand. He looks stunning in his tux, his hair messy and damp, and his face clean-shaven. *Stunning.*

"It'll be okay. Stop fidgeting."

"What if I don't fit in?"

"You don't need to fit into their world; you only need to fit into mine."

I look to him. "This is your world."

"No, honey," he says, squeezing my hand. "You are."

My smile is huge when I respond with, "Yeah?"

"Yeah, baby."

I look back out at the road, smiling the entire drive to the hall where the event is held. It's a massive open space with polished wooden floors, a stage, and tables elegantly decorated with white tablecloths and silver finishings. Lucas walks me through, one hand in mine the entire time, keeping me close. He's proud. My cheeks stay flushed and warm as we move. I've never felt so incredible in my life.

"Lucas."

We both turn to see a group of men with women by their sides. Lucas makes a displeased sound, but he walks over anyway, holding my hand tighter.

"Boys," he murmurs, then his eyes scan over the women. "Ladies."

"It's good to see you. Heard you've been busy on some important cases lately; we haven't seen you," one man says, his eyes studying me, even though he's talking to Lucas.

“I’m not here to talk about work.”

“Who’s the pretty girl?” he asks, ignoring Lucas’s remark.

“My girl, Ava.”

*His girl.* My heart flutters.

“Hi.” I smile.

“I know that face.” The man grins, his eyes flashing with amusement.  
“Jackson’s daughter.”

Great.

“Don’t matter whose daughter she is,” Lucas mutters, pulling me to his side.

“Jackson, as in biker Jackson?” a lady says, her eyes flicking to me and taking me in. “Hmm, yes, I can see it now.”

“It has no point, so why are we talking about it?” Lucas growls.

“No point?” The man laughs. “You’re fucking a biker’s daughter, and you’re a cop . . . it has a point.”

“What I do with my personal life is none of your business,” Lucas responds, his voice like ice.

“I didn’t even know Jackson had kids,” the female muses to herself. “I suppose it’s been over twenty years since I’ve seen him though.”

“How do you know him?” the man with her snaps.

“I . . .” Her cheeks flush.

Gross. She fucked my father once.

“Can we go?” I ask softly, tugging Lucas’s hand.

“Yeah,” he says, glaring at them all before pulling me away.

“Sorry about that, kid,” he murmurs, taking two champagnes from the waiter who comes by. He hands me one. I refuse.

“Shit,” he mutters. “Sorry, I didn’t think.”

“It’s okay,” I say.

“Not okay. I should know better than to offer you alcohol after everything.”

“Luke,” I say gently, placing a hand on his arm. “It’s okay.”

He hands the glass off to the next waiter that passes, putting his down too. I don’t argue. He’s wound up and tense.

“Do you want to dance?” I ask.

His eyes flash to mine, and he smiles. “Yeah, that’d be good.”

He takes me out to the dance floor and pulls me into his arms. There are eyes on us from all round, but I ignore them, pressing my cheek to his

chest. He moves us softly across the dance floor, holding me as if it's the last thing he'll ever do. I never want to let him go; I just want to hold onto him until the world stops spinning, and it's just us.

My bladder has other ideas.

"I have to use the bathroom," I whisper.

"Means I have to let you go," he says, tilting my head up with his finger and kissing my lips.

"I'll come back."

Yeah, he knows that statement is going to be true for as long as I'm breathing.

I'll always come back to him.

~\*~\*~\*~

Tears run down my face as I sit on the toilet lid, clutching my purse to my chest. I've been sitting in this toilet cubicle for the last ten minutes, but I can't get out because there's a group of women standing at the sinks and they're talking about me. The words they're using cut deep, and I'm in here, listening to every, hurtful word.

"I don't understand what he's doing with her. I mean, she's pretty, but she's biker trash."

"Exactly. Lucas is hot, sophisticated—everything she's not. God, I fucked him once; the man is out of control. She's just an easy play-thing. It won't last."

"She's nothing like Jennifer; that woman had class. This one is young, too. She probably gives it good."

"Probably letting him get over his missing wife. Nothing like young, cheap, biker pussy. I've been to those clubs; I know how they work. She's probably been screwing around since she was twelve. Her father was a whore."

"I knew Jackson; he was hot in bed. I went through a rebellious stage when I was younger and used to go to his club. The filth I saw there would make anyone's hair stand on end. Trash. Utter trash."

"Such a waste of a good man. He deserves someone better than a biker slut."

"Right?" She pauses and I hear some rustling. "Let's get back out there before we get busted."

They all laugh and walk out, and I remain as I am, tears streaming down my face. Are they right? Am I trash? Is that how the world sees me? I think about the club I grew up in. I never felt that with them, not even for a second, but is that how the rest of the world sees us? Just cheap trash?

My phone buzzes in my purse and I slide it out, glancing at the message from Lucas.

**L – You okay?**

I don't know how to respond to that. If he sees me, he'll know the truth and he'll get angry, but if I leave, he'll demand answers and he'll figure it out. I think about the women and their cruel words. I think about the life that I know I live and I know how I should respond to this. It isn't with pain, but with pride. I know the world I live in. I know their words are wrong. They deserve to know that, too.

**A – No.**

**L – Where are you? What's happened?**

**A – I was in the toilet and a group of girls came in talking about me and you.**

**L – Where are you?**

**A – Still in the toilet.**

I tuck the phone away and only a few minutes later, the door swings open and Lucas barks, "Ava?"

I push off the toilet and swipe my tears away before stepping out. The second Lucas sees me, his face hardens.

"What did they say?" he says, his voice as soft as he can manage when he's clearly angry.

"They said I'm biker trash, easy pussy, and not classy like your ex-wife," I say, my voice wobbling.

His eyes flare and he turns, storming out of the bathroom.

"Lucas!" I call.

I rush out after him and when I get back into the ballroom, I find him storming towards the group of women. He stops in front of them, and when he opens his mouth, his words stop the entire room and everyone falls silent, including me. I knew he'd defend me, defend us, but until this second, I never realized just how much I meant to Lucas Black.

"You've had your say," he says to the women, his voice like a whip. "You stood in the bathroom when my girl was in the toilet and you had your fuckin' say about what kind of woman she is—about what kind of

relationship we have. You put her down, put me down, and thought that wouldn't come back and bite you in the ass. You've had your say." He leans in close to the bitchiest one from earlier. "Now I'm going to have mine."

Their faces fall, and their eyes get wide.

"You're unclassy, catty, rotten women with boring pathetic lives and husbands who would rather stick their dicks in the receptionist than go home and fuck your bony, cold asses. Just because you're wearing nice dresses, expensive jewelry and pretty things doesn't mean you're not complete and utter trash—because you are, you know? Women like you that pick on those less fortunate are indeed just that—trash."

There is not a cricket to be heard in the crowd, and nobody tries to stop him.

"That girl"—he points to me, and his eyes grow warm—"has been through more in her short life than any of you combined. So think what you will. In the end, it's you that goes to bed each night, utterly alone, with not a single person in the world who cares about you. And tonight, you will know that her, the girl you just called worthless, will have me. And to me, she's the god damned world."

With that, he turns and strides towards me.

The entire room—except the group of women he yelled at—erupts in applause.

Yes, I love this man indeed.

## CHAPTER 37

### NOW – AVA

I slide my bottom onto Lucas's counter and watch him get ready for work. We had a long, blissful night after the police function gone wrong, and I couldn't have asked for anything better. He made it perfect, as I knew he would. He made up for the pain and the heartache those women caused. He fixed the hole and sealed it up even stronger.

He's doing that—making me stronger.

His doorbell rings, and we both turn to look at each other. It's pretty early, and by the look on his face, nobody comes around this time of the morning. He puts his coffee cup down and finishes doing his shirt up before walking over and swinging the door open. Then I hear nothing but utter silence. Not a single peep. Curious, I slide off the counter and glance over to see who is there.

It's a woman.

And they're looking at each other like they just saw a ghost.

That can't be good.

It's her who speaks first. "Lucas, long time no see."

When he speaks, his voice comes out as a garbled "Jennifer?"

My body goes still. Jennifer? As in, his wife, Jennifer?

I study the woman who would be utterly stunning if not for the skinny junkie look she's wearing right now. I don't know if her hair has always been that shade of blond, or if she was always so skinny and small, but I imagine not. Still, she's got delicate features and stunning eyes. Without the dark rings under them, she'd be beautiful.

"It's me," she says, but she doesn't sound happy about it. "I heard you've been looking for me? You look good, Luke. Really hot."

He flinches.

I want to go to him.

“You’ve been missing for over a fuckin’ year, left me after I lost my daughter, and now you’re here telling me I look hot?”

She waves a hand. “Don’t be so dramatic. I figured you got over me a long time ago. I’m here to talk, so are you going to let me in, or are we going to do this here?”

She looks past Lucas and sees me, and for a second, her eyes flash with a slight level of pain before she replaces it with anger. “I see it didn’t take you long to move on?”

“You left,” Lucas says, his voice almost disbelieving. “You fucked another man and left me alone at the hardest moment of my life, and you want to judge me for finding another woman?”

“She’s pretty,” she says, ignoring him. “Bit young, though, don’t you think?”

“Tell me what the fuck you’re here for and leave,” Lucas roars, so loudly Jennifer flinches and looks up at him. For a split second, I can see something soft in her eyes.

“Luke,” she says, her voice less chirpy.

“Don’t call me that,” he growls. “Tell me what you want and get the fuck out of my life.”

“Why are you talking to me like this?” she cries, throwing her hands up.

“If you’re seriously stupid enough to ask that question then you don’t know me at all.”

“No, you’re right about that. I don’t know you. You pushed me away, you know.”

His fists clench. He’s on the verge of losing it.

“I lost my daughter, I lost my life, and my wife decided to make it harder by fucking off and letting me spend over a year looking for her.”

She frowns. “Which is why I’m here, by the way.”

“Not lookin’ for you anymore.”

“But you are.”

I narrow my eyes. Lucas stiffens.

“I know you’re looking into Ricky, and I’m here to tell you to stop.”

Ricky? Who the hell is Ricky?

“That his name?” Lucas mutters.

“I’m being serious, Lucas. He’s not happy with you digging into things you shouldn’t be digging into. I’m here, you can see I’m safe—now stop



looking or”—her eyes swing to me and then back to him—“you’ll regret it.”

“Was that a threat?”

She crosses her arms. “I don’t want anything to happen to you, okay? I loved you once, loved Shylie, but you’re sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

“Scared I’ll take down all you and that pathetic piece of shit have created?”

“No. I’m scared for your life.”

Lucas grunts. “You can assure Ricky I couldn’t give a fuck what he’s doing with you and his shit. I’m a cop, but even I know I’m not big enough to take down something that huge.”

“I knew you were smart,” she says, studying him.

“Now are you done?”

“Really? That’s honestly all you feel towards me after everything?”

“Got a woman in my house behind me that is ten times the woman you are, so yeah, that’s honestly all I feel.”

My heart swells.

“You know he’s been married twice, right?” Jennifer says to me.

“You’re not holding hope that you’ll, you know, be the one, are you?”

I don’t answer her.

“Well, you know what they say.” Lucas grunts, putting his hand to her chest and pushing her out of the doorway. “Third time is a charm.”

With that, he slams the door in her face.

When he looks at me, our eyes hold, unanswered questions flowing between us.

The first and foremost being . . . are we in danger?

~\*~\*~\*~

“So,” Skye asks, as we enter the compound for the weekly cookout on Saturday night. Lucas is working, so I took the opportunity to come along and catch up with everyone. “His old wife just showed up?”

I nod. “Yep, just appeared at his front door acting like she never did a thing wrong.”

“What a bitch,” Skye breathes. “How did Lucas take it?”

“He was in shock, seriously. He was completely thrown. His voice was almost disbelieving when he was speaking to her, like he was in a dream. But that passed pretty quickly, and he got really upset. It took me hours to calm him down.”

“How is he now?”

“He’s getting there.” I sigh. “He went to work wound up and angry. She threw a few threats around.”

“Like what?” Skye asks, tying her pretty long hair up into a ponytail as we enter the main house.

“She’s with some big-ass drug lord, and they didn’t like that Luke was sniffing around, so they threatened him to make him stay away.”

“Do you think you should tell Jacks?”

I shake my head. “No, it has nothing to do with the club. Lucas has it sorted.” *I hope.*

“What about everything else?” Skye asks as we pass a heap of bikers and get our usual happy greetings. We wave and smile and keep moving through the house.

“It’s awesome, Skye. I’m so happy with him.”

“I’m happy for you.” She grins.

“Yo!”

We both stop, and see Danny sitting in the main room at the table with Mercy and Max by his side. We wave and go over.

“How’s it goin’, Ant?” Danny asks, taking me in.

He’s asking about Michael; I know that. I love that he’s keeping an eye on me.

“It’s great, D.”

He grins. “Glad to hear it.”

Michael got fired after I reported his attempted assault. Turns out I wasn’t the only one who he sunk his claws into. Three other girls also made a report, one of them apparently being forced into having sex with him. She was terrified of reporting him, but when the investigation came forward, she spoke up. I can only imagine the relief that caused.

We’re getting a new boss and in the mean time there is a fill-in, but we’re all keeping our jobs, and that’s the main thing.

“I need another beer,” Max says, sliding his bum off the table he was perched on. “You guys want?”

There is a chorus of ‘yes’ around the table. I look to Mercy, noticing she hasn’t said much and see she’s staring at her phone, face scrunched.

“Hey Merc.”

She looks up, her pretty eyes fluttering. “Hey Ava.”

“How’s college?”

Her cheeks get pink, and my eyebrows shoot up. “Good, it’s fine.”

I study her. Oh, it’s more than fine. Something is definitely going on.

“Come help me find Addi; I have to give her something,” I offer and Mercy jumps at the chance, leaping up and hooking her arm through mine.

When we’re out of the room, I turn to her and say, “So, what was that look for?”

“Remember the guy I told you about?”

“The singer dude . . . Diesel?”

“Yep.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Well, I arrive at college, first day, and you’ll never guess who I saw.”

My eyes get big. “He goes to the same college?”

“Yep,” she mutters. “And it gets worse. He’s a complete dick and pretty much the guy every girl in school wants to be with, because he’s like, mysterious and broody. He is a known player, and he doesn’t let anyone in. He’s somewhat of a challenge, I suppose.”

“Maybe it’s meant to be,” I point out, pulling her so we’re walking again. “Maybe you’re the one girl who isn’t like the rest.”

“He didn’t even notice me,” she huffs.

“Stop trying so hard, Merc. You’re the funniest, craziest, sassiest girl I know. Don’t give a man like that the time of day if he doesn’t notice you. Ignore him, be different to all the rest, and you might just be surprised.”

“I just can’t stop thinking about that kiss.” She sighs.

“That’s normal; just don’t become another woman that chases him. He’s used to that. Try being what he’s not used to. Try being yourself.”

She smiles. “That’s probably some seriously sound advice.”

I giggle. “Of course it is.”

We reach the kitchen where all our moms are gathered. They turn when we come in and we both wave. Ciara, Mercy’s mom, comes rushing over. “There you are! I’m so glad you could make it back this weekend. I missed you, little mouse.”

Mercy rolls her eyes. “Mom, you’re killing my street cred. Can’t you call me Fire Demon, or something equally as tough?”

Ciara laughs. “You’ll always be my mouse.”

I grin and wave to my mom, Janine and Addi, who are preparing salads for the cookout.

“Sister,” Addison calls, waving me over. “Come, talk to me, tell me about Lucas.”

“Addison,” Mom scoffs. “Keep it G-rated.”

Addi grins at Mom. “Oh poo, Serenity. You’re no angel.”

I roll my eyes and Mom throws an olive at Addi, who it narrowly misses.

“Nothing new to tell,” I say, sliding my booty onto the counter and picking some cheese and popping it into my mouth.

“There’s always something to tell,” Janine says, smiling at me.

“Exactly,” Ciara adds, joining back in the group.

“He’s awesome.” I sigh. “Sweet and broody. The best kind.”

“Ohhh.” Addi winks. “Broody and sweet can be fun.”

My cheeks flush, remembering the bath.

“Apparently so.” Mercy laughs and I fake-glare at her.

“I don’t want to know,” Mom says, blocking her ears with a grin.

“Tell us, is he all cop-like in bed?” Addi urges, her eyes wide with humor.

“Addison!” Mom cries. “No, just no!”

“Oh hush, Serenity. You don’t have to listen.”

I shake my head. “I’m not sharing anything else with you, rebel.” I throw another olive at Addi who catches it with her hand and pops it into her mouth, a wicked gleam in her eye.

God, I adore my sister.

I adore all of them.

## CHAPTER 38

### NOW – AVA

“So you’re leaving now?” Lucas asks over the phone, his voice low and husky.

“Yeah, I’m leaving now.” I grin as I step outside the compound and walk down the road to my dad’s house, where I left my car.

“It’s been a long day. I’ll be looking forward to sinking deep into you, baby.”

I flush. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to drive fast then.”

“Not too fast,” he warns lightly.

“No sir, not too fast.”

“Missed you today, kid.”

My heart swells, and I pick up the pace. Cars whizz past me and I keep as close to the darkest part of the road as I can.

“Missed you, too.”

Lights flash behind me and I glance over my shoulder to see a car slowing down, edging up behind me. I squint but can’t see who it is. Maybe it’s Danny, though he was pretty enthralled talking to Skye when I left.

“Ava?”

“Sorry, a car just slowed down behind me.”

Lucas goes silent for a few seconds.

“Who is it?” he asks.

The door opens and five men pile out. My heart leaps into my throat. That’s not normal. When I see the familiar face step into the light, I want to lean over and vomit.

“Lucas,” I say, my voice trembling. “It’s h-h-h-him.”

“Ava,” Lucas growls. “Run. Fucking run.”

I do. I turn and start running. My feet pound hard as I dash down the street. They're catching up to me on the straight so I dart across the road and down into the thick trees.

"Ava?" Lucas bellows. "Where are you?"

"N-n-near the club, oh God, Luke . . ."

"Keep running. Hide if you can. I'm coming. Stay with me."

I run faster. Tree branches gouge into my arms and cause intense burns on my skin. It doesn't slow me. I can hear the pounding feet behind me, see the lights shining past my head. I turn to get an idea of where they are and trip, stumbling over a log. I go down with a cry, my phone soaring from my hand. I scurry towards it while getting to my feet, but I'm too slow.

Arms go around my waist, hauling me up, and a needle is jabbed into my neck.

No.

Please, not again.

The last thing I hear is someone saying, "Hope you said goodbye, because you ain't goin' to see her again, cop."

Then I'm out.

~\*~\*~\*~

I wake in a well lit room.

My entire body hurts and I'm chained, my hands behind my back, my ankles bound together. I'm not gagged. The room I'm in is of fair size, with a single bed, a small lamp and one barred window. It's musky in here, as if the room hasn't been used for a while. I squirm, trying to turn and get a better understanding of my surroundings.

I have to be strong.

I broke last time; it won't happen again.

My dad will find me. Luke will find me. He knows I'm missing. He won't stop until he does. Right?

Fear courses up my throat and I try to squelch it down as I come up with a plan, something to get me out of here. The little voice inside my head is telling me there is no way out, and that scares the shit out of me, so I shove it down and put on a brave face. I've been through so much; I can get through this, too.

The lock on the door rattles and I look up to see that monster, the man without a name, enter. He's got three people behind him, but I take no notice of them, I'm just focused on him. He's grinning, eyes filled with evil. "Good to see you again, Ava."

"What the fuck do you want?" I spit.

"Oh," he says, tapping his fingers together. "The same thing I always want. Blood, gore, revenge . . ."

I flinch but keep my face stern, hard, unwavering.

"And you need me because?" I snap.

"Because you're part of the plan."

I keep my mouth shut and just glare at him, holding his eyes, refusing to break.

"I believe you've met my sweet Jennifer?"

My eyes get big and dart to his side where the three people are standing, and there she is, her eyes to the ground, her face blank.

"No," I breathe.

"Oh yes. You'd never believe how utterly thrilled I was to find out not only are you the daughter of the man I want to kill, you're also the girlfriend of the other tiresome pain in my ass."

Jennifer is with this monster? This horrible, cruel man? She left Lucas . . . for this?

"What's wrong with you?" I yell at her. "What sort of person are you? You left a loving, caring man for this . . . scum?"

The man throws his head back and laughs. "I give her what she needs, unlike that weak, pathetic cop."

I keep glaring at Jennifer, who isn't looking at me. "You had so much to say the other day. Cat got your tongue now?" I snarl at her.

She looks at me. "You should watch your mouth."

"Or what?"

"Or I might cut your tongue out," the man says.

"You said you wouldn't hurt her, Ricky."

*Ricky.* I remember her mentioning that the other day, but it only just clicked that he's the same person who took me and also ruined Lucas' life.

"Ricky," I snort. "Such a lame name for a big, tough man."

Ricky turns and glares at me. "I will hurt you, Ava. I will pull your intestines through your nose while you scream in fucking pain if you don't shut your fucking mouth."

“Hit a nerve, did I?”

He lunges forward, curling his fists into my hair and pulling so hard I scream. “I’m not joking,” he barks in my face. “You want another repeat of Bethy? You want me to go find an innocent little child and force you to blow their brains out?”

I shake my head. My hair pulls and it burns, but I don’t stop.

“Then shut your fucking mouth.”

He lets me go and stands, turning to glare at Jennifer. “And you, keep your mouth shut and do what I’m asking.”

She nods, avoiding my eyes.

“We’ll be back for you later.” Ricky grunts, ushering them all out and slamming my door as he leaves.

Well, I did learn something today. Jennifer is scared of Ricky, but she doesn’t love him. I can see it in her eyes. She might be my way out.

If I can get her alone.



# CHAPTER 39

## NOW – LUCAS

I rattle the chains on the compound gate, bellowing Jackson's name. Fear is coursing through my body and rage is building equally as strong. They have my girl. My Ava. My baby. They have her, and god only knows what they'll do to her. Fuck. She should have never been walking down that road on her own. Never.

"What the fuck do you want?" Muff, the redheaded biker, grunts, walking out.

"Get Jackson. Get him right fuckin' now."

"He's busy."

"Too busy to find out his fuckin' daughter has been taken right under his nose?" I roar.

Muff drops the cigarette in his hands and turns, bellowing, "Jackson, emergency!"

Not a minute later, Jackson is coming out buttoning up his jeans, his little wife by his side, her cheeks pink. His VP, Cade, and another guy, Spike, are following him, their women in tow also.

"What're you doin' at my gate, screeching and bellowin'?" Jackson grunts.

"He has your daughter."

Jackson's face falls. "Who?"

"I don't know his fuckin' name," I bark. "All I know is he took her, right outside your club."

Jackson's hands start to shake, and his wife makes a pained, crying sound.

"How do you know this?" he demands, jerking on a shirt. Cade barks an order and before I know it, thirty or more bikers have appeared.

"I was on the phone with her when she was walkin' home. They showed up; she was terrified. I told her to run but they got her. They also told me I

wouldn't see her alive again."

"Call back-up," Jackson roars. "Call everyone you know. We need to hunt down that motherfucker."

"Care to tell me who exactly it is that has my woman?" I demand, clenching and unclenching my fists, trying to push down the fear.

"His name is Ricky Thompson."

I flinch.

"What did you say?"

"Ricky—"

I cut him off with a pained bellow as I turn and drive my fist into the fence, splitting my knuckles.

"What aren't you tellin' me, cop?"

"That fucker is the man who is currently screwing my ex-wife."

"The one that went missing?" Cade asks.

I jerk my head in a nod.

"Fuck!" Jackson barks.

"Right now he has a tool to hurt the both of us; he has our lives in his hands," I say, my voice hitching at the end.

"I'll get the fucker," Jackson growls.

"Let me help. I got information on him."

"Bikers don't mix with cops."

"Jacks," Ava's mom, Serenity, cries. "It's our baby."

"Put your pride aside," I mutter. "This isn't about us."

"He can help us, Prez," Cade says, keeping calm. "We need all the help we can get."

Jackson looks to me, then nods. I return the gesture.

It's done.

~\*~\*~\*~

## AVA

I keep my body as comfortable as I can get it, which is proving to be hard when my ankles and hands are chained. I've been here overnight—I think. They haven't come back in. They haven't given me food or water. I'm thirsty, desperate, and praying Lucas and my father have come together to help me out of this.

I refuse to let fear in this time.

My body is stiff, my back is aching and my ankles and wrists are numb. Add to that my mouth is dry, and my tongue thick and scratchy. I'd do anything for a drink of water. Anything at all. Sleep hasn't come to me, and so all day I've just sat here, waiting for them to come back, waiting for my fate to be sealed.

They didn't return.

The rattling of the door comes as a surprise to me for this very reason, and my head jerks around to see it creak open. Jennifer comes in, holding a bottle of water and a sandwich. She doesn't look at me as she walks in and dumps the food down in front of me, close enough that I can lean over and take it with my bound hands. I do immediately, unscrewing the bottle and bringing it to my lips.

It's like heaven.

I don't drink the entire thing, knowing it'll only make me sick. I place it down and look up at Jennifer as she's walking towards the door to leave.

"Are you really this evil?"

She stops, but doesn't turn.

"Lucas told me you were loving, a great mother to Shylie, but this woman I'm seeing . . . that isn't her. Was he right? Was the woman he saw true or was it all a lie?"

She flinches.

I've hit a nerve.

Lucas did tell me Jennifer used to be loving and sweet; he also told me she had a weakness for drugs, even when he first met her. I'm clutching at straws, hoping to dig into her deepest depths and pull out the woman I'm sure is still in there—at least, I'm praying she is, because it's my only chance of escape.

"Don't pretend to know anything about me. I know exactly what you're trying to do, and it won't work."

"Would you be here if that little girl was still alive?"

She flinches again.

"Because I don't think you would," I press. "I think you'd be there, with him, being the good mother you were. Imagine if she could see you now, hurting her father's girlfriend, hurting her father . . ."

She spins around, baring her teeth. "You know nothing about me. Now shut the fuck up before I slit your throat myself."

Then she storms out, slamming the door.

I sigh and fumble, picking up my sandwich.  
This might take longer than I'd first thought.

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## CHAPTER 40

### NOW- AVA

I glare at Ricky, who is standing in front of me, an evil smile on his face. I don't crumble in his presence, even though everything in my body is screaming at me to shrink away and hide. I push any images of Bethy from my mind and focus on staying calm and cool. I don't want to give this piece of shit what he wants.

"I wonder how frantic your father is right now? What about that cop boyfriend? I can only imagine they're rallying the troops to find you. In fact, I know they are; I have spies everywhere."

"They'll find you," I spit. "And when they do, they'll gut you."

He throws his head back and laughs. "I'd love to see them try."

"You think you're so tough, don't you? You think your little plans are so fucking foolproof, but they're not. In fact, you're going to find out the hard way that you're nothing but a pathetic, weak loser of a man who needs to steal and kill innocent women to show the world how tough he is. Men like my father, men like Lucas—they don't need to do those things. They're strong and tough just because of who they are, and believe me when I say they'll make you scream, you pig."

Ricky lunges at me, curling his hands around my throat. I squirm and gasp, trying to take a breath though his tightening fingers.

"How does it feel to know I could kill you at any second?"

"Fuck you," I spit.

He squeezes harder and pressure builds behind my eyes, causing my entire head to throb. I gasp and gasp, but no air is getting through.

"A few more minutes, and you're dead."

I glare at him even though I'm terrified, so damned afraid he will do it.

"Strong girl. Here I thought I broke you last time."

I spit in his face.

He lets me go and slaps me so hard my head swings to the side.

“Do I need to teach you a fucking lesson?” he roars. “Clearly blood and gore doesn’t do the job, but I can only imagine how you’ll cope if I find other more creative ways.” He grins, reaching down and cupping my breast. I scream and try to kick out, thrashing my body.

“Ahhh.” He chuckles, pinching my nipple through my shirt. “I think I found your weakness.”

“Let me go, you sick fuck!”

He reaches down, grabbing me between my legs. I scream and thrash, trying to kick out, doing anything I can to dislodge his hand.

“How would you feel if I fucked you right now? Put my cock inside you and then slowly killed you?”

“Fuck you!”

He gets to his knees, reaching for his belt. Vomit rises in my throat and I fight harder, trying to slam him with my bound hands. He jerks his belt off and unbuttons his jeans, grabbing my shorts when he’s done in an attempt to pull them down. Fear unlike anything I’ve ever felt rips up my spine and I start to tremble. *No.*

“I think it’ll feel good,” he growls, reaching into his jeans while his other hand dives down into my shorts.

I screech as loud as I can, launching my body forward and biting his arm—it’s the only thing I can reach. I bite so hard his skin pops in my mouth and blood pours out.

“You fuckin’ bitch! I’ll fuck you so hard you tear for that.”

“Ricky?”

The sound comes from behind us. Ricky spins around, pants down, cock out, to see Jennifer standing at the door, her eyes wide.

“What’re you doing?” she whispers, pain flashing over her features.

“Teaching this little cunt a lesson.”

“By fucking her?”

His face softens slightly. “No, no baby,” he says, letting me go and standing, jerking his jeans up. “By making her think I am.”

“You had your hand in her pants . . .”

“Jenn,” he croons, pushing her out the door. “No. You know I wouldn’t . . .”

I don’t hear any more, because he slams and locks the door.

I slump forward and a tear escapes and runs down my cheek.

That’s the only one I’ll allow.

*I have to get out of here.*

~\*~\*~\*~

I wake to a hand gently slapping my face.

It takes me a few minutes to focus, and when I do, I see Jennifer leaning over me. It's dark, and she has a small flashlight in one hand and a phone in her other.

"Jennifer?" I croak. "What are you doing?"

"You're right," she says, fumbling with my cuffs. "Lucas doesn't deserve this; you don't deserve this. I . . . I didn't realize what a monster Ricky was."

"Is this a joke?" I whisper, my heart racing.

She looks at me and I see a kindness in her eyes, the kindness I have no doubt Lucas saw once.

"When she was little, she used to call me Jenna Banana." She smiles sadly. "She was the cutest kid—just like Luke. So much life and energy. It broke me when she died. She wasn't my daughter by blood, but she was in every way that counted. He shut down and I couldn't handle the pain, so I turned to drinking and then the drugs. My life just spiraled after that."

I can understand that. I was at a point where I nearly turned to drugs, too. Lucas saved me, but when Jenn was hurting, Lucas was equally as broken and couldn't save anyone - not even himself.

"I never meant to hurt him," she says, freeing my hands. "I . . . I just lost control. Ricky gave me what I needed. What I still need. I'm a drug addict, Ava. I don't know that I'll ever be different. Maybe I'll always need him but . . . I won't sit back and watch him do this."

"So you're letting me go?"

"Yes. I'm letting you go."

"If he finds out, he'll kill you."

Her eyes meet mine. "He won't find out, because you're going to beat me."

I am shaking my head before she's even finished her sentence. "No!"

"It's the only way he'll believe it. Here. I got this off him earlier; it was in his jeans." She hands me a pocket knife. "For all he knows, it dropped when he was . . . when he . . ."

“Jennifer,” I say, reaching out and taking her hand. “Come with me. Get the help you need. Lucas . . . me . . . we’ll help you.”

She looks at me sadly. “I’m beyond help.”

“No one is beyond help.”

“If I leave . . . he’ll find me. Just . . . go.”

“I can’t leave you here.”

She smiles weakly. “You don’t get a choice. You leave, or you stay and let him hurt you. I know which I’d pick.”

I study her, really study her. She wants to come with me. She wants it to stop, but she’s scared of Ricky. Worse, she’s as addicted to him as she is her drugs.

“I’ll send him back for you,” I whisper.

“Don’t, Ava. It’s not worth it. *I’m* not worth it.”

“You really won’t come with me?”

She finishes freeing my legs. “No.”

I stretch my legs out and listen as she gives me exact directions to get out.

“I’ll distract the watch. When you leave this room, go left. You’ll find a big hall; run down it until you reach the end. When you get there, turn right. You’ll come into an open kitchen. Everyone is asleep; no one will be in there. Exit the door you see to the left. We’re about five miles from the road; stick to the trees. No one should figure out you’re gone until morning, but in case they do, you don’t want to be seen. Take this phone; Ricky doesn’t know I have it. Call Luke, tell him this address.”

She gives an address to the place we’re at, and then sits back, handing me the pocket knife.

“I’m not stabbing you,” I cry.

“You don’t have to; just make it look like we had a good fight.”

“Jennifer, I can’t.”

Her eyes meet mine. “Go back, Ava. For me. For Shylie. For him. He needs you.”

A tear runs down my cheek as I get to my feet. She gets to hers too.

Then I raise my hand and bring it down on her cheek.

The loud crack of my fist that echoes through the room is equally as loud as the one echoing through my heart.



# CHAPTER 41

## NOW – AVA

“Lucas Black.”

I’m running down the dirt road as hard and fast as I can. I got out of the house easily after I left Jenn in the room, bruised and battered. I made sure I didn’t hit her anywhere that’d cause major problems. I took the pocket knife with me. She told me she’d tell Ricky that when she came to feed me, I had freed myself with the knife he dropped, and then I attacked her, getting out.

I only hope he believes her.

“Luke?” I croak.

“Ava? Fuck, baby, is that you? Please, God, please be you.”

My heart clenches. “It’s me . . . Luke . . . I need help.”

“Where are you?”

I lean down, pressing one hand to my knee and taking a deep breath.

“Ava?”

I pant out the details Jennifer gave me.

“Find somewhere safe and don’t move until I call you. Don’t go on the roads; stay hidden. I’m coming for you, baby.”

“Lucas?” I croak, rushing into the trees.

“Yeah?”

“Will you get Jennifer out? She saved me. She—”

“I’ll get her, honey. Just sit tight.”

“I was so scared,” I croak.

“Fuck, baby, me too. I’m coming; hang strong for me.”

“I . . . I will.”

I hang up and find a fallen log, sitting down on it. I can hear cars in the distance so I’m guessing I’m close to the road. I put my head in my hands and take a deep, shaky breath. I’m okay. I’m free. I’ll be safe as soon as Lucas gets here. I just need to be calm and stay still.

A sound catches my attention, and I jerk my head up.

There is a car coming. It's travelling really slow and it's coming from the same direction the house was.

My heart rate picks up and I carefully scramble backwards, deeper into the trees. A flashlight shines through the undergrowth. They're looking for me. I spin and search quickly for something to hide behind. The only thing I can see is a massive tree. I rush to it and press my back against it, my chest rising and falling with panic.

*If they find me again . . .*

No.

They won't. Lucas is coming.

"Where the fuck could she have gone?" I hear a voice bark over the low rumble of the car. "She couldn't have gotten this far."

"I don't know."

Jennifer.

"You lying to me? 'Cause if you are . . ."

"Ricky, I'm not. She attacked me. I don't know where she went."

"She's close. I can sense it."

I shiver and stay dead still.

They flash the lights deeper into the bushes, the car moving slowly past. Then I see more lights and my heart rate quickens. Lucas. He could get killed. Ricky would have more men with him, surely. Lucas would have only himself, maybe some back up if I'm lucky. Panic sets in and I try to peer through the trees.

Car doors slam.

Then voices.

"Ah, Lucas. I wondered when you'd show up."

"Where is she?"

"That's for me to know . . ."

I hear a loud grunt, and then, "I'm not fucking with you, Ricky. Where the fuck is she?"

"What're you going to do?" Ricky laughs. "I've got men comin in behind me, at least seven of them, and you . . . well . . ."

"You think I won't fuckin' end you?" Lucas growls.

"With what?" Ricky chuckles. "Your bare hands? Not even you're that good, cop."

"Where is Ava?"

“Dead. It’s more than she deserves. By the way, she has a sweet pussy. I spent a little time inside it before I slit her throat.”

Lucas makes a growling, angry sound and then I hear a gun being cocked. “Step any closer,” Ricky warns, “and I’ll kill you.”

I want to run out and help him, but I can’t. One distraction and he’s dead. But I can’t just sit here and do nothing. I pull out the phone Jennifer gave me and call my dad, praying he answers. He doesn’t. I know Lucas would have gone to him, but is did he get time to call him tonight?

I close the phone and keep listening, knowing the best thing I can do is be quiet and let Lucas deal with this.

He knows what he’s doing . . . right?

“I’d like to see you fuckin’ try,” Lucas barks.

“Is that a dare?”

Silence.

“Yeah,” Lucas growls. “It’s a dare.”

I gasp into my hands and clench my eyes shut. What is he doing?

“You think I won’t do it, pig?” Ricky bellows. “I’ll blow your fuckin’ brains out.”

“Try it,” Lucas says, his voice calm. “You so much as touch that trigger, I’ll have you and your men dead in less than a minute.”

“With what?” Ricky laughs. “You?”

“You think I’d be so stupid as to bring no back-up? You fucked with my girl twice now, you put her through hell, you tortured her, and you killed an innocent woman. You were never going to live for that. So, put the gun down and you won’t die.”

“Back-up?” Ricky says, his voice a little less confident. “I see no one but you.”

“That’s ’cause you ain’t looking hard enough.”

I hear the sounds of boots crunching and then a low, familiar voice. “You didn’t think I’d let you get away with torturing my daughter, did you?”

*Dad.* I press a hand to my mouth and force back my tears.

“You’re not going to kill me!” Ricky barks. “You won’t get away with killing this many people.”

“Won’t we?” Lucas laughs. “You’re very, very wrong. You’re scum. Nobody will miss you. Nobody will question it. I am an officer of the law; I know all the loopholes.”

“Some officer.” Ricky laughs nervously. “Killing that many men. You’ll go down.”

Lucas laughs again. “Let’s see, shall we?”

Then the guns start firing, quick successions, rapid shots. There is yelling, a woman screaming—Jennifer, I guess—and the guns keep ringing out through the air. I press my hands to my ears and drop to the ground, lying flat, praying with every single piece of my heart that they survive this. Please, let them survive.

~\*~\*~\*~

The gunfire has stopped, and I can hear the low murmuring of voices. I lift my head, and I can’t see anything but the car headlights. I don’t want to go out there; I don’t know who is standing and who isn’t. The very thought makes my chest clench, and I focus hard on keeping myself together.

“Ava?”

*Lucas?*

I push to my feet, legs wobbling. Is that him? God, please let me have heard that right.

“Ava, honey, are you there?”

It’s him.

I run forward, trees scratching my arms, gouging into already pained flesh. I clear the thick shrubs and go onto the dirt road and see Lucas standing, staring at the trees. When he sees me, his entire body jerks with relief. I run towards him, my legs pounding hard. The moment I reach him, I launch myself into his arms, tears running down my face.

“Baby,” he croons into my neck, holding me so tight it hurts, but I don’t care. “Fuck, my baby.”

“You came,” I sob.

“Of course I came.”

“Ava?”

I hear my dad’s voice and unhook my legs from Lucas and turn. Dad is standing, his face relieved. I throw myself into his arms and he holds me close, arms even tighter than Lucas’s were. “Never been so scared in my life.”

“I’m okay, Daddy, I’m okay.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No,” I whisper.

“Thank god.”

“Daddy . . . are . . . is anyone hurt?”

“No baby, we’re okay – a couple of minor injuries, but we outranked them by at least ten.”

“And them?”

“Not for you to worry about.”

I pull back, turning to Lucas. “Will he get into trouble for this?”

“Baby,” Lucas says. “Leave it with us; there was only four of them, including Ricky.”

“But he said . . .”

“He was lying, now leave it with us.”

“What about the rest of the people underneath him? Will they come for you and—”

“Hey,” Lucas says, stepping forward and cupping my jaw. “People like Ricky get themselves killed all the time. Now, do you trust us?”

I glance at him, then to my dad. “Yes.”

“Then don’t worry about it.”

“Jennifer?” I ask, my eyes wide, suddenly remembering.

“She’s okay. She’s with Muff.”

I exhale. “Thank god.”

“Time to go home, honey,” Lucas says. “It’s over.”

It’s over.

God, it’s really over.

*Finally.*

## EPILOGUE

“And you’re going to be okay?” I ask Jennifer.

She’s been in the hospital for the past week. She wasn’t well and they wanted to monitor her after a bullet hit her in the arm. She’s okay, but because her entire system was rundown from drugs, she got an infection and had to stay in. They’ve got her strapped down, ready to go to a rehab center my dad’s club paid for.

“I’ll survive,” she croaks, looking like hell.

“It’s going to be a long road, you know?”

She forces a weak, trembling smile. “Yeah, it will, but they said . . . they said they’ll get me through.”

I take her bound hand. “They will.”

“When I get out,” she croaks, “we’ll have coffee, okay?”

I smile. “Of course.”

“It’s time to take her.” The nurse smiles, coming into the room.

“I’ll call you,” I promise her.

She squeezes my hand. “Thank you, Ava.”

“No,” I say, as she lets go of my hand. “Thank you.”

I watch her being wheeled out of the room and even after she’s gone I just stand there, staring at nothing. I wrap my arms around myself and rub carefully, trying to soothe the sadness welling in my chest. Jennifer laid her life on the line for me; she took huge risks. Seeing her getting the help she needs makes me feel good, but I also know what a hard time she’s going to have. Lucas promised she’d be taken care of.

“Hey.”

I spin to see Lucas standing in the doorway, smiling at me.

“Hey yourself,” I whisper.

“You okay?”

I nod. “Did you see her?”

“Yeah, stopped her in the hall. She’ll be okay, baby.”

I walk over, and he tucks me into his arms. “I know, but it’s going to be so hard.”

“It will, but once she’s out the other side, she’ll have a better life. Keep thinking of that.”

I snuggle closer, breathing him in. The past week has been chaotic, but between Lucas and my dad, they’ve managed to deter any backfire from what happened that night. I asked a few questions but they just assured me it was fine and I didn’t need to worry about it. I trust that. I trust them.

They’ve had a whole new respect for each other since.

We’re having a cookout tonight for Dad’s birthday, and for the first time, Lucas is invited. I don’t think that it’s entirely perfect between them, but they trust each other and respect each other, and that’s all I could ever ask for. It’s not as though Dad is going to involve Lucas in the club business, but Lucas also won’t stick his nose in and cause problems.

They’ve found even ground. And I’m okay with it.

“Are you still coming to the cookout tonight?” I ask him, letting go and stepping back.

“Fuck yeah.”

“You’re not worried about all those grumpy bikers?”

He takes my chin and tilts it back. “I’d walk through fire for you, honey. Dealing with a bunch of bikers is nothing.”

I giggle.

He grins.

That’ll never get old.

~\*~\*~\*~

“Oh my god! Stop!” I cry to Addison, throwing a brat at her face.

She ducks, and laughs so hard she doubles over. “It was fucking hilarious, Lucas. She was so cute and little . . .”

“Stop it!” I yell again, laughing so hard tears run down my cheeks.

“I can’t stop until I get all the bad stories out of the way. He needs to know the gritty details of you and poop and . . .”

Lucas is laughing and turns to me, winking. “I’m enjoying the stories, kid.”

“I’ll hurt you.” I grin.

“Enough now, child,” Dad says to Addi, and she flips him the bird.

“Now I see where you get it.” Lucas grins at me.

“It’s all Dad’s fault.”

Dad chuckles and keeps flipping the burgers.

“So, Lucas, do you like being a cop?” Skye asks, throwing her legs on Danny’s lap. He grunts and flings them off, but she puts them right back on.

“Yeah,” he says to her.

They get into a conversation about his job and I just listen, smiling as I watch. We’re all sitting in a big group, fire in the middle of us, beers flowing freely. Mercy and Max aren’t here. He went to visit her in the city where she is attending college. They’re good friends like that, and he’s missing her. Ebs is gone again, so it’s just Danny, Skye and I.

The conversation can tend to get slightly awkward, but that’ll smooth over in time. I didn’t expect it to be perfect, but the fact they’re here, together, is an awesome start.

I stand and walk over to my father, standing beside him. “How’re you feeling, old man?”

He looks over to me, putting the lid down on his grill.

“I’ve got a cop in my compound.”

“Yeah, you do.”

“You know that feels like I’ve broken every rule.”

“He’ll only ever be in here during cookouts; the rest of it he has no intention of bothering with. He cares about me. He wouldn’t do that.”

“Nah, I don’t think he would . . . still . . . took a lot of convincing to get him in.”

I wrap an arm around his waist. “They’ll be fine.”

He hugs me close. “Happy to see you smilin’ again.”

I sigh and press my cheek to the leather jacket that’s always a permanent fixture on his body. “Me too. There was honestly a time I thought I’d never smile again, but being here . . . being with Lucas . . . I’m thinking that is becoming a distant memory. He saved me.”

“Know that, baby girl.”

“There was a time I thought I couldn’t be saved.”

“Know that too, darlin’.”

“I’m glad he’s in my life.”

Dad sighs. “Fuck, me too.”

I giggle. “Did you just admit to liking Lucas Black for me?”

Dad grunts. “Don’t repeat it.”



I lean up and kiss his cheek. "Love you, old man."  
"Yeah, love you too, baby girl."  
Life is looking up.

~\*~\*~\*~

"Your family is awesome," Lucas murmurs later that night as we sit on his porch after a successful cookout.

"Yeah, they really are."

"Never thought I'd say that, but I can see why they mean so much to you. They're not what I expected."

"They never are, but they're used to it. Everyone judges them before they know them."

"I've learned that means they're missin' out. They're good people. Loyal, brave, fierce. . ."

"Yeah, they are."

"And you," he says, pulling me into his side. "You're the best kind."

I grin and look up at him. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, baby. I never thought I'd find light again, but turns out there is always light at the end of a tunnel, no matter how long."

"Every tunnel has an end, Lucas. You just have to believe it's there."

He strokes a thumb down my cheek. "Never thought I'd be happy after I lost my baby, but you're showing me that there is a chance I'll breathe again."

"She'd want this for you, you know?"

He smiles weakly. "Yeah, I know."

"Tell me about her."

Lucas tells me about Shylie, from her as a baby right through until the day he lost her. He talks about her with pride, and warmth, and such love it makes my heart swell. He was an incredible dad; I can tell that just from his words. He'll make an incredible dad again.

"She sounded perfect, Luke," I whisper.

"She was the best."

"Do you think you'll ever want kids again?"

He looks out at the stars sparkling on the clear night sky. "I thought I never wanted a child again after I lost her, but then I met you and you showed me that I can find happiness again. We've both been through more

than most, yet I feel stronger than I've ever felt. I don't deny that having another child would scare me, and that's an issue I'd have to work through, but yeah, I do think one day I'll want more."

My heart explodes with happiness. "I'm glad," I whisper. "Because I'd really love a little girl just like Shylie."

He smiles down at me. "Me too, kid."

"Luke?"

"Hmmm?"

"This . . . me and you . . . is it forever?"

He turns me to him and captures my face in his big hands. "I've had women, I've been married twice, but I've never needed something the way I need you, Ava. You're the piece of my soul I lost, and with every passing day you're healing me. I'm so in love with you it fuckin' hurts."

"You love me?" I croak.

He leans down, kissing my lips. "Fuck yeah I do."

I tuck myself into his side. "Tell me when you knew."

He pulls me close and we stare out at the stars that are shining so brightly tonight, as if they know somehow they brought us together. They say you meet people in your life for a reason, and sometimes it takes a while to know what that reason is. I met Lucas in the worst possible condition, yet somehow, through it all, we've come out tougher.

Sometimes the greatest heartache makes the strongest people.

"I knew the second you looked up at me on the sidewalk that day. I saw something in your eyes, something so fragile and beautiful, something I hadn't seen since my daughter. I wanted to protect you, to wrap my body around you and make it all go away. I knew in that second that you would change my life, and you did, Ava—you changed everything."

A tear trickles down my cheek, and he swipes it off with his thumb.

"You're my reason," I whisper.

"Your reason?"

"Everything happens for a reason. You're my reason, Lucas Black."

We analyze the reason for things so often in life when sometimes we just need to look at what's right in front of us, and the answers will be so very clear. Lucas Black, my cop, my broken, beautiful man, was my reason all along.

And that's all there needs to be.

*THE END*

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